

“Waiting for Christmas”

Isaiah 11:1-4a, 5; Galatians 4:4

A Sermon by Rev. Dr. Ronald L. Farmer

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The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe, the first book in C. S. Lewis’ children’s fantasy series, the *Chronicles of Narnia*, tells the extraordinary story of four children who stumble upon a passageway through a clothes wardrobe in an old English country house that leads them into the enchanted kingdom of Narnia. In this strange world, all is cold and quiet, for the evil White Witch has usurped the throne and cursed the land with eternal winter. All those who attempt to resist her oppressive reign find themselves turned into stone statues adorning her palace grounds.

With the arrival of the four children, however, the good inhabitants of Narnia—the talking animals, dwarfs, and tree-people—come out of hiding. Simultaneously, a rumor begins to spread that Aslan, their beloved lion king, has returned. With the help of the four children, the great golden lion deposes the White Witch and frees Narnia from her evil spell.

Lewis paints a vivid picture of the despair the inhabitants of Narnia experienced living under the rule of the White Witch. In the following excerpt from chapter two, Lucy, the youngest of the children, has just stumbled into the land of Narnia where she encounters a Faun named Mr. Tumnus who invites her to his house for tea. While they are talking, he suddenly begins to cry.

“Mr. Tumnus! Whatever is the matter?” for the Faun’s brown eyes had filled with tears and then the tears began trickling down his cheeks, and soon they were running off the end of his nose; and at last he covered his face with his hands and began to howl.

“Mr. Tumnus! Mr. Tumnus!” said Lucy in great distress. “Don’t! Don’t! What is the matter? Aren’t you well? Dear Mr. Tumnus, do tell me what is wrong.” But the Faun continued sobbing as if his heart would break. . . .

“Oh—oh—oh!” sobbed Mr. Tumnus, “I am crying because I’m such a bad Faun.”

“I don’t think you’re a bad Faun at all,” said Lucy. “I think you are a very good Faun. You are the nicest Faun I’ve ever met.”

“Oh—oh—you wouldn’t say that if you knew,” replied Mr. Tumnus between his sobs. “No, I’m a bad Faun. I don’t suppose there ever was a worse Faun since the beginning of the world.”

“But what have you done?” asked Lucy.

“My old father, now,” said Mr. Tumnus, “that’s his picture over the mantelpiece. He would never have done a thing like this.”

“A thing like what?” said Lucy.

“Like what I’ve done,” said the Faun. “Taken service under the White Witch. That’s what I am. I’m in the pay of the White Witch.”

“The White Witch?” Who is she?”

“Why, it is she that has got all Narnia under her thumb. It’s she that makes it always winter. Always winter and never Christmas . . .”¹

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Always winter and never Christmas—that’s how Lewis described the bone-chilling despair and hopelessness of the inhabitants of Narnia. When I was a child, it seemed like Christmas would never come. From the moment the autumn chill began to permeate the air, my thoughts turned increasingly to Christmas. I confess, the arrival in October of the Sears and Roebuck *Wish Book* certainly increased my yearnings! When I was in the second grade, Dave Seville and the Chipmunks released a song that captured my feelings precisely. It begins:

*Christmas, Christmas, time is here,
Time for joy and time for cheer.
We’ve been good but it can’t last,
Hurry, Christmas, hurry fast!*

After several delightful verses in which the chipmunks ask for everything from airplanes that loop-the-loop to hoola-hoops (a very popular toy back then), the song concludes with a desperate plea:

*We can hardly stand the wait,
Please, Christmas, don’t be late!*

(Isn’t it amazing the things you remember from childhood?)

But yearnings for Christmas are far older than my childhood or Lewis’ creation of the *Chronicles of Narnia*. Indeed, these yearnings are far older than the first Christmas. We can trace their roots back to the ancient Hebrews who longed for an age of peace and equity and justice for all people. We find an excellent example of this longing in today’s Hebrew Bible lesson.

Isaiah 11:1-5 expresses the deep yearnings of the Hebrew people for the birth or ascension of a new king from the lineage of Jesse. Because this descendant of David will be anointed by God’s Holy Spirit, he will possess all the gifts necessary for a just and equitable rule—gifts such as wisdom and understanding, counsel and might. As one who will see and hear beneath the surface, he will ensure that the “poor” and the “meek,” that is, those least able to protect themselves, will experience justice and full equality with the rich and powerful. This coming righteous ruler will be a pious person, one who personally knows and deeply reveres God.

The passage immediately following today’s Hebrew Bible lesson describes the benefits of this righteous reign as extending far beyond the borders of Israel. Not only will all nations

unite around this coming king (v. 10), but there will also be a transformation of the cosmic sphere as well. Natural enemies in the animal world will live together in peace: “The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; the lion shall eat straw like the ox” (vv. 6-7). In this world without violence, even infants, the most vulnerable of humans, have nothing to fear: “The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder’s den” (v. 8). With profound poetic beauty, Isaiah records God as promising: “They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea” (v. 9).

What a wonderful vision! Peace! Tranquility! Unity! Harmony! “The character and administration of the king here [described] are those that the people [of Israel] hoped for—but never fully realized—as each new descendant of David took the throne in Jerusalem.”² Indeed, frequently the kings were far from pious or just. When the line of Davidic kings came to an end with the Babylonian conquest of Palestine, many people despaired of ever seeing this vision come to fulfillment. Others, however, began to look for a Messiah who one day would fulfill the aspirations of the Hebrew people.

Centuries passed, yet no Messiah appeared. Still, the faithful waited—and that was part of the problem. “What on earth do you mean by that?” you may ask. “Why was their waiting part of the problem?” Well you see, *there are two kinds of waiting: passive waiting and active waiting*. Let me explain.

In Galatians 4:4 the Apostle Paul wrote that God sent forth the Messiah “when the fullness of time had come.” Even God had to wait for the first Christmas! Perhaps you have never thought about that. “On what was God waiting?” you may ask. God was waiting on the people of God to bring about certain conditions that were necessary for the advent of the Messiah. The Christ Child could not be born at just any time; his birth was contingent upon certain factors. Until all the necessary ingredients came together, even God had to wait for Christmas. And God’s wait was lengthened anytime God’s people waited passively.

Whenever people think that God’s vision will come about by unilateral action on God’s part, they delay its coming. People are to be co-creators with God in bringing God’s vision into existence. Passive waiting only extends the wait—for us *and* for God.

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The four children in Lewis’ fantasy worked side-by-side with Aslan, the mighty lion king, to overthrow the White Witch and break her evil, wintry spell. Christmas would not have come to the land of Narnia without their help. So, too, new manifestations of Christmas will not come to our world if our waiting is passive. Our waiting must be active; we must be co-workers with God in making the possibilities of Christmas become realities in our world.

As you wait for Christmas this Advent Season, use this special time in the church year to ask yourself an important question: Is my waiting active or passive? Am I working with God to bring about new manifestations of Christmas to our weary world, or am I sitting on the sidelines as a passive spectator? Remember, God is waiting for Christmas, too. Let's join the effort to shorten the wait by engaging in *active waiting*.

And that's today's good news. Amen.

¹ C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, illustrated by Michael Hague (New York: Macmillan, 1981 [1950]) 16-17.

² Gene M. Tucker, *Preaching through the Christian Year: A* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press, 1992) 12.