

**Theology of the Lord of the Rings:
Virtues of Perseverance, Hope, and Mercy**

Sermon reprint by Rev. Tess Baumberger
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My sister Paula first brought me the books of J.R.R. Tolkien when I was a bored school kid and she was in college, majoring in English literature. By that time I had already read every mythology book that came my way, and so was primed to love Tolkien and his mythological world. That's exactly what happened. I read his works several times into young adulthood.

As an adult I read *The Hobbit* aloud to my son, and took him to see the movies as they started coming out. Having had some theological training, things struck me differently than they had before. That scene from the first movie that Jennie and I read, in particular, struck a chord with me.

The second movie's portrayal of the character Faramir led me to re-read the books once more, to see if I was right that Tolkien had portrayed Faramir as a wise man who resisted the ring's power. To my self-righteous delight, he did and therefore the movie was wrong. Ha. This re-reading uncovered more than the fact that I was right. It revealed religious themes I wanted to explore in a sermon – which has not been possible until now.

However, this feels like good timing because there is much in the book that I believe speaks to our times and how we can cope with them. We find ourselves in the midst of a global economic crisis, the warming of our planet, the rise of terrorism, the strife of wars in so many countries, the greed of a few that has caused so many to suffer. We may feel as lost and helpless as the Fellowship of the Ring does as it moves through the cold, dark Mines

of Moria.

For the uninitiated, let me summarize the plot. There is a ring of great and evil power that has fallen into the hands of hobbits, who are short people with furry feet. Hobbits are very humble and down to earth. In general they'd rather not be bothered by the affairs of the wider world. In fact, they try to avoid them.

But the ring has fallen to them, and its evil master and his minions are trying to retrieve it, which would mean the destruction of everything. So they form a Fellowship composed of men, hobbits, an elf, a dwarf, and one wizard, (which kind of sounds like the start of a complicated joke – “So four hobbits, two men, an elf, a dwarf, and a wizard walk into a bar...”).

Anyway, this group embarks on a quest to destroy this ring by taking it to the fiery mountain where it was forged, deep in the territory of its terrifying master, Sauron, the Dark Lord.

The company is making its way through the dark heart of the mountain of Moria, mined by dwarves for its precious metals. An evil wizard made the way between the mountains impassible, so they had no choice but to go through the mountain. They find the mine bleak, dark and abandoned and they soon become lost. Frodo, who bears the burden of the ring, and the wizard Gandalf talk about their lot while Gandalf is trying to remember the way through the mines.

What continues to strike me most about this scene is not Frodo's lament about the times (which might be like our own), but Gandalf's reply. He says we cannot decide what times we are given, but we can decide what to do with them. What a powerful message this can be for us. We may feel lost in the Moria of our times. We may feel powerless in the face of so much turmoil and suffering.

What I hear in Gandalf's words is that in fact we are not powerless. Each of us has the freedom and the power to choose how we will respond. Will this crisis become an opportunity for us to rise to the occasion, however reluctantly, as do the characters in Tolkien's books? What inspiration can we find in the beliefs that show through in his writings? What great truths and religious lessons can we glean from Tolkien's intricate mythology?

In order to understand that intricate mythology a bit better, it's good to know a little about the man who created it. John Ronald Reuel Tolkien was born to British parents in South Africa. His mother settled in the English countryside with the two boys after his dad died, when he was only three.

Some features of his works reflect Tolkien's real life. For instance, as a boy he often visited his aunt's farm, which was named "Bag End," the name of Bilbo's home in *The Hobbit*. When he was 19 he trekked through the mountains of Switzerland with twelve others. This journey served as the basis for Bilbo's adventures in the Misty Mountains.

Probably the life experience that comes through most clearly in *The Lord of the Rings* is his military service in France during the First World War. There he caught "trench fever" and was declared medically unfit to serve. By the end of that terrible war, all of his closest friends had died.

Many see shades of World War II in the Rings. It is true that Tolkien was writing the series then, and that he had great contempt for Hitler. However, he said in order to know the horrors of war you have to have fallen under its shadow yourself. It is the trenches of France that we see in the Rings, the echoes of his illness that we discern in Frodo's exhaustion.

Tolkien's intellectual interests also shaped his work. He could read fluently by the age of four and was soon writing. His mother taught him

Latin, which started his lifelong passion for ancient languages. As an adult, as he created the world of Middle Earth, he actually invented languages of his own.

Tolkien was fascinated with mythology and read extensively on the subject. As with language, he was not content merely to study myth, he also worked creatively to invent his own mythology. Throughout his life he worked on *The Silmarillion*, a complete mythological system that draws together both his intellectual and religious influences.

