



## “Oxford and Hawkins, Narnia and Bethlehem: A Christmas Search”

Chapel Message by Head of School Lee Burns '87  
Wednesday, December 10, 2025

I grew up in a family of seven children. When I was in elementary school, my parents thought that my siblings and I would enjoy going to Tennessee Vol football games, so they bought our family season tickets starting the year that Johnny Majors, fresh off coaching the Pitt Panthers to a national championship, returned to his alma mater in Knoxville to become the coach of the Big Orange. I cherish many happy family memories of going to those games and, to this day, I have a great passion for Tennessee football.

For 16 years, Majors would coach the Vols to, on balance, a good era in program history, capped by a 1985 Sugar Bowl victory. But there were some disappointing stretches as well, and by the early 1990s, there was a growing sense of discontent and restlessness, and Majors was pushed out to make way for a young new coach, Philip Fulmer, who would relatively soon guide the Vols to several SEC titles and a national championship in 1998.

Like with Majors, though, a faction of the fan base and school administration would eventually grow discontent and restless during a stretch of a few losses, and Fulmer was fired in 2008, despite at the time being one of the winningest active coaches in all of college football.

Enter Lane Kiffin, a brash, young NFL coach from California, recently fired by the Oakland Raiders, who had a gift not just for play calling, but for trolling other teams and exploiting the emerging era of social media. Kiffin was the polar opposite of Fulmer, and the fans, team, and school embraced him and his injection of fresh energy and optimism—even arrogance. He brought a brash and braggadocious brand. The program was ready for something different.

After one season, so was Kiffin. In a shocking move at the end of the season, Kiffin bolted to take the head coaching job at Southern Cal. He left in the darkness of night, leaving behind an angry team and fans that felt betrayed. A bill was introduced in Knoxville to name a sewage plant after him.

Kiffin's coaching journey after UT would include a series of awkward departures after relatively short stays. USC fired him on the tarmac as his team arrived back on a flight. Nick Saban dismissed him as an assistant before Alabama's national championship game because he'd already accepted another job. He left Florida Atlantic as head coach before his contract ended to go to Ole Miss.



He would serve as the Ole Miss coach for the longest time at any of his nine coaching stops—five years—and lead them to the most successful stretch in their football history. For many of his years at Ole Miss, there would be rumors of his leaving for another job. This fall, those rumors were especially rampant, and reports came out that Florida and LSU were courting him and that he would be deciding between those two schools and staying with the Rebels. Each of those schools, reportedly, would be offering him a long term contract worth about \$90 million, plus about \$25 million in NIL money.



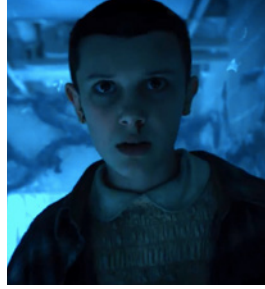
As our family sat around the Thanksgiving table a couple of weeks ago, after we each expressed things for which we are grateful, the conversation at some point turned to Lane Kiffin and what he'd do. Stay at Ole Miss or go to LSU or Florida? His situation called to mind the English punk band The Clash's famous 1982 song, "Should I Stay or Should I Go?"



Though I've not been a fan of his, largely on account of his departure from Tennessee, earlier this fall I watched an ESPN documentary on him, "The Many Lives of Lane Kiffin," and I saw in that a man who was self-reflective, humbled, committed to his family, and expressive of his faith. I commend him for that. As I've gotten older, I've tried to be less judgmental and give other people more grace as I realize I don't really know them and what they may be going through.

Kiffin did decide to leave Ole Miss for LSU, where he may have a better chance of winning a national championship one day. He took a few Ole Miss coaches with him. Kiffin and these coaches won't be coaching the players in the upcoming college football playoff, presumably putting the team in a difficult position. Bitterness and betrayal are certainly swirling in Oxford as Kiffin heads for a new opportunity in Baton Rouge.

My point isn't to fault or support his decision or critique him, but I think Lane Kiffin's coaching journey is illustrative about something we all have: restlessness. We as human beings have an innate and constant desire for something different...for something better. But it's not just that we want a better grade or to win more games or to make more money or have a better car or to have more likes and follows. It's not just that we want to be more popular and happier. It's deeper than that. We are restless because we know, deep down, that we are flawed; there is something off—broken—in us, and we want to find what fixes it...what makes us whole, what gives us peace and joy. So we are restless and search and strive and move from thing to thing and place to place. And yet we are still restless, still searching. The search goes on and on and on. One of my favorite bands, U2, puts it this way:



"I have climbed highest mountains, I have run through the fields...I have scaled these city walls...I have kissed honey lips...But I still haven't found what I'm looking for."

I still haven't found what I'm looking for.

