

Film & Faith: The Chronicles of Narnia—Do you believe?
Rev. Becca Wieringa
May 21, 2017

(Film Clip: Children meet the beavers for the first time)

The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe is one of my all time favorite stories, one that connects deeply to the child within. I first read this book when I was 12, and I've experienced the story via book and film dozens of times since then, most recently this past week. Every time I read it or watch the film, I am able to find myself, my own dreams, hopes, expectations, worries and insecurities in the adventures of particularly the four main characters: Peter, Edmund, Susan and Lucy.

These four siblings have been shipped off to stay in the country because of the WWII blitz bombings in London. They end up in the mansion of an eccentric but kindly professor who has a cranky housekeeper named Mrs. Macready.

Between her tedious rules and demands for them to be quiet, and the fact that they desperately miss their parents and friends, the kids aren't having much fun. But Peter, the eldest, reminds them there's a war going on and they have to make the best of it.

One miserable, rainy day, the kids play hide and seek and Lucy, the youngest, finds an old wardrobe, a large, stand-alone coat closet, to hide in. Amazingly when she pushes herself to the back of the wardrobe she discovers there is no back wall, and she finds herself in a forest of an entirely different world called Narnia. It is a magical world where animals can talk, and there are unique creatures like centaurs and dryads. It is a marvelous place beyond the imagination.

When I was a kid I wished that the hidden crevices of my own house would lead to a world like Narnia and to my own adventure. Many times I pushed to the back of our coat closet hoping to find something besides coats!

Anyway, Lucy finds herself in Narnia and meets a faun named Mr. Tumnis. A faun is a mythical creature that is part goat and part human. Over tea, she learns that Narnia is ruled by the cruel White Witch who has plunged Narnia into an everlasting winter.

"Oh, I like winter" says Lucy, "because you can skate and sled and of course you get to celebrate Christmas".

"Oh no," says Mr. Tumnis. "Here it is always winter, but never Christmas."

In Narnia, after tea, Lucy finds her way back to our world and her siblings, and tells them about this amazing adventure, but they don't believe her. Though she has been gone for hours, no time at all has passed from the others' perspective.

“Another world?” They ask, “Through the wardrobe? Lucy, you’re dreaming.”

But eventually they all find themselves through the wardrobe and see with their own eyes that Lucy is, indeed, very much awake.

Together with some wonderful talking Beavers, the four children search for Aslan, the “king” of Narnia. Aslan is the only one who can overcome the White Witch and save the kingdom, the only one who offers hope of Spring. Eventually the children are successful. Christmas comes to Narnia, Aslan leads the children and the good guys to a victory over the White Witch, the snow melts and spring joyously begins!

The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe is one of 8 books in the series. If you were to read the entire chronicles, you would discover the beginning of Narnia—its creation story, all the way to the last battle, when darkness and evil are overcome forever and Aslan, the good and mighty king, will rule a land of peace.

Throughout the stories we get to know the four Pevensie children and their cousin Eustace, and other children who assume great responsibility. As they get older, and their childish imaginations become redirected to adult things, and they disappear from the pages, until the very end.

Today I continue our “Faith & Film” series during which I have invited us to watch movies or read books critically as we learn how to place ourselves within the story and then find glimpses of God’s story, the greatest story ever told, within the experiences of others.

But unlike the other films I’ve talked about, we don’t have to work very hard to see the connections between CS Lewis’ Narnia and the story of our Christian experience. The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe IS the Christian story, an allegory of deep spirituality and faith in something bigger and greater than can be seen with human eyes.

Of course, Lewis said he did not intentionally write a Christian allegory... that is, the story of Narnia is not supposed to represent the Bible. But he did say that he imbedded his own theology in the story and that his HOPE was that people would read it and find God within the pages.

The entire series is full of theological gems and parallels between faith in God and life in the real world. The White Witch represents the evil one, who deceives and makes empty promises that lead to her own exaltation and the destruction of everyone else.

Aslan is the great king who sacrifices himself in order to save all others, who knows and respects the law but understand the purpose of the law is love, not control or condemnation.

