

The “Deep Magic” of Christmas and Easter

As Revealed in “Handel’s Messiah” and “The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe”

Written for the C.S. Lewis Minyan on December 3, 2023

Last night Elizabeth and I attended the performance of the Messiah at Epiphany. Everyone present was transported by the scripture and music. We invited an old Microsoft colleague and friend of ours who had never been to Epiphany before. In Part 2 of the performance she turned to Elizabeth, took her hand, and said hearing this music was Christmas for her. The music and setting penetrated the clutter of life and revealed the reality of the season. Similarly, for me anyway, the story of Aslan in “The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe” also exposes the emotional journey and punch of Christmas and Easter. Music and Myth both envelop us in an “experience” versus simply knowledge. Character development versus plot. They follow the same arc of Anticipation, Realization, Sacrifice, and Resurrection. Narnia goes one step further and describes the transformation of the children. My Sunday afternoon thought exercise is to put the Messiah and Narnia side by side. You can let me know on Thursday if it works!

Anticipation

Messiah, Part 1 (note, I jump around a bit on the versus I’ve selected)

3. Air (Tenor) – “Ev’ry valley shall be exalted, and ev’ry mountain and hill made low: the crooked straight and the rough places plain:” (*Isaiah 40, v.4*)

4. Chorus – “And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it. (*Isaiah 40, v.5*)

11. Air (bass) – “The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light; and they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined.” (*Isaiah 9, v.2*)

12. Chorus – “For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder; and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.” (*Isaiah 9, v.6*)

“The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe.”

"They say Aslan is on the move - perhaps has already landed." Said Mr. Beaver.

"And now a very curious thing happened. None of the children knew who Aslan was any more than you do; but the moment the Beaver had spoken these words everyone felt quite different. Perhaps it has sometimes happened to you in a dream that

someone says something which you don't understand but in the dream it feels as if it had some enormous meaning - either a terrifying one which turns the whole dream into a nightmare or else a lovely meaning too lovely to put into words, which makes the dream so beautiful that you remember it all your life and are always wishing you could get into that dream again. It was like that now. At the name of Aslan each one of the children felt something jump in its inside. Edmund felt a sensation of mysterious horror. Peter felt suddenly brave and adventurous. Susan felt as if some delicious smell or some delightful strain of music had just floated by her. And Lucy got the feeling you have when you wake up in the morning and realize that it is the beginning of the holidays or the beginning of summer."

Aslan isn't mentioned for a few pages, and then, when discussing what to do next, he comes up again.

"Couldn't we have some stratagem?" said Peter. "I mean couldn't we dress up as something, or pretend to be - oh, pedlars or anything - or watch till she was gone out - or- oh, hang it all, there must be some way. This Faun saved my sister at his own risk, Mr Beaver. We can't just leave him to be - to be - to have that done to him."

"It's no good, Son of Adam," said Mr Beaver, "no good your trying, of all people. But now that Aslan is on the move-"

"Oh, yes! Tell us about Aslan!" said several voices at once; for once again that strange feeling - like the first signs of spring, like good news, had come over them."

Later Susan asks about Aslan

"Who is Aslan?" asked Susan.

"Aslan?" said Mr Beaver. "Why, don't you know? He's the King. He's the Lord of the whole wood, but not often here, you understand. Never in my time or my father's time. But the word has reached us that he has come back. He is in Narnia at this moment. He'll settle the White Queen all right. It is he, not you, that will save Mr Tumnus."

Lucy picks up the questioning.

"Is--is he a man?" asked Lucy.

"Aslan a man!" said Mr. Beaver sternly. "Certainly not. I tell you he is the King of the wood and the son of the great Emperor-Beyond-the-Sea. Don't you know who is the King of Beasts? Aslan is a lion--*the* Lion, the great Lion."

"Ooh!" said Susan, "I'd thought he was a man. Is he--quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion."

"That you will, dearie, and no mistake," said Mrs. Beaver. "If there's anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they're either braver than most or

else just silly."

"Then he isn't safe?" said Lucy.

"Safe?" said Mr. Beaver. "Don't you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe?' Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you."

Realization

Messiah, Part 1

19. Recitative (mezzo-soprano) – "Then shall the eyes of the blind be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then shall the lame man leap as an hart, and the tongue of the dumb shall sing." (*Isaiah 35, vv.5–6*)

20. Duet (mezzo-soprano/soprano) – "He shall feed his flock like a shepherd: and he shall gather the lambs with his arm, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young. (*Isaiah 40, v.11*); "Come unto him, all ye that labour, come unto him, that are heavy laden, and he will give you rest. Take his yoke upon you, and learn of him; for he is meek and lowly of heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls." (*Matthew 11, vv.28–29*)

21. Chorus – "His yoke is easy, and his burden is light." (*Matthew 11, v.30*)

"The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe."