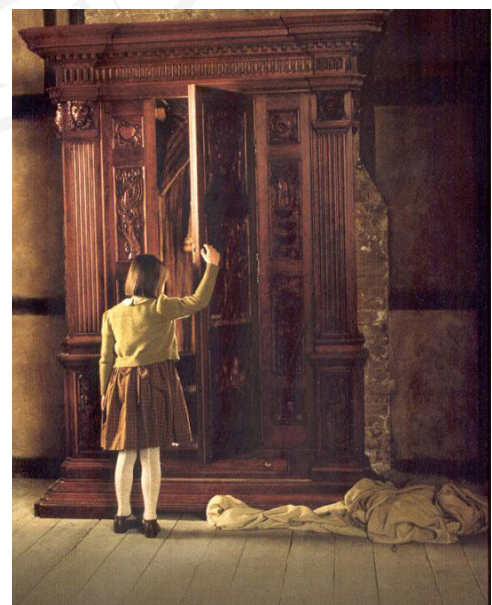


Also around Thanksgiving, the fifth season of "Stranger Things" came out. It, too, is about searching, but a different story of searching. I know that many of you have seen it. Set in the small town of Hawkins, Indiana, in the 1980s, it begins with four boys searching for their friend, Will Byers, who had mysteriously disappeared while riding his bike home one night. Aiding in their search is a mysterious girl they encounter named Eleven, who has escaped from a national science lab in the town and has telepathic powers yet a very limited vocabulary. As the series unfolds, we learn that Will is trapped in a parallel

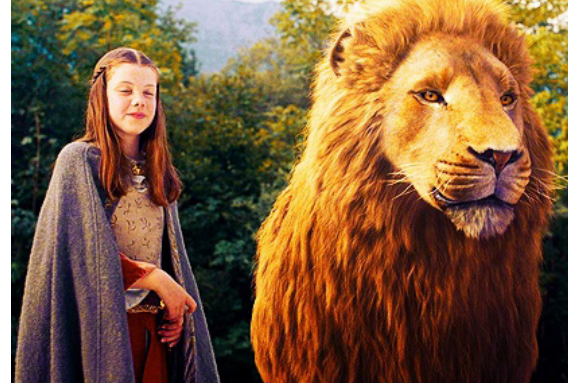
dimension called Upside Down, that he is communicating with his mother by flickering Christmas lights, and that Eleven can, to some extent, bridge communication between Will and his mother and friends desperately searching for him.

Slowly, the town begins to see the incursions of evil supernatural forces breaking into the town of Hawkins through a portal that Eleven tries to keep closed—sometimes successfully and sometimes not. Other residents of Hawkins go missing as supernatural forces—manifest as the Mind Flayer and Vecna—gain footholds. The series pits battles between good and evil, dark and light, natural and supernatural, as ordinary teenagers and adults search not just for each other, but search for meaning amidst the chaos, pain, and devastation.

The portal in Stranger Things which connects the natural and supernatural worlds reminds me of another fictional passageway: that of the wardrobe closet in C.S. Lewis' classic book, "The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe." Four London children, staying in a countryside manor during World War II, are searching for adventure and stumble through a hidden passageway in the back of a wardrobe closet into the fantasy world of Narnia. Though an enchanted, magical world where the animals can sing, the children soon learn that Narnia is a cold and frozen land stuck in perpetual winter without Christmas and under the spell of an evil witch. The witch, fearing a prophecy that the four children will become the rulers of Narnia, seeks to capture and kill them. She deceives and captures one of them, Edmund, leading his siblings on a search to find and rescue him. The children are aided by



a lion named Aslan, the true king of Narnia, who eventually sacrifices his life to rescue the children from the witch. His sacrifice—and resurrection—destroys the evil in Narnia, turns winter to spring, and redeems the magical land and children, who are in fact installed as rulers.



The Old Testament also is largely a story about loss and search, setting the stage for a rescue in the New Testament. We learn early in Genesis that humans have, despite being created in God's image, despite being given a perfect place in the Garden of Eden, and despite being given God's presence, rebelled against God, spoiled this paradise, stained ourselves with sin, and lost our perfect relationship with Him. As a result, we are cut off from Him and therefore lost and confused. We thus experience a world of brokenness, pain, and loss. So we strive and search for something better, but we often can't see or articulate what it is we are searching for. We often search for the wrong things...things that don't satisfy the deep longings of our heart...the purposes and plans for which God designed us...the plans and purposes which still echo, if faintly, in our hearts.

Over Thanksgiving, I had surgery on my eyes. I've worn contact lenses since sixth grade, and my mom predisposes me to have high pressure in my eyes, so my doctor thought there would be several benefits to my having eye surgery. For several different periods of time before the two surgeries, I couldn't wear my contact lenses, so I wore some old glasses with an out of date prescription. Then I had surgery on one eye but not the other yet. So I had one corrected eye and one uncorrected eye for a few days. It was disorienting not being able to see well. My depth perception and focus were off. At one point, I nearly stumbled when I misjudged simply walking over a curb.