As for religion, Tolkien's mother joined the Catholic Church when he was eight years old, over the loud objections of her Baptist family. She died of diabetes four years later, when he was twelve, and he remained a devout Catholic all his life.

When he wasn't creating a world with its own myths and languages, Tolkien worked as a professor at Oxford. His life's work integrated his life experience, his love of myth and language, and his religious beliefs.

This means it is intricate and defies easy or simple explanations. For instance, some sources claim that characters in *The Lord of the Rings* directly represent characters from the Christian scriptures. Some say the self-sacrificing Frodo represents Jesus, others that the "returning king" Aragon does, still others - Gandalf the Grey. Gandalf makes the most sense to me because he does die fighting a fire demon, then comes back to life as Gandalf the White

The thing is that Tolkien denied any such simple association. He was critical of the overtly Christian themes and material in his friend C. S. Lewis' *Narnia* series, and so strove to keep the religious material in his own work very much in the background. He never intended his characters to

represent people from scriptures. He said,

“The Lord of the Rings is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision. That is why I have not put in, or have cut out, practically all references to anything like “religion,” to cults and practices, in the imaginary world. For the religious element is absorbed in the story and the symbolism.”

In order to discern his theology, then, we have to look deeper into the foundations of the story, which are woven through the mythology in *Silmarillion*. This work includes a creation story where the deity and angels sing creation into being. Creation and creativity are central to Tolkien’s theology, according to scholar Damien Casey. For this man who created languages and myths, creation and creativity are the opposite of evil, which is discordant and destructive.

In the singing creation story, a fallen angel introduces destructive notes of discord. However, the Supreme Being introduces new themes that incorporate the discord into beautiful new music. So at the start of Tolkien’s creation story, fate holds sway. The god figure can counteract evil by introducing new themes. However, eventually fate gives way to freedom, because freedom is also important in Tolkien’s belief system.

The chief among the fallen angels, Morgoth, uses this freedom to become evil incarnate, as Sauron will do later. Morgoth becomes a part of the earth itself, infusing his evil power into its matter. Casey writes, “He impressed himself totally upon the world, and the world bears his imprint.” The earth itself was Morgoth’s “ring.”

Because the fall happens before creation takes final shape in Tolkien’s myth, his view is that evil has always been a part of the world.

There was not a primal Eden, a first paradise. And yet the world IS creation, and recall that this is the opposite of evil for Tolkien. Good and evil intertwine, then, in his myth.

The earth is both “fallen” and graced, and so is humanity. This gives us a choice that we are free to make, to choose evil or to choose good. Because we are mortal, we are also built to look beyond this world. According to Tolkien, this capacity to look beyond the here and now can sometimes tempt us into evil. Every upright character in *The Lord of the Rings* that is tempted by the Ring wants to use it for good, including Gandalf and Boromir, two members of the Fellowship. But absolute power corrupts absolutely and Ring cannot be used. The good ends will never justify such means.

There are some folks who say *The Lord of the Rings* shows Tolkien’s Catholicism because it emphasizes the fallen nature of humanity, how easily we are tempted into wrongdoing, how impossible it is to resist the power of the ring. But this assertion ignores the fact that several who are tempted by the ring resist it, including Gandalf, Aragorn, Galadriel, and Faramir. They resist by choosing to reject it, and they are transformed in some way by passing this test.

Even Boromir, who tries to overcome Frodo and take the ring later repents and dies valiantly defending Frodo’s friends. Joseph Pearce says that Tolkien is just as powerful in his depiction of goodness as of evil. So it is too simple to say that Tolkien depicted only the weaker tendencies of humanity. He also feelingly and movingly depicted our ability to save this world through creative transformation.

Remember that the world according to Tolkien is intrinsically both graced and fallen. Because Morgoth infused the earth with his evil power,

Tolkien seems to say that you cannot overcome evil by force without destroying the goodness of creation, and that itself is an evil thing to do.

We may be tempted to use violent means to destroy evil, but in doing that we cannot avoid also destroying good. Tolkien said he didn't believe in any absolute good or evil, except for God. Even Sauron started with some good intentions, to bring order to the world. So do you see how complicated Tolkien's theology and mythology is? His world is not an either/or world, it is a both/and world. We are free to choose to do good or evil, but the ends, even the end of eradicating evil, can never justify forceful or violent means.

What could this mean for us, trying to find our way in our present Moria? Damien Casey writes that in Tolkien's theology, "Salvation makes no sense unless it includes the world." This implies that we must save not only ourselves, but everything. And that salvation hinges on the goodness inherent in creativity, our creativity. You see according to Tolkien's intricate mythology, the music that made the world was not finished by the deity and the angels. We finish it. We participate in creation. Human beings contribute to the final form of the song.

