

In C. S. Lewis' wonderful series, *The Chronicles of Narnia* four children step into a wardrobe and step out into another world. Early on in the second book, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, the children find themselves in a strange land, in the company of a large talking beaver who explains to them about this land of Narnia, and the one who created it. Aslan, the great lion, sang Narnia into being. And as the story unfolds Aslan clearly becomes a Christ-figure in every sense. As the children hear more about him, and they feel themselves filled with both joy and trembling at the mention of his name, one child finally just has to ask, "Is he safe?" "Safe?" said the Beaver. "Whoever said anything about safe" 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. Very good."

Somehow I believe that this veiled description of Jesus would resonate with Peter. Our gospel reading this morning is really of one piece with the reading from last week. It is unfortunate that our lectionary has separated them because the one needs the other for the fullest understanding. Last week, we encountered Jesus as Messiah, as "good, very good," the one blessing Simon with a new name. This week in the same breath we find Jesus wholly unsafe.

Today's gospel reading flows directly from the question Jesus posed to his disciples, the one we heard last Sunday. This is of course the great question of the gospels, the question at the heart of our faith. Jesus asks the twelve, "Who do you say I am?" Simon gives the 64,000 dollar answer, rings the bell, and earns the name of Rock, "Petrus," Peter. Jesus tells the disciples that everything will rest on Peter's answer, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God."

Now Jesus could have just let things be. That would have been the safe thing to do. But this morning's reading continues with the words, "From that time on Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised." Peter sees that Jesus' words do not fit with his own understanding about the Messiah. Perhaps Peter pulled out his handy dandy *Oxford Guide to Messiahship* or *Messiahship For Dummies*, with its centerfold portrait of a king restoring Israel to its promised land and ousting Rome and all oppressors for eternity. So Peter tries to set Jesus straight. For his efforts Rock gets broken apart. Things become "unsafe" for Peter very quickly. He is told to "get behind" Jesus, a phrase that literally translates as "to follow, as a disciple would." And Peter is renamed a third time as Satan, the one who tempted Jesus to use his power for worldly gain. Peter is reminded of who wrote the book on Messiahship.

Now again, Jesus could have stopped here with this clearer definition of himself and his role as Messiah. But he goes on, dragging all of us into the fray. It seems to be important that we "get" Messiahship because discipleship follows close behind. Jesus reminds us that if we wish to follow the will of God we do not pick up a sword, or spear, or gun. Rather we take up the very thing that will break us, that which will result in the loss of our lives as we would live them so that we might find our lives as God would have us live them. Jesus is quite clear: "If you will follow me, deny yourself, take up your cross, die to yourself, lose your life." There is a question here, perhaps more subtle than the earlier all important question, but a question of paramount importance nonetheless. Last week Jesus asked us, "Who do you say I am?" This week he asks us, "How will you live out who I am?" And we know the answer lies somehow in the process of losing one's life so as to find life.

It is interesting and more than a bit unnerving that our questions – "Who do you say I am," and "How will you live out who I am?" – both point to a death, of sorts. True identity seems to involve a loss. From the point of view of Peter and the disciples more than Jesus' body was nailed to the cross. The hopes and dreams and expectations for Israel's vision of what a

Messiah was “supposed” to be and do died a painful death as well. The glossy centerfold image of Peter’s *Oxford Guide to Messiahship* had to be crucified. Only then was humankind able to discover that through Jesus’ death and resurrection something new was being offered: instead of land conquest and political triumph through Christ we receive reconciliation, forgiveness, and the joy of a loving relationship with God.

If we are to follow Jesus we tread out into “unsafe” territory. We likewise face a death, a loss, of sorts. We all carry with us our own guide book of who we are supposed to be, don’t we? The pages might variously read: “Success is measured by the neighbors you keep.” “Might makes right.” “To make it in this world the ends do justify the means.” “The popular kids in school listen to this music.” “Your next car or house or job must be bigger and better than the last one.” We all have these books, these mirrored pages that over time we and those around us have written. We take them with us everywhere. They pose as our true identity. These are the lies that must die, this book of who we and others think we are supposed to be. Now killing this false self is a fearsome prospect, and the risk seems great: if we die to the world’s definition of ourselves, what might be left? What if the answer is, “Nothing?” The disciples felt the dull ache of this “nothingness” as they watched the events of Calvary unfold from afar. But the new creation that was Jesus Christ could only be perceived clearly after all preconceived expectations and definitions had died. The false veil had to come off for Christ’s true nature to be revealed. If you and I dare to lose our lives, bury our guidebooks of who we ought to be and learn to become whom God made us to be, then we become real, and powerful, and full. We find our lives.

So how exactly does this process happen? I really couldn’t tell you. In fact if I tried to lay out a five step or twenty step program to tell you how to lose your life to find life in God it would not be particularly helpful. Best case scenario: you would ignore what I had to say; worst case scenario: you would listen, maybe even write a few things down and just create yet another guidebook that has to be buried. In the end we each must bury our own false selves and take our own steps behind Jesus into new life. Yet we should keep in mind that we need community in this effort. We need the support of one another, and we need to offer support to one another, as we walk along together. In large families the younger children walk earlier than the older ones did due to the encouragement of their brothers and sisters. Although only I can make my legs and feet and heart move to follow Jesus, I could never do so if it were not for this community walking with me.

And so I cannot offer you a “lose-your-life-find-your-life” program. What I can offer is a picture of what losing life to find life looks like for me. You will have your own, and I would encourage you to share them. Mine is a picture I have within me. It is a photograph of my dad, taken before my parents remarried each other again after a lengthy divorce, when my dad was starting to get his life together, a life that had come completely undone. The story behind the photo is this: my dad had taken my sister and me fishing. Now we were far from experienced fisherfolk, but out we went on a boat on a lake in Eastern Kentucky nevertheless, with just a few bamboo poles, hooks, and a container of worms. In spite of our inexperience, my younger sister and I were fishing machines. We were catching fish left and right. We just could not NOT catch fish. As soon as our bait hit the water, something was biting. It was amazing. Now what we caught were just brim, sunfish, no more than 6” long. But we thought we were the greatest fishers in the world. My dad was kept constantly busy with helping us bait our hooks and get the fish off. Needless to say my sister Cathy and I wanted to keep these trophy fish. Three pictures were taken. There is one of my sister, proudly displaying her stringer full of these little fish. There is one of me with my stringer full of fish, happiness and accomplishment washing over my

face. And then there is a picture of my dad, the one hanging on the wall of my heart. His face is filled with pure joy. I am not sure I have another picture or memory of him looking so joyful. And he is holding a stringer that is completely empty. There is not a fish on it. The fullness of my dad, the man God created him to be, is so evident in his joy-filled emptiness. He poured himself out on that boat that day, just as he had been pouring out himself to try to right the wrongs in our lives. To get his life back with his family my dad had to die to all the terrible temptations and actions that had lost us. And in that photo it was clear that such a death was worth it; the joy of true life lies on the other side. Perhaps this is something like what Jesus is getting at when he says we have to lose our lives to find our lives. It is far from safe; but it is good, very good.