

The Young Lions – Pentecost+11B

Which of you desires life, and covets many days to enjoy good? The young lions suffer want and hunger, but those who seek the Lord lack no good thing. Come, O children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the Lord.

Some of us may remember *The Young Lions*, Irwin Shaw's stunning 1948 novel, and its powerful film version with Dean Martin, Montgomery Clift and Marlon Brando, that came out in 1958. In a 1953 interview, Shaw commented, "What I was trying to do in *The Young Lions* was to show the world at a certain point in its history, its good and evil, and as many people as I could crowd into the book struggling through that world, trying to find some reason for trying to stay alive in it". He described the character of the German soldier – ironically named Christian: "I wanted to show how a man can start out decent, intelligent, well meaning, as so many people in Germany must have been, even in the greatest days of Naziism – and wind up bestialized, almost bereft of humanity, even dead to the instincts of survival, as the Germans finally were, by believing in one false thing, which spreads and spreads and finally corrupts them entirely.

Shaw's title – *The Young Lions* – has biblical roots, in Psalm 34, which we sang today, and elsewhere. The phrase has powerful resonance for those with ears to hear. Young Lions are not to be confused with Roaring Lions, strikingly mentioned in the first letter of Peter, Chapter 5, Verse 8 which reads: "Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour. Roaring lions are the kind that have fierce

powers to strike fear in, and inflict destruction upon whomever they choose. Lion Kings are Roaring Lions. Young Lions, on the other hand, are in a precarious, even fragile position. The way a lion family works is with one dominant male ruling over a number of females and their offspring. When a male lion reaches an age where he is inclined to compete with the alpha male for female attention and family dominance, he is expelled – violently if necessary – and sent out on his own. Only one can be at the top. It's not by accident that we call the family a Pride of Lions.

The young lions go out in search of weaker male heads-of-family whom they can defeat and supplant to form prides of their own. But while these young males are unattached, they are inexperienced, reckless, and impetuous, with nothing to lose and no one to answer to. The young lions are self-serving, headstrong and vulnerable, both to attack from others and to their own follies. As Irwin Shaw remarks, they can start out in a perfectly good direction and, because of one bad choice, meet and court disaster. Like a navigator with a sextant, whose one false sight can turn safe landfall into lost at sea, young lions are susceptible to the kinds of particular errors, often matters of pride, that result in catastrophe.

Those of us who aren't so big on war movies, even ones as nuanced and thought-provoking as *The Young Lions*, may instead recall Groucho Marx as Captain Spaulding, telling stories from his recent adventures: "As I say, I was sitting in front of the cabin when I bagged six tigers. I bagged them, I bagged them to go away, but they hung around all

afternoon. They were the most persistent tigers I've ever seen.”

In each of our readings today, we hear the sages bagging us, admonishing us, warning us not to be as the young lions, not to make the crucial false choices that drive us away from life. One would think that Elijah has done everything right. The servant and prophet and mouthpiece of the Lord, he challenges the ungodly prophets of Baal and defeats them roundly. Indeed, in what seems an egregiousity of violence, Elijah not only defeats them in an elaborate my-god's-better-than-your-god contest, he then kills them in the Wadi Kishon. Four hundred and fifty of them, according to the story, which seems a little excessive, like something even an over zealous misguided young lion might consider too much.

Sure enough, Elijah finds himself no better off afterwards than he was before the contest. Ahab and Jezebel are still hot on his trail, with revenge added to their murderous pride, and Elijah's skin as their only possible satisfaction. He has to run and hide and suffer depression too. An angel talks him into eating a little something, and Elijah survives to prophesy another day in another land and (of course not by accident) to make the point God would have made: It's not about killing the prophets of other gods, it's not about being triumphant or cataclysmic. It's not about great winds, so strong they split mountains and break rocks in pieces, or earthquakes or fire. It's about the everlasting presence of the Lord, always and everywhere, even in the sound of sheer silence. When Elijah hears it, he hides his face in his cloak and goes to the entrance of the cave. And God says, “Whatcha doin there,

Elijah?” “I have been very zealous for you Lord, God of hosts. The Israelites have forsaken your covenant, torn down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and now they’re trying to kill me.” And the Lord tells him to simply get on with his work. Don’t be a young lion. You made a mistake of pride, but it looks like you learned your lesson, so I’m bringing you back into the family and putting you back to work.

Similarly, Paul, in his didactic way makes clear the distinction between the instinct driven, headstrong, young lion behaviors that will ruin us, and the spirit driven, temperate, neighborly ways that will reconcile us to God: Put away falsehood and speak the truth. Sure, go ahead, be angry but don’t act on it. Don’t let the sun go down on your anger, and thus make room for the devil. You who are thieves: give up stealing; instead labor honestly with your own hands and share with the needy. Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only words that give grace to those who hear. Put away from you all bitterness and wrangling and slander; be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another as God in Christ has forgiven you.

And in John’s gospel, we see a portrayal of Jesus struggling with the pride of his people to convey the one simple but vital piece of information that can make the difference between living death and endless life. Again and again in John he says, “I am.” “I am the bread of life,” I am the Living Bread.” Jesus echoes the most ancient conception of God’s existence, given to Moses, who alone among us has encountered the Lord: “*Eyeh Asher Eyeh*,” I am that I am. Call it Popeye Theology if we must; whatever it takes so that we never lose sight of the one piece of

information that makes all else possible, all else matter: “I am what I am, and that’s all that I am.” For the rest of our lives and indeed forevermore, “I am” can mean only one thing: “Anyone who comes to me I will never drive away, (like a young lion). Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. I am the living bread that came down from heaven, and whoever eats of this bread will live forever.”

Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, who will exalt you in due time. Cast all your care upon the Lord who cares for you. Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord rescues them from them all. The Lord is near to the brokenhearted, and saves the crushed in spirit. When I sought the Lord, God answered me, and delivered me from all my fears. Look to the Lord, and be radiant; so your faces shall never be ashamed. The young lions suffer want and hunger, but those who seek the Lord lack no good thing. O taste and see that the Lord is good; happy are those who take their refuge in God alone.