It's easy to take for granted being able to see well...and to see what all is helpful to see. Oftentimes, we don't really know what we are missing, what we aren't seeing well or seeing at all. I think our perception of God can be like that. We can fail to see Him, even if His handiwork is actually all around us and in us.

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So we might see Him more clearly, God sent to us Jesus, whom Christians believe to be the Son of God. He came as God and as man. It can be hard to see, sense, and understand anything that is abstract and distant. Jesus, though, is not abstract and distant. He is flesh and blood. He had a human father and mother. He faced human temptations. He enjoyed His family and friends. He faced sorrows, sadness, and sufferings. He had a job. He was beloved, and He was hated. He was followed, and He was abandoned. He was a teacher, and He was misunderstood. He was glorified, and He was humiliated. He died. That's all pretty relatable.

Our vision for God often isn't very good, and we don't search very well for Him much of the time. Jesus helps us see and search better. He is seeable and searchable. He isn't like Will Byers communicating in a confusing code of flickering lights from a distant dimension. He is God come to earth as man. He has drawn near to us.



But He didn't just come that we might be better in our seeing of and searching for God. He came that He would rescue us from our dire predicament...a predicament we can fail to see. We are stuck and stranded as sinners in a fallen and broken world. We can't fix that, despite our best and good efforts, despite our minds and morals and manners. We are cut off from God who created us, whose own perfection demands a perfection in us that we can't achieve to be in His presence.

So we need not just an intermediary, not just an advisor, not just a fixer. We need a rescuer.

God sent Jesus to rescue us, to be a sacrifice for us, to save us, to be a Savior.

It is that sending that Christians especially celebrate at Christmas, commemorating the birth of Jesus in a manger in Bethlehem about 2,000 years ago. It is an unexpected—even strange—story: the Creator of the universe inserting Himself into human history, coming as a child born to a poor, obscure family in a dirty barn under dire circumstances, then subjecting Himself to pain, suffering, even death, all to rescue us out of His unfathomable love for us undeserving rebels. It is, I think, more strange and more supernatural than anything in “Stranger Things.”

God sending and sacrificing His Son for us is the greatest, most astonishing, and transformative act in human history.

It's also unexpected and counterintuitive. Jesus was the opposite of what His followers expected in a long-promised and prophesied Messiah. In “Stranger Things,” the upside down supernatural dimension is evil and scary. Jesus can also turn our lives upside down, but for our good. He turns our despair to delight, our chaos to clarity, our covetousness to contentment, our fear to faith, our exhaustion to exuberance, our bitterness to beauty, our guilt to grace. Do you need some of those upside down turnings? I do.

What do we do with this extraordinary gift that He brings to us? Does it change us?

Gifts are meant to be received and opened. They are intended to be used according to their purpose. They can be cherished. But the receiver of the gift can choose what to do with the gift, even not to open it, or to look at it briefly and set it aside. So it is with God's gift, given to all of us, all of us created in His image. It's our choice.

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His gift can change our searches. When we have the most important thing, we have less need to search for the lesser things. We all desire to be known and understood for who we really are, and we all desire to be loved unconditionally. Perfectly known, perfectly loved. When a person knows, feels, and experiences that from God—and only God can do that—he or she is freed up from trying to find it in smaller ways that will inevitably disappoint us. Our fulfillment then isn't about a particular college acceptance or a certain job or a championship ring. It isn't about the right romantic relationship or social media aura. We aren't consumed with constant searches for something different and better. We let go of our Lane Kiffin instincts. We search more for God—and see more of God—when we open our minds and hearts to contemplating Him, to studying Him, to reading the Bible, to praying to Him.

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Internalizing God perfectly knowing and perfectly loving us can relieve our restlessness. We can rest. Not just physical rest, but rest from needing to perform or prove ourselves to be worthy. We can rest from the need to be popular, to impress our family or friends or a fan base. We can rest from anxieties when we think that we are in control of and responsible for everything, as we recognize that a loving and all powerful God is in charge. We can rest from our fears that natural and supernatural evil will prevail, knowing that the world is more like a redeemed Narnia than a Hawkins, Indiana. We can rest from the guilt and shame from our mistakes, past and future ones, knowing we are forgiven through Jesus paying the price of all our sins. We can rest knowing we can have His perfect record and be in His presence forever. We can rest because the end of the story isn't an end, but it is forever peace and joy.



We can rest—and rejoice—in receiving God's amazing gift... and in embracing the gift. And we can respond with gratitude and in loving others as Jesus models for us.

I invite you to stand and sing of this rejoicing in “Joy to the World.”