SERMONS THAT WORK

The Feast of the Epiphany (A)

[RCL] Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14; Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12

Miracles and All

JRR Tolkien's beloved book, *The Hobbit*, is set "i*n a time between the dawn of faeries and the dominion of Men.*" *The Hobbit* is a beloved tale and has never gone out of print since its first publication in 1937. This story, along with the *Lord of the Rings* series, are incredibly entertaining and enjoyable, but they do require one to suspend reality at times and invite us to believe and experience the tale for ourselves as an incredible adventure, involving a colorful cast of creatures and characters. The stories are vivid, challenging, and full of adventure. Of course, Tolkien was a deeply committed Christian who wrote his books filled with Christian theology, metaphors, and themes.

Sometimes, when we read the Gospel accounts, particularly the miracles and incredible stories that we hear at Advent, Christmas, or today's story of the magi in the Epiphany season, it can feel like we're reading fantastical stories like *The Hobbit*. Perhaps we feel as though we have been invited to suspend reality for a moment and to enter into an incredible fairytale. But, unlike the fantasy fiction of Tolkien, the Gospel writers sought to be faithful to the reality they experienced and to record what truly happened, miracles and all. Still, we may struggle to believe the supernatural accounts of the Bible. It has, for instance, been pointed out that some Biblical accounts, like those from the book of Genesis, including the creation story and the great flood of Noah, mirror the great ancient myths of the Hebrew's surrounding cultures. Modernist philosophy and the rationalist movement have long urged us to reject these stories as fiction, even perhaps as childish fiction. Meanwhile, the popularity of fantasy novels and stories that contain spiritual and supernatural elements endures, and such stories even made a resurgence of popularity in our contemporary society, especially among teens and young adults through online communities like "BookTok."

The Church ought to take note of this fact. We are rapidly moving beyond not just modernism, but also the postmodern era, and into a very different cultural and philosophical context. Many are beginning to recognize the folly of rejecting outright those stories that contain supernatural accounts. In fact, as many have pointed out, the great tales and myths—which have endured throughout the centuries—are the most important stories of all, because they reveal the deepest truths about life. But the challenges of life and our current social ills can make it easier to get lost in the mundane details or even harsh realities of our lives, so much so that we may forget the bigger picture, the greater story line of our lives, even the reason for our being. We, and the wider world, desperately need to be reminded that the journey of life is set in a much wider, more deeply meaningful and purposeful context.

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In fact, it appears that fantasy series like Tolkien's are so popular and well loved, not because they are dissimilar from reality, but because they reflect it so profoundly. These tales teach us about the world; they provide insight into universal truths, as well as ethics, friendship, dangers, and the victories and failures we must face along our journeys to achieve the higher calling we've been given.

Today we commemorate the feast of the Epiphany: the revelation and manifestation of God's Son to the whole world through the visitation of the wise magi from the East to see the young Jesus, the promised King. This expectation of a Savior, we read, has been fulfilled through none other than God in Christ, as a baby born on a lonely night to a young girl in a stable, a baby whose humble beginnings actually betray his destiny to heal and save the world.

It is such a fantastic story, such a beautiful one, that it, too, might seem like a fairytale. But this, the Incarnation, is the foundational story of our faith as followers of Jesus: that God came to earth and God is with us. And today, living in the twenty-first century, we have the privilege of retrospect: We get to see what the magi had only hoped for and read in the stars, believing, as they did, that this little baby would change the world forever.

They were right: This baby did exactly that. Jesus' birth, life, and resurrection continues to impact millions today, bringing salvation, joy, healing, hope, peace, and the reconciling love of God to all of humanity. However, the magi (from whose name we get the word "magic") needed tremendous faith to believe that their long journey to see the promised newborn king was not without purpose or meaning. The magi had to trust that the message they had read in the stars really was from God and was leading them to a higher calling. They were among the first to recognize the significance of this little child. And they arrived at the Holy Family's humble dwelling to kneel before the Christ child and offer him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, gifts reserved for a king. Their journey was one of faith from beginning to end and it was filled with purpose and significance.

Of course, the magi encountered many obstacles along the way on their journey: they got lost a few times, took some wrong turns, had to be warned by angels in their dreams, and encountