Longest Night Service 12/22/19
6:00 PM

When I was in fourth grade, my teacher, Mrs Leahy, used to read to us during the last 20 minutes of class. It was in her class that I was introduced to "The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe" by C.S. Lewis. It was the first book she read to us that year. And I remember loving that book, but more than that, I remember how exicited I was to discover that there were seven books in the Narnia series. It wasn't until a couple of years later that I was able to get copies of all the books, but I remember devouring them. I still do. And perhaps my favorite moment in all the Narnia stories occurs in *The Horse and His Boy*, which is my favorite book in the series. In this scene, the boy Shasta has been left behind by the horse Bree and as he travels on alone on a different horse, he begins to feel sorry for himself because of all the terrible misfortunes he has had. His horse walks and walks up into the mountains and night begins to fall and then the fog rolls in so thickly that he can't see two feet in front of him. He feels deserted, lost, and alone. But in the midst of his emptiness, Aslan shows up.

> And being very tired and having nothing inside him, (Shasta) felt so sorry for himself that the tears rolled down his cheeks.
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> What put a stop to all of this was a sudden fright. Shasta discovered that someone or somebody was walking beside him. It was pitch dark and he could see nothing. And the Thing (or Person) was going so quietly that he could hardly hear any footfalls. What he could hear was breathing. His invisible companion seemed to breathe on a very large scale, and Shasta got the impression that it was a very large creature. And he had come to notice this breathing so gradually that he had really no idea how long it had been there. It was a horrible shock.
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> It darted into his mind that he had heard long ago that there were giants in these Northern countries. He bit his lip in terror. But now that he really had something to cry about, he stopped crying.
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> The Thing (unless it was a person) went on beside him so very quietly that Shasta began to hope that he had only imagined it. But just as he was becoming quite sure of it, there suddenly came a deep, rich sigh out of the darkness beside him. That couldn't be imagination! Anyway, he has felt the hot breath of that sigh on his chilly left hand.
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> If the horse had been any good – or if he had known how to get any good out of the horse – he would have risked everything on a break away and a wild gallop. But he knew he couldn't make that horse gallop. So he went on at a walking pace and the unseen companion walked and breathed beside him. At last he could bear it no longer.
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> "Who are you?" he said, barely above a whisper.
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> "One who has waited long for you to speak," said the Thing. Its voice was not loud, but very large and deep.

"Are you – are you a giant?" asked Shasta.

"You might call me a giant," said the Large Voice. "But I am not like the creatures you call giants."

"I can't see you at all," said Shasta, after staring very hard. Then (for an even more terrible idea had come into his head) he said, almost in a scream, "You're not – not something dead, are you? Oh please – please do go away. What harm have I ever done you? Oh, I am the unluckiest person in the whole world."

Once more he felt the warm breath of the Thing on his hand and face. "There," it said, "that is not the breath of a ghost. Tell me your sorrows."

Shasta was a little reassured by the breath: so he told how he had never known his real father or mother and had been brought up sternly by the fisherman. and then he told the story of his escape and how they were chased by lions and forced to swim for their lives; and of all their dangers in Tashbaan and about his night among the Tombs and how the beasts howled at him out of the desert. And he told about the heat and thirst of their desert journey and how they were almost at their goal when another lion chased them and wounded (his companion) Aravis. And also, how very long it was since had had anything to eat.

"I do not call you unfortunate," said the Large Voice.

"Don't you think it was bad luck to meet so many lions?" said Shasta.

"There was only one lion." said the Voice.

"What on earth do you mean? I've just told you there were at least two lions the first night, and -"

"There was only one, but he was swift of foot."

"How do you know?"

"I was the lion."

And as Shasta gaped with open mouth and said nothing, the Voice continued. "I was the lion who forced you to join with Aravis. I was the cat who comfroted you among the houses of the dead. I was the lion who drove the jackals from you as you slept. I was the lion who gave the Horses the new strength of fear for the last mile so that you should reach King Lune in time. And I was the lion you do not remember who pushed the boat in which you lay, a child near death, so that it came to shore where a man sat, wakeful at midnight, to receive you."

"Then it was you who wounded Aravis?"

"It was I."

"But what for?"

"Child," said the Voice, "I am telling you your story, not hers. I tell no one any story but his

own."

"Who are you?" asked Shasta.

"Myself," said the Voice, very deep and low so that the earth shook: and again "Myself," loud and clear and gay: and then the third time "Myself," whispered so softly you could hardly hear it, and yet it seemed to come from all around you as if the leaves rustled with it.

Shasta was no longer afraid that the Voice belonged to something that would eat him, nor that it was the voice of a ghost. But a new and different sort of trembling came over him. Yet he felt glad too.

The mist was turning from black to grey and from grey to white. This must have begun to happen some time ago, but while he had been talking to the Thing he had not been noticing anything else. Now, the whiteness around him became a shining whiteness; his eyes began to blink. Somewhere ahead he heard birds singing. He knew the night was over at last. He could see the mane and ears and head of his horse quite clearly now. A golden light fell on them from the left. He thought it was the sun.

He turned and saw, pacing beside him, taller than a horse, a Lion. The horse did not seem to be afriad of it or else could not see it. It was from the lion that the light came. No one ever saw anything more terrible or more beautiful.

Luckily Shasta had lived all of his life too far south in Calormen to have heard the tales that were whispered in Tashbaan about a dreadful Narnian demon that appeared in the form of a lion. And of course he knew none of the true stories about Aslan, the great Lion, the son of the Emperor-over-sea, the King above all High Kings in Narnia. But after one glance at the Lion's face he slipped out of the saddle and fell at its feet. He couldn't say anything but then he didn't want to say anything, and he knew he needn't say anything.

The High King above all kings stooped towards him. Its mane, and some strange and solemn perfume that hung about the mane, was all around him. It touched his forehead with its tongue. He lifted his face and their eyes met. Then instantly the pale brightness of the mist and the feiry brightness of the Lion rolled themselves together into a swirling glory and gathered themselves up and disappeared. He was alone with horse on a grassy hillside under a blue sky. And there were birds singing.

It is at these moments, during the longest nights, the times when we think we are deserted, lost, alone, when we think we are the unluckiest person in the world, that all of sudden in dawns on us that we are not alone, and we even feel the breath of someone walking next to us.