

# Stepping Into the Picture

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In the beginning of one of C.S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia – The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* three children are in the room of a house and on one of the walls of the room is a painting. It's the painting of a ship in full sail on the sea. It's one of those old Viking type ships with a prow in the shape of a dragon's head similar to what you see on the cover of your bulletin. Two of the children recognize the ship as looking like the ships they had seen before in Narnia. Narnia is this other world – this other dimension – this parallel universe that the two children had visited before and long someday to return to. And as they try to explain this other world to their uninitiated friend – all of a sudden they find themselves – the three of them -- being drawn into the picture. What was once a bedroom with a painting on the wall was now all of sudden the deep swells of a sea and the three children are treading water beside the great hull of a ship. They are plucked from the sea by the crew and find themselves now on this adventurous voyage on the ship called The Dawn Treader. Without getting too much into the story – the ship and its crew are on a mission to find some lost souls and to find them they must face into great dangers and fears. And the protagonist of the story and the most courageous of the crew turns out to be not the Captain of the ship nor the Prince of Narnia – but a little mouse named Reepicheep. Of all the crew, it's the little mouse who dares most to go where angels fear to tread. He is the one who keeps them on their mission. And what you discover is that the little mouse is himself seeking to live into his own picture. And the picture comes in the form of a poem that was given him when he was young. And the poem suggests that he will find his ultimate destiny in his sailing to the uttermost east. The poem paints for him a picture that he feels

compelled to step into – and he does so by stepping on board this great ship and sailing east and pursuing the mission of seeking these lost souls.

There are in this world some captivating pictures - that possess the power to lure us in.

I wonder if we don't all have a picture, whether we know it or not, whether we like it or not, we have stepped into. For some of us it was the stepping into a career. Perhaps someone painted for us the picture of a certain career – and we stepped into an attractive image, a seductive image of living a life. The McConnell family could be accused of this – great grandfather, grandfather, father, uncle and three brothers all Presbyterian ministers – do you think we stepped into a picture? No regrets for any of us, but still we stepped into a picture. For some it's the family business, the family profession, the family tradition. For some it is the stepping into a certain culture of people – a club, a fraternity, a sorority, even a college or university – we were drawn a picture of this culture of people and we were struck by it and stepped into it – for better or worse. For some it is the stepping into a certain ideology – we have been intrigued and compelled by a depiction – sometimes a caricature of a certain ideology and we get swept into it sometimes without really thinking about it. We keep watching the same channel – we keep listening to the same station. A lot of really smart people became Nazi's not too long ago – they got swept into the picture without really thinking about it. One could say the same thing about terrorism or fanaticism today. Some get swept into the picture of certain sports teams. I myself don't understand this - but some do. But likely all of us have some sort of picture – some type of poem – some type of framework - we have consciously or unconsciously stepped into – and this has made all the difference.

Let's imagine this as Americans for the moment. As Americans our 238 year history has been a history, many would say, of attempting to step into a poem. A poem that paints a picture. And the poem that paints a picture is the iambic pentameter of Thomas Jefferson's words at the beginning of the Declaration of Independence:

*We hold these truths to be self-evident:  
that all men are created equal,  
that they are endowed by their Creator  
with certain inalienable rights;  
that among these are life, liberty  
and the pursuit of happiness.*

From the moment those words were penned and joined by the signature of fifty-six of our founding fathers – Americans have been trying to step into that picture – the picture of equality, the picture of shared inalienable rights , and the picture of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Every election we vote in, every debate we listen to, every political blog we forward to our friends is all about how do we live into that poem.

The most remembered American speech were words delivered by Abraham Lincoln when he traveled to a Union cemetery in Central Pennsylvania and said,

*Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.*

Six hundred and fifty thousand people died trying to understand how to step into Jefferson's poem.

Twenty one short years later Grover Cleveland dedicated at the mouth of the Hudson River the great Statue of Liberty – Lady Libertas, the Roman goddess of freedom who bears her torch and carries her tablet upon which is inscribed the date of Jefferson's poem – July 4, 1776 and at its base the words of Emma Lazarus' poem:

*Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,*

*With conquering limbs astride from land to land;  
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand  
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame  
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name  
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand  
Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command  
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.  
"Keep ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she  
With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.  
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"*

And then seventy nine years later an African-American Baptist preacher stood in front of the Lincoln Memorial, at the feet of the Great Emancipator and in front of two hundred and fifty thousand marchers on Washington – and delivered perhaps the second most remembered American speech in which he said:

*I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal."*

American history has been a history of trying to live into Jefferson's poem.

