

Bilbo, Mary, and Unexpected Journeys
Preacher: Rev. Lauren Lorincz
Date: December 23, 2012

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I've spent the month of December counting down the days, and the time finally arrived—I finally got to see *The Hobbit* last week! I love all things Lord of the Rings, so I've been anticipating this movie release for months, and it's fabulous. I want to talk about the movie a bit in relation to Mary and the Magnificat we just heard Carol read. There are some parallels believe it or not, and I'll try my best not to spoil the movie for anyone.

For those of you who don't know the story, it's the tale of a group of dwarves who return to the Lonely Mountain to reclaim their once glorious home from an evil dragon who drove them out decades before. It's an epic journey, filled with danger, battles, mythical creatures, and lots of moral lessons. This group of dwarves ends up finding friends and allies on their quest to win back their home, including Bilbo Baggins, a simple hobbit from a quaint land. As a side note, hobbits are basically creatures like human beings except they are very short with huge hairy feet, and always content with food, drink, merriment, nature—the simple things of life.

In fact, when Bilbo is first approached by wizard Gandalf the Grey, Gandalf says, "I am looking for someone to share in an adventure that I am arranging, and it's very difficult to find anyone." Bilbo responds, "I should think so—in these parts! We are plain quiet folk and have no use for adventures. Nasty disturbing uncomfortable things! Make you late for dinner!"^[1] If you were off on a quest where you needed battle skills, cunning, and courage, a hobbit is maybe the last person you would invite along at the outset.

Bilbo ends up going on this adventure though, much to the chagrin of some of the dwarves, their leader most of all. And this is the basis of the first movie; it's one of three that's coming out. Chances are you will hear me discuss *The Hobbit* again, but Part One revolves around Bilbo trying to find his courage and his purpose and the dwarves' wrestling with viewing him as a worthy, vital part of their fellowship. Does this happen and if it does, how does it happen? Go find out over Christmas break.

But seriously, Tolkien was a very devout Christian and major Christian themes often play out in his books. For our purposes today, we see in *The Hobbit* some of the classic reversals found in the Gospel of Luke. A reversal we also see in the story of Mary and the Magnificat she sings today.

Luke's Gospel emphasizes Jesus' ministry to people who are oppressed, excluded, or at a disadvantage in society. Jesus reaches out to people on the margins everyone else ignores. There's a reason that in Luke's Gospel, the angels announce the birth of Jesus Christ to ordinary shepherds living in their fields keeping watch over their flocks by night and not to glorious, rich wisemen like in Matthew's Gospel. We often combine birth narratives in our retelling of the Christmas story, but Luke's story and Matthew's story are very different and highlight their perspectives of Jesus' birth, life, and ministry.

Luke is all about Jesus empowering the powerless, and reversing your expectations. You think that the first people to hear about the birth of Jesus Christ will be the wisest, richest among us? Nope. The shepherds are the first to hear the news, you'll hear about it tomorrow night. You think that a Samaritan will walk right by that poor, helpless man nearly beaten to death in the road? Nope. The Samaritan is the hero of that tale. You think that God will deem a rich woman from a noble family to bear God's Son into the world? Nope. God chooses Mary, a

poor, ordinary girl. All these stories of reversals and changing your preconceived notions are what Jesus' ministry and the Gospel of Luke are all about.[2]

It reminds me of a scene in *The Hobbit*. At one point Gandalf, reflects on why he would want Bilbo Baggins, a simple hobbit of the Shire, to even come on this quest in the first place. Bilbo seems so unqualified, almost the worst choice possible. He has no fighting skills, no previous experience on a quest, and he's never even traveled much. Gandalf says, "I find it is the small everyday deeds of ordinary folk that keep the darkness at bay. Small acts of kindness and love." [3]

It ends up that unexpected things can happen, whether we feel worthy of them or not. It ends up that small acts of kindness and love by ordinary people can make a huge difference in our broken world. Theologian Albert Schweitzer once said, "I have always held firmly to the thought that each one of us can do a little to bring some portion of misery to an end." Sometimes the bravest thing we can do is say yes to a new opportunity even though it can be scary. That's certainly what Tolkien emphasizes in *The Hobbit*, that's what Luke emphasizes throughout his Gospel, and that's what Mary did in the Annunciation that Eric preached about last week. She said yes to the Angel Gabriel, even if she didn't feel worthy of her task at first.