But overarching it all is one thread that ties the rest together, and that is childlike faith. Lewis’ stories suggest and even insist that faith must be

encountered with childlike optimism, hope, and expectation. From their first stumble into the magical world of Narnia, the children simply believe. Talking animals and fanciful creatures and magical powers and a salve that heals any wound and a giant, majestic, talking Lion and sentient, guardian trees do not give them reason to shake it all off as make belief.

Instead, they are able to accept that there are some things reason and life experience simply can not explain. Even when they return to the real world, and can no longer see with their eyes, the children hold onto Narnia in their hearts, expectantly waiting for the next time they'll see Aslan, their king.

While Narnia is certainly fictional, our Christian experience and the scripture which is its foundation instruct us that there is such a thing as an Unseen World. As children, it is easy for us to believe in things we cannot see. We have imaginary friends and can make up entire worlds with legos or a box of crayons. Children accept without proof the things that we adults seem to painstakingly examine for evidence and corroboration.

Adults try to find faith in spite of things we cannot prove, but children simply believe. Children can accept at face value a world that was created in seven days, a flood that covered the entire world on which an ark full of all the world's creatures floated for many weeks, a man who was safe in a lion's den, a fish who could swallow up a deserter, and a God who could overcome even death, where the cross gave way to an empty grave.

Luke recorded many of Jesus' profound statements, but none is more profound than the one found in Luke 18:17. Listen to the Message version:

"Mark this: Unless you accept God's kingdom in the simplicity of a child, you'll never get in."

Another time, the disciples were arguing over who had the best seminary education or something like that, so Jesus had a little child stand among them and said: "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." Matthew 18:3

We try so hard to make sense of our faith in mature and educated ways, but in great irony Jesus tells us the way to become mature in our faith is to "become like little children"

No one exemplifies this principle better than CS Lewis, whose first name was, by the way, Clive. CS Lewis was one of the foremost scholars and keen intellects of the 20th Century.

By his own admission, Lewis was deeply affected by his mother's death when he was only ten years old. He felt completely abandoned by his father, and this led to his rejection of Christianity and gravitation toward atheism. But Lewis loved to read, so as an adult he began to read Christian authors like George MacDonald and G.K. Chesterton.

One of MacDonald's volumes, *Phantastes*, powerfully challenged his atheism. "What it actually did to me," wrote Lewis, "was to convert, even to baptize . . . my imagination." By 1929, Lewis had abandoned atheism and was convinced not only of God but also of the Christian faith. Ever the scholar, Lewis began to focus the direction of his work in defending his newfound faith. He published writing like:

"The Great Divorce"

"The Problem of Pain"

"Abolition of Man"

"Surprised By Joy"

"The Screwtape Letters" and,

"Mere Christianity."

Yet despite the many thoughtful and evidence-rich volumes he wrote, I am convinced that his greatest revelation of Christ's love and childlike faith and certainly the one with the most far-reaching and greatest impact has been and continues to be "The Chronicles of Narnia." Its popularity and usefulness for Christian instruction reminds me of what Jesus said in Matthew 11:25
25 ". . . you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. "

Jesus means many things when he instructs child-like faith. First, children are ever humble. In Jesus era, children were to be seen and not heard, insignificant in my spheres of life. Though Jesus challenged this and argued for their importance, he also preached often of a self-sacrificing kind of being in the world. The first will be last, Jesus would say, and real power comes from service not might. Children represented this kind of humility. They were invaluable not because of their greatness, but because of their gentleness and innocence. This is the kind of heart the kingdom of heaven demands.

The second thing Jesus refers to is the aspect we see so beautifully in the Chronicles of Narnia, and that's the simplicity of just being able to believe.

In the final saga of the Narnia chronicles, three of the four siblings from the original story return to save the kingdom from destruction. Only Susan, the oldest is absent. The book eventually reveals that Susan grows up and outgrows her love for Narnia. We get few details about how this happened until the end of the book, when Peter responds to an inquiry into his sister's whereabouts.

"My sister Susan," answered Peter shortly and gravely, "is no longer a friend of Narnia."

"Yes," said Eustace, "and whenever you've tried to get her to come and talk about Narnia or do anything about Narnia, she says, 'What wonderful memories

you have! Fancy your still thinking about all those funny games we used to play when we were children."