But there was another poem that Martin Luther King quoted in his famous speech and it was a poem from the prophet of the morning – the prophet Isaiah:

*I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, and every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight; "and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together."*

Words straight out of Isaiah chapter 40. King was quoting from one of the greatest poets of all time. Find for me a poet who has produced a more hopeful, a more challenging, a more bracing picture of what the world can be than the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah stands in the great prophetic tradition of scripture in which the great poets of Israel – Micah and Malachi, Amos and Habakkuk, Jeremiah and Ezekiel – drew for the people of God poetic pictures of the world God wants us to step into. If asked, Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King would say that just about every great word they wrote and every great thought they thought – all could be traced back the prophets. Isaiah perhaps at the top of the list. When you read the prophets it is like walking through a gallery of paintings – painted by the voice of God – each showing the incredible images of what God wants the world to be.

Hmingi last week told us about Micah's image of doing justice, loving mercy and walking humbly with our God. Amos tells us that justice is to roll down like waters and righteousness to flow like an everflowing stream. Jeremiah looks forward to the Lord raising up for David a righteous branch who shall reign and deal wisely, and execute justice and righteousness in the land. Malachi pictures the day of the Lord and the Righteous One as a refiner's fire and a fuller's soap. And then there is Isaiah who dreams of the day when swords will be beat into ploughshares and spears into

pruning hooks. When the wolf shall lay down with lamb, the cow will graze with the bear, the lion shall eat straw like the ox and no one shall hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain. God's great peaceable kingdom. Not unlike the stained glass windows of this sanctuary, the prophets surround us with these poetic pictures of what way it's supposed to be. And every word, every verse, every stanza is an invitation to God's people to step into the picture.

But therein lies the challenge – because there is big part of me, and I bet a big part of you – that would be happy for those pictures to stay on the wall. To keep these poems at an arm's distance. To do our gallery walk and gaze and listen and admire from afar but never to step too close. Kind of like walking through the Ringling Art Museum and standing before this painting and that painting and saying, "Hmmm. Interesting, beautiful, striking image, beautiful scene, captivating expression ... but never to think of entering. Of stepping in. Of taking on the story.

But this is precisely what our good friend Isaiah would have us do. His are poems to live into. Verses not to admire, but to adhere. Beating our swords into ploughshares and our spears into pruning hooks. Taking whatever weapons in my possession ... and letting them be melted down, beat by the blacksmith into something that makes for peace and life. And I don't know about you, but I have an idea of what that means for me. Because Lord knows I got my weapons. How about you? Oh, I got my weapons. I got my words. I got those razor sharp words I can let shoot from my mouth that have most certainly sliced and diced my opponent. That before I have stopped to think and pray – before I have taken those words to the blacksmith and had him bang them into something different -- I have managed to fire at will and let the chips and the humans fall. I've got my email. I can pound out a good, cynical, mean-spirited email and hit that send button and never have to think about the broken heart that receives it and the tear-filled eyes that try to read it. I've got my resentment. I've got my passive/aggressiveness that can freeze people out. I've got this remarkable ability to withhold grace. I've got my indifference. I've got this remarkable ability to turn away. Ain't it a shame, I say, that children go hungry and teenagers are being trafficked and homeless have no homes and my next door neighbor is desperate for a friend – ain't a shame, but

could you pass me the remote control my favorite team is about to play. We've got this quiver of weapons, don't we? It's not a guilt thing, it's a human thing.

But the prophet writes his poem of hope – and he says it doesn't have to be that way. You can step into the picture. You can lay down with the lion and the lamb. You can offer your weapons to the blacksmith. You can begin to build this world that God really wants built.

It makes me think of the friend of mine who subjected himself to my preaching for years – and I choose carefully the word subjected, because it was often a painful experience for my friend to hear such calls I sought to amplify from the Biblical world. And he would say to me about once a month as he walked out the back of the church – that's all well and good, Steve – but you know I live in the real world. And I knew what he was saying and I understood what he was saying – because these poems and pictures of which I spoke – this Biblical world -- they were like pictures on a wall that had no movement, no invitation. And I guess they will be for all of us ... if we don't try somehow to step toward them. To step into them. To hand over the sword, the fear to the blacksmith's anvil.

Don't you hear the poem of the prophet coming from our friend across the state in Ft. Lauderdale? Arnold Abbot, 90 years old, setting up his little feeding station for the homeless and hungry though it's against the law. He keeps getting cited. He gets his notices to appear in court – but he's taking serious the prophet Jesus when he said, "Love your neighbor as much as you love yourself." He doesn't just see the picture, he's stepping into it.

Is there a greater joy than to peek into the food pantry and see those faithful volunteers packing bags and handing them out to folks for whom life has dealt an unfair hand? Is there greater joy than to glance in and see the scores of volunteers sitting with children tutoring them in their subjects. Or to go over to Booker Elementary and see another group of volunteers encouraging many who get no encouragement. Or to see a Habitat House go up. Or to see two people who may disagree strenuously about something important – and yet maintain for each other a strong

affection. Is there a greater joy? Well, of course there is – and what could be greater than to gaze upon such beautiful pictures? Would it be...to enter them?