If we follow the example of the upright characters in his story, we will choose not to destroy the world in order to destroy evil. Instead, like the Creator, we will learn how to introduce new themes that will incorporate the discord and make the world into something new, a new creation that is beautiful and whole.

How can we do that? Tolkien gives us clues in the action and words of the characters in *The Lord of the Rings*. How do they set about making the world new? Theologian Ralph C. Wood, who wrote a book called *The Gospel According to Tolkien* has this to say,

“... all the members of the Fellowship stake their lives on a future

realization of the Good beyond the bounds of the world. Their devotion to their quest does not depend on any sort of certainty concerning its success. They are called to be faithful rather than victorious. Often the Fellowship finds its profoundest hope when the prospects seem bleakest.”

We recreate the world is by being faithful and finding hope in the worst times. One of those moments in the movies is from the other scene we read, Sam’s speech in Mordor. Ralph Wood writes that Sam sees, “... the deep and paradoxical truth that the dark has no meaning apart from the light. Light is both the primal and the final reality, not the night that seeks to quench it.” Like Gandalf, Sam sees there is also good in the world, and that is worth fighting for. This insight gives him and Frodo the courage to persevere in their quest.

Tolkien wrote that he was a hobbit in all but size, so I think we can see his ways of recreating the world most powerfully in them. The hobbits, who would mostly prefer not to be bothered by the wider concerns of the world, when faced with their times, demonstrate the virtue of what one writer calls “courage ennobled by modesty.”

Yet despite the hobbits’ sterling qualities of humble hope and perseverance, ultimately Frodo fails in his quest to destroy the ring. In the end it is Gollum who destroys it. Before it corrupted him, he was also a hobbit. Gollum, who struggles with good and evil in himself, who haunts and torments Frodo throughout the book, destroys the ring through his determination that either he shall have it or no one. Does this mean it is greed that destroys the evil embodied in the Ring? Tolkien suggests not. Let me take you back to that conversation in Moria.

Before Frodo says that he wishes the ring never came to him he says

it was a pity Bilbo didn't kill Gollum when he had the chance. Gandalf responds that it was pity that stayed Bilbo's hand. He goes on to say, "The pity of Bilbo may rule the fate of many." Mr. Casey writes that Frodo and the quest were saved in the end not by Gollum's greed, but by Bilbo's mercy, pity, and forgiveness that happened years before. We never know how a good act with echo through time.

The mythology and theology of J.R.R. Tolkien are complex. Someone once described his Lord of the Rings as a "theological thriller." I prefer to think of it as a "mythological thriller," that combines elements of fantasy and religion. Damien Casey writes that like fantasy, "Religious discourse should break through the mundane to recover a sense of the wonder and mystery of the world."

He says that both fantasy and religion have a prophetic function – seeing the promise of a better future, naming the goodness that can be, and then deciding to fight for it. Both fantasy and religion have a prophetic function, and myths like Tolkien's, that combine fantasy and religion, can be profoundly prophetic.

You see, Tolkien always believed myths contain great truths that people of all ages can understand, from bored school kids to sophisticated theologians. This is because such myths are the foundational stories Samwise Gamgee talks about in his speech in Mordor. Tolkien has created just such a story - a complex and nuanced myth that can be a foundational story for our times. If we apply the insights in Tolkien's intricate mythology to our times, what might we discover?

First, we have no power to turn back the hands of time, but we do have the power to decide what to do with the reality at hand. Second, we have the power (if we so choose) to take this current crisis as an opportunity

to contribute to creation, to participate in creation itself, as partners in shaping this world of good and bad into something new.

Third, we can do so by practicing some of the great virtues shown by the brave but humble hobbits. We can hold onto the good that exists in the world, knowing that it is worth fighting for. We can persevere and find our way out of the cold dark by combining our efforts in fellowship with all those forces in our world that working for good.

Finally, before we can move on to this work of re-creation, we may need to practice the virtue of mercy. It may behoove us to let go of resentments that keep us stuck in the cold dark of Moria, lamenting our fate. As one sage puts it, “resentment is a poison you take hoping someone else will die.”

In place of resentment, we might practice mercy, pity, peace, and love, especially for the victims of the few whose greed led them into wrongdoing. We must move forward with hope and perseverance because interwoven with all that is painful and wrong about our times, there is good that is worth fighting for. There are other forces at work in the world. We can choose to work with them, adding our songs to the music of creation, shaping it into something new. So may it be.