Susan thought she had become too grown up for thoughts of a great king like Aslan and a blessed land like Narnia and, though she had once experienced it, she left it behind.

How often do we, like Susan, grow up and lose our sense of wonder? Children experience everything with openness and wonder. In Narnia it was talking Beavers and mythical creatures but here in this world kids look at a snowstorm and waterfalls and crickets and flowers growing through sidewalk cracks with that same sense of wonder and delight.

As adults, we want to question, examine, dissect, pull apart. We sometimes come at our faith like scientific investigators, putting God under a microscope to try and discover why things happen and if God is really listening to our prayers, to see if we can find a reason for belief and a justification for our doctrines and theology.

But children seem to have this instinctive connection to God's presence. A little boy was drawing a picture in his kindergarten class and his teacher asked what he was drawing. He said, it's God! The teacher laughed and said well that's impossible. No one knows what God looks like! The little boy said impatiently, well if you give me a minute, THEN you'll know!

Sometimes we ask a lot of "if" questions about God – if God is real, if God loves me, if God is listening, if God could actually exist with what we know about science. Children ask "how" and "why" questions about God, but for them, God isn't an "if". That's trust, and that's the kind of relationship that pervades the story of Narnia.

The Pevensie children trust that what they experience is real, they trust Aslan as king even when they can't see him, and they trust that one day they will return to this magical kingdom, even when they are home and surrounded by ordinary things and can only see Narnia with their hearts.

The Narnia chronicles invite us to open up our hearts the way that children naturally, to rediscover our faith and reencounter God with a sense of wonder, where we take nothing for granted and everything for granted at the same time! The story also invites us to be like Peter, Edmund, and Lucy, willing to let go of certainty and hold onto simple belief instead.

Susan, like all of us, grew up, and when science and reason and other adults told her Narnia could not be real, she acquiesced to a life of certainty and gave up a life of faith.

Now please do not misunderstand me. For the people called Methodists, investigation matters. We do not advocate a blind faith that shuns science or ignores reason. Wesley argued that as fully human creatures we must use our

reason and intellect and experiences to examine the traditions of our faith and the implications of scripture. We cannot allow doctrine to give us the permission to exclude or harm others or our environment, and we have to enjoy the stories of our faith through the lens of what we know about history, culture, science, and human development and evolution. These things allow us to be better informed human beings, more authentic disciples, and to live lives that better reflect the Spirit of the gospel and the example Jesus Christ set for us.

At the same time, there is a deep danger to our faith that happens when we abandon the simple joy of believing in the unseen, of suspending our willingness to take things we cannot explain or do not understand simply on faith. Creativity and imagination are characteristics of being made in the image of God, and God invites us to think outside of the boxes we humans have created, to envision a world where anything is possible, to live as though peace on earth is already here even while we work to make that a reality.

Remember when I talked about the world as it is versus the world as it should be? The world as it is is ruled by power, while the world as it should be is fueled by love. Narnia represents the world as it should be, a world where love conquers all and everything is possible if you only believe it to be true.

Hebrews 11:1 tells us that faith is the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things unseen. How much richer our own lives become when we experience God as though faith itself is the evidence we seek, when we can believe in the unexplainable, even if it defies scientific explanation or grown-up wisdom.

Are we too jaded to do that? Are we too much like Susan, too mature to believe in the fanciful Biblical stories of our childhood? Is it too late to STOP acting our age? Can we un—grow up as far as our faith is concerned and somehow find our way back to a child's perspective, encountering God's love, and the hope that there is something more to this world that we can see?

This is my challenge today for all of us. I invite you to join me in pushing through the wardrobes of our grown up understanding and need for everything to make sense. Let us seek our own Narnia, where we trust in the unseen, embrace an imaginative, trusting, wonder-filled kind of faith, where we expect to be delighted in things that do not make sense but give us such lasting and life-sustaining hope, that while we wait for the king who was willing to give his life for us and help us usher in a kingdom that is marked by peace, friendship, and abiding love.

For as CS Lewis writes at the end of the Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe:
Wrong will be right, when Aslan comes in sight,
At the sound of his roar, sorrows will be no more,
When he bares his teeth, winter meets its death,
And when he shakes his mane, we shall have spring again.” AMEN