

## Restored!

3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Advent; Series A  
Isaiah 35:1-10

In C.S. Lewis' third book, *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe*, of the seven part *Chronicles of Narnia* series, the reader learns that the land of Narnia, which plays a major role in the story, is under a curse by the White Queen. The effect of the Queen's curse upon the land is that it is always winter and never Christmas in Narnia. The vibrant signs of life have given way to a cold, dry, arid, and life-less feeling and appearance. Even the mood of the animals and dwarves is affected by the curse. They are dreary and sorrowful, sapped of joy and hope. This is the state of things in Narnia. At least, this is the state of things until four children, Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy, enter Narnia through a wardrobe. As the four children venture into the land they soon discover that the cold, dry, arid, life-less wintery season is giving way to spring. It appears as though with their arrival the White Queen's curse was breaking and the signs of vibrant life are once again returning to the once barren land of Narnia.

Living in a barren land and experiencing the effects of barrenness. When something is barren it is infertile and unfruitful. It lacks vibrancy, life, and the signs of it. At first thought it may be difficult for us to imagine a barren land. Here in San Diego we are truly blessed to live in a land of plenty. The climate is one of the most ideal and suitable climates for the temperature of the human body. Along with the suitable climate we have the ocean, the mountains, and the desert all within an easy driving distance, providing the possibility for a seemingly endless number of outdoor adventures. In addition to all of this one can grow a seemingly endless variety of fruits, vegetables, and other plants pretty much all year around. How difficult it may be at first thought for us to imagine those Narnia-like conditions of bareness, infertility, unfruitfulness, a lack of vibrancy, and an apparent life-less-ness. We may associate bareness, a lack of vibrancy, and vitality less with the land and more with something else—the experiences that our bodies go through.

In the everyday experiences with our own bodies we can relate to the reality of bareness, a lack of vibrancy and vitality. As much as we live in a culture that tries hard to cover up the effects of aging through make-up, plastic surgery, extreme dieting, and excessive exercise, the reality still glares at us as vividly as our reflection in the mirror. To put it bluntly, we live in a world where all creation is on a crash course toward death. As much as we resent it, deny it, and object to it, we cannot but yield to truth that we are getting older, our bodies are breaking down and, unless our Lord returns beforehand, death will have its way with us. Like the perpetual wintery, Christmas-less-ness state of the Land of Narnia under the curse of the White Queen, so also the reality of bareness, the lack of vibrancy and vitality that we feel in our own lives with our own bodies as a result of the curse of Sin and rebellion against God even affects our bodies, even our minds. Our mood of joy and gladness is swallowed by sorrow and sighing as our whole bodies ache and groan (Ro 8:23). In our weakest moments we may find ourselves crying out for even a glimmer of relief, a dawn to come to our feelings of darkness and gloom, a spring to thaw our winter. Some may even become so consumed with the experience of bareness and the lack of vibrancy and vitality upon their bodies and minds that they begin to have fleeting thoughts of seeking their own solution for relief by ending it all.

In our Old Testament lesson we find the prophet Isaiah surveying the land of Israel. He writes in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC and his context is the return of the Israelites from exile in the land of Babylon. As he looks over the land of Israel he sees

bareness. The land's rightful inhabitants are still in exile as the full consequence for their unrepentant Sin and disobedience to their landlord, YHWH, the Triune God who made the heavens and the earth. Isaiah gives a picture of a lack of vibrancy and vitality. He describes the land with words like "wilderness," "dry land," "desert," and "thirsty ground." But suddenly a transformation takes place. As the people of Israel come back into their land, Isaiah's picture changes. He describes a reversal of the state of things. This reversal affects all of creation. Not only will the wilderness and the dry land be glad and filled with springs of water (vv.1, 6, 7), the desert rejoice and blossom (vs.1), but even the disabled, deformed, decaying, bodies are transformed. He says, "Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy" (vv.5-6). Isaiah unfolds a spectacular picture of reversal and recreation, and restoration. Vitality and vibrancy return to the land and to the people even in their own bodies. The joy and the gladness returns. And as Isaiah proclaims it, the cause of this whole event of restoration is *the Lord's coming*. ". . . Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you" (vs.4).

In the Land of Narnia, as Lewis depicts it, once the four children, Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy arrive, winter appears to start giving way to spring for the first time in ages. At least, it is the *appearance* that the cause of the change or circumstances is due to *their* coming. But the reader soon learns the true cause behind the "thawing" and the reversal and restoration of the whole land. The cause is Aslan, a lion who Lewis portrays as the Christ-figure in the whole *Chronicles of Narnia* series. Aslan came into the land at the same time that the four children came into Narnia. His presence was with them. And although Aslan's presence triggered the transformation of the entire land of Narnia into a land of undeniable life, the most visible effects of the reversal and restoration of winter to spring, death to life, were witnessed in the immediate area surrounding his presence. His coming brought a dramatic reversal and display of life that could not be denied. So it is when our God comes and visits the land just as he promised through Isaiah.

In the person and work of Christ God completes Isaiah's picture and fulfills his promise to restore all creation. In Christ God reverses the effects of Sin and death. Our Gospel reading takes place around seven hundred years after Isaiah's prophecy. John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus, is put in prison for his bold work of preparing a way in the wilderness for Jesus to do his restoration and reversal work. As John is in prison you can imagine him contemplating the whole situation, starting to doubt whether or not his bold proclamation and his imprisonment were in vain. So he sends his messengers to ask Jesus a direct question, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another" (Mt 11:3)? Are you the one that Isaiah has spoken about, the one that we heard predicted in our reading of the Old Testament lesson this morning? We can imagine that Jesus just was not fitting John's expectations. We can imagine him wondering, "If Jesus is the Messiah, then why am I in prison?" Jesus gives John's messengers a word of joy and hope to take back to John in the barren, life-less, joy-less, hopeless wilderness of a prison. He gives the messengers a word from Isaiah's prophecy. "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them" (Mt 11:4-5). The signs give him away. Following the signs of restoration, reversal, and life leads us to the very presence of Isaiah's promised one—God who comes to save his whole creation, even your body and soul!

In Christ Isaiah's picture of reversal and restoration is fulfilled now! In his list of signs Jesus even adds one more item that wasn't on Isaiah's original list. He says, "The dead are raised up" (Mt 11:5)! If the full consequence of Sin is death

then by raising up the dead in his Ministry, Jesus showed that he is here to do the ultimate work of restoration and reversal. Through the raising of a little girl, a young man, and Lazarus in his Ministry, Jesus showed that he is Lord over death. Those resurrections were a foreshadowing of our Lord's resurrection and victory over death. In his death he paid the price of your Sin and mine, separating us from its guilt. And in his resurrection he conquered death and all that could eternally separate us from him and one another. He did everything that needed to be done to reverse the final, eternal effects of Sin and death upon your life and mine and then he ransomed you and redeemed you to be his very own. The living baptismal waters have broken through the wilderness of your life to bring God's vitality and the fruit of his Spirit to you. In your Baptism he ransoms and redeems you and brings you into a restored land full of life. As a baptized child of God you are in Christ. And when you are in Christ you are in God's renewed and restored land now even as you await the time of his return when you will live in that land forever. This Advent season let us live *unashamedly* in the hope of that Day of full and complete restoration even as we live in a wintry world of sorrow and sighing. Come, Lord Jesus. Amen.