They Meet Aslan

"But as for Aslan himself, the Beavers and the children didn't know what to do or say when they saw him. People who have not been in Narnia sometimes think that a thing cannot be good and terrible at the same time. If the children had ever thought so, they were cured of it now. For when they tried to look at Aslan's face they just caught a glimpse of the golden mane and the great, royal, solemn, overwhelming eyes; and then they found they couldn't look at him and went all trembly.

"Go on," whispered Mr. Beaver.

"No," whispered Peter, "you first."

"No, Sons of Adam before animals," whispered Mr. Beaver back again.

"Susan," whispered Peter, "what about you? Ladies first."

"No, you're the eldest," whispered Susan. And of course the longer they went on doing this the more awkward they felt. Then at last Peter realized that it was up to him. He drew his sword and raised it to the salute and hastily saying to the others, "Come on. Pull yourselves together," he advanced to the Lion and said,

"We have come--Aslan."

"Welcome, Peter, Son of Adam," said Aslan. "Welcome, Susan and Lucy, Daughters of Eve."

Sacrifice

The Messiah, Part 2

22. Chorus – “Behold the Lamb of God, that taketh away the sin of the world.” (*John 1, v.29*)

23. Air (mezzo-soprano) – “He was despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief. (*Isaiah 53, v.3*); “He gave his back to the smiters, and his cheeks to them that plucked off the hair: he hid not his face from shame and spitting.” (*Isaiah 50, v.6*)

24. Chorus – “Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him;” (*Isaiah 53, vv.4–5*)

25. Chorus – “And with his stripes we are healed.” (*Isaiah 53, v.5*)

26. Chorus – “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.” (*Isaiah 53, v.6*)

29. Accompagnato (tenor) – “Thy rebuke hath broken his heart; he is full of heaviness. He looked for some to have pity on him, but there was no man, neither found he any to comfort him.” (*Psalms 69, v.20*)

30. Arioso (tenor) – “Behold, and see if there be any sorrow like unto his sorrow.” (*Lamentations 1, v.12*)

“The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe.”

After Edmund has been rescued from the White Witch and Aslan and Witch meet in private and cut a deal that frees Edmund. Soon, Aslan’s mood shifts.

“Everyone felt how different it had been last night or even that morning. It was as if the good times, having just begun, or already drawing to an end.”

Susan and Lucy have a conversation about Aslan’s mood.

“I’ve a most horrible feeling—as if something were hanging over us.” (Susan said to Lucy)

“Have you? Because, as a matter of fact, so have I.”

“Something about Aslan,” said Lucy. “Either some dreadful thing that is going to happen to him, or something dreadful that he’s going to do.”

Lucy and Susan seek him out and find him near the Stone Table. Before he sees them, they observe him.

“His tail and his head hung low and he walked slowly as if he were very, very tired.”

The girls ask if they can join him and ask him what is wrong.

“Aslan! Dear Aslan!” said Lucy, “what is wrong? Can’t you tell us?”

Are you ill, dear Aslan?” asked Susan.

“No,” said Aslan. “I am sad and lonely. Lay your hands on my mane so that I can feel you are there and let us walk like that.”

Resurrection

Messiah, Part 2 and 3

33. Chorus – “Lift up your heads, O ye gates; and be ye lift up, ye everlasting doors; and the King of glory shall come in. Who is this King of glory? The Lord strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle.” (*Psalms 24, vv.7–10*)

34. Recitative (tenor) – “Unto which of the angels said he at any time, Thou art my Son, this day have I begotten thee?” (*Hebrews 1, v.5*)

44. Chorus – “Hallelujah: for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth.” (*Revelation 19, v.6*); “The kingdom of this world is become the kingdom of our Lord, and of his Christ; and he shall reign for ever and ever.” (*Revelation 11, v.15*); “King of Kings, and Lord of Lords.” (*Revelation 19, v.16*) “Hallelujah!”

53. Chorus – “Worthy is the Lamb that was slain, and hath redeemed us to God by his blood, to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing. Blessing, and honour, glory, and power, be unto him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb for ever and ever.” (*Revelation 5, vv.12–14*) “Amen.”

“The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe.”

In Narnia, the White Witch has Aslan bound and put on the Stone Table where she kills him. Lucy and Susan witness this from afar and are distraught. They go to the Table afterwards.

“The rising of the sun had made everything look so different – all the colours and shadows were changed – that for a moment they didn’t see the important thing. Then

they did. The Stone Table was broken in two pieces by a great crack that ran down it from end to end; and there was no Aslan. "

They leave the Table and wander away. Suddenly, they see Aslan "larger than they had seen him before, shaking his main (for it had apparently grown again)..."