This reversal of expectations and acceptance of an adventure, a quest, a calling is what we see. And this is why Mary celebrates the goodness of God in her grand song the Magnificat, which comes from the Latin "to magnify." As in, "My soul magnifies the Lord." [4] Mary is an ordinary person—an unwed, pregnant, poor, Jewish girl. And yet she accepts that she has an extraordinary task ahead of her, for she is to bring an extraordinary child into the world. Mary goes to visit her relative Elizabeth and learns that she's pregnant too, even though this shouldn't have been possible at her age. And Mary just breaks forth into this song of pure joy.

Charles Campbell, Homiletics Professor at Duke Divinity School tells us Mary's story like this, "The church prepares this week for Jesus' birth, not through serious theological reflection, but through subversive laughter, singing, and astonishment The story is not only odd and joyful, it is fleshy, embodied, earthy, appropriate as a forerunner to the incarnation . . . in the women's actions, the world is indeed turned upside down. Hierarchies are subverted. The mighty are brought down. Two marginalized, pregnant women carry the future and proclaim the Messiah." [5]

This is fantastic and joyful beyond measure. Mary can't help but proclaim the goodness of God in the midst of all these blessings. And in line with the reversal theme, she says that God has "brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty." Where I'm from we'd say these are fightin' words, my friends. If said powerful, rich people heard Mary speaking this way; it wouldn't have been pretty. She's thanking God for reversing the status quo—this wouldn't have been a welcome message for all to hear.

In the end, Mary's song comes down to two hopes we Christians have had from the beginning, two hopes Mary shouts from the rooftops, two hopes that still ground our religion from its infancy (literally) until today. God is good. All the time, God is good. And God keeps promises. All the time, God keeps promises. [7]

On this last Sunday in Advent, going into Christmas Eve tomorrow, and the New Year to come, we have to hold onto the goodness of God and God keeping promises. We have to hold onto God standing by us and never leaving us alone in this world, that love will win in Syria, Egypt, Afghanistan, Israel, Palestine, Capitol Hill, Newtown, and wherever else God is needed the most—God is there and love wins. Small acts of kindness can transform our world, and

miraculous moments happen even when we don't feel particularly worthy of them. God is good and God keeps promises.

In Tolkien's world of hobbits and dwarves in Middle Earth, he says it like this, "There, peeping among the cloud-wrack above a dark tower high up in the mountains, Sam saw a white star twinkle for a while. The beauty of it smote his heart, as he looked up out of the forsaken land, and hope returned to him. For like a shaft, clear and cold, the thought pierced him that in the end the Shadow was only a small and passing thing: there was light and high beauty for ever beyond its reach."^[8] In this moment, years after the events of *The Hobbit*, another young one on an adventure realized that all was not lost, that darkness will never have the final say. There are beautiful, holy moments that can hit you right in your heart. The goodness of God prevails. Mary says it like this, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely from now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me and holy is his name."^[9] God keeps promises and never abandons us.

So on this eve of Christmas Eve, I give thanks for reversals, for shattered expectations, for simple acts of kindness, for Bilbo and Mary, for laughter, singing, and astonishment. I give thanks for the birth of the Holy One announced to humble shepherds in the fields and laid in a manger among the barn animals. I give thanks for light and love breaking into our world when we need it the most. And I rejoice for the goodness and faithfulness of God our Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer, and I hope you will too. Amen.

[1] J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit*.

[2] Mark Allan Powell, *Fortress Introduction to the Gospels*, 93.

[3] J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit*.

[4] Luke 1:46-47.

[5] Charles L. Campbell, *Homiletical Perspective of Luke 1:39-45 (46-55)* in *Feasting on the Word*, David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Eds., Year C, Volume 1, 93 and 95.

[6] Luke 1:46-47.

[7] Charles L. Campbell, *Homiletical Perspective of Luke 1:39-45 (46-55)* in *Feasting on the Word*, David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Eds., Year C, Volume 1, 93 and 95.

[8] J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*.

[9] Luke 1:47-49.