

Holy lion

By [Katherine Willis Pershey](#)

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I've been reading the Chronicles of Narnia to my daughter at bedtime. As a kid I only read as far as *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*; the endless shelf of Babysitter's Club books distracted me from the Narnians. We're on *The Silver Chair* now, and while I'm still not sure about that [Jill Pole](#), I continue to marvel at C. S. Lewis's masterful Christian allegories.

I've always loved Aslan, but I am newly convinced that the lion really does capture the essence of Christ. I'm convinced because of the joyous expression on my daughter's face every time Aslan appears in the narrative. She has the countenance of a girl who is in the presence of God—the very unselfconscious delight and wonderment that is elusive for her angst-ridden, overly analytical mother.

A few weeks ago I sat slumped on my spiritual director's couch, complaining of the spiritual malaise that perennially afflicts me. I was tired of hearing myself recount the same lamentations. She reminded me how critical it is to continue to practice being still in the presence of a God who loves me.

Easier said than done.

She suggested we try a guided meditation in which she would invite me to visualize myself at rest and peace in the arms of Christ. I have a tendency to resist such exercises, but I trusted her enough not to roll my eyes. Still, I was hesitant when we entered the time of prayer, and even more hesitant to name the image of God her promptings roused from my subconscious: a lion. The holy lion, Aslan.

And so, for the next week or so, I sheepishly made a habit of imagining myself leaning on the lion of God. I visited the lion during the savasana that closes my yoga practice, and while the church choir sang "Total Praise" during worship last Sunday, and as I stroked the belly of my pretty white house cat.

I had only just left the lion when I signed into Facebook yesterday and saw a post from my friend [Heidi Haverkamp](#) (author of the forthcoming [Advent in Narnia](#)): "I'm

really sad about the Lion. Really sad.” She was, of course, referring to Cecil, the beautiful black-maned lion illegally shot, skinned, and beheaded in Zimbabwe by an American bowhunter.

It’s an ugly story of colonialism, corruption, violence, and machismo. A beloved animal killed in its prime, with the added tragedy that Cecil’s cubs will likely be killed off by a rival lion. It’s possible that the lion’s death will not be in vain, even at a literal level; never has there been such a furor targeting the unconscionable sport of trophy hunting.

But the literal story, though worthy of a measure of grief and outrage, isn’t all there is. Just as there is a theology of the cross, there is a theology of the crossbow.

The horrifying scene of Aslan’s death in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* was nearly too much for my seven-year-old. She reeled at the cruelty of the White Witch and her despicable cronies. She had no frame of reference for such evil—an evil that delights in killing good, in killing God.

And yet humans, debased by sin, persist in killing God—and not only in the allegorical crucifixions of Christlike lions. We injure, maim, rape, starve, and desecrate the image of God every time we injure, maim, rape, starve, and desecrate a brother or sister imprinted with the *imago Dei*.

While the hunter’s actions were heinous, I’m reluctant to heap more shame upon him. I pity the person who elicits the rage of the Internet. Still, it is perfectly fitting that the villain in this story is a dentist from Minnesota. The face of evil is not the twisted, grotesque face of one of the White Witch’s henchmen. It’s a man with distractingly white teeth. It’s someone like you or me.

At the end of *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, my daughter rejoiced. “Aslan wasn’t really dead!” I corrected her. I needed her to know the truth of his brutal death, for without it the glory of his resurrection is muted.

This morning I sat in meditation with my holy lion again. Cecil’s death made him all the more real to me. I wanted to play in the field with him, the way Susan and Lucy do when the Stone Table is broken and the Deeper Magic has prevailed. Instead, he paced. He roared. Aslan, on the move.