"Oh, Aslan!" cried both children, staring up at him, almost as much frightened as they were glad.

"Aren't you dead then, dear Aslan?" said Lucy.

"not now," said Aslan.

"You're not—not a--?" asked Susan in a shaky voice. She couldn't bring herself to say the word *ghost*.

Aslan stopped his golden head and licked her forehead. The warmth of his breath and a rich sort of smell that seemed to hang about his hair came all over her.

"Do I look it?" he said.

"Oh, you're real, you're real! Oh, Aslan!" cried Lucy and both girls flung themselves upon him and covered him with kisses.

"But what does it all mean?" asked Susan when they were somewhat calmer.

"It means," said Aslan, "that though the /Witch knew the Deep Magic, there is a magic deeper still which she did not know. Ker knowledge goes back only to the dawn of Time. But if she could have looked a little further back, into the stillness and the darkness before Time dawned, she would have read there a different incantation. She would have known that when a willing victim who had committed no treachery was killed in a traitor's stead, the Table would crack and Death itself would start working backwards."

In Narnia, Edmund was forgiven before Aslan allowed himself to be sacrificed, so jumping back a bit in the story. It is deeply personal.

"Here is your brother," he said, "and – there is no need to talk to him about what is past."

Edmund shook hands with each of the others and said to each of them in turn, "I'm sorry," and everyone said "That's all right." And then everyone wanted very hard to say

something which would make it quite clear that they were all friends with him again – something ordinary and natural – and of course no one could think of anything in the world to say."

Transformation

The Children stay in Narnia for many Narnian years and become King and Queens. At the end of the book Lewis describes their transformation.

"And they themselves grew and changed as the years passed over them. And Peter became a tall and deep chested man and a great warrior, and he was called King Peter the Magnificent. And Susan grew into a tall and gracious woman with black hair that fell almost to her feet and the Kings of the countries beyond the sea began to send ambassadors asking for her hand in marriage. And she was called Queen Susan the Gentle. Edmund was a graver and quieter man than Peter, and great in council and judgement. He was called King Edmund the Just. But as for Lucy, she was always gay and golden haired, and all Princes in those parts desired her to be their Queen, and her own people called her Queen Lucy the Valiant."

Commentary.

C.S. Lewis wrote the Chronicles of Narnia to "baptize the imagination" of children so that when they encountered the Christian story in our world, they would be familiar with the patterns. The need to write these books became apparent to Lewis in 1939 when some evacuee children arrived at the Kilns (the home of Lewis, his brother, and Mrs. Moore) after the German invasion of Poland. He was shocked by the children's inability to entertain themselves. "Modern children are poor creatures. They keep on coming to Maureen (Mrs. Moore) and asking 'What shall we do now?'" They lacked imagination and had never been exposed to fairy tales and myths. In a letter to his good friend Arthur Greeves, he wrote about a young boy who had visited the Kilns years earlier. Lewis was concerned that this boy's "poor imagination has been left without any natural food at all. I often wonder what the present generation of children will grow up like.....They have been treated with so much indulgence yet so little affection, so much science and so little mother-wit. Not a fairy tale or nursery rhyme."

Lewis valued myth highly. In his book *Miracles*, he wrote that "myth in general is not merely misunderstood history....nor diabolical illusion...not priestly lying...but at its both, a real unfocused gleam of divine truth on human imagination."

One argument that Tolkien made the night before he fully converted, or in his words, was awakened, to Christianity was that Christianity was "true myth." In short, it is a historical and real event that also connects to divine truth and, more importantly, divine relationship.

This leads us to Narnia. Narnia is a "supposal" world. What if Christ were to appear in a world like Narnia? What would he be like, and how would people feel? It is not an allegory in the sense that the characters, except Aslan, do not map to biblical figures. It is a fairy tale that connects to the mythical impact of a Christ figure in an imaginary world. In so doing, it allows children of all ages to perceive the awe and feeling of the Christ Story.

Earl Palmer, my C.S. Lewis Mentor, felt the Chronicles should be read in the order they were published versus chronologically because the arc of the books is all about the Children's relationship with Aslan. Consequently, people should start with "The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe." The book has four parts. The first is before they are aware of Aslan. The second is when they are aware of him but haven't met him. The third is when they have met him, and he must sacrifice himself to save Edmund. Finally, the fourth is what happens after. Stepping back, this is the path of everyone's Christian Journey, and perhaps even the liturgical calendar. Right now, we haven't met Aslan/Christ, but at Christmas, we do. The time between Christmas and Easter is our world's great thawing, followed by his sacrifice. We then move through the year fully mindful of Aslan/Christ's existence, his sacrifice, his love for us, and our obligation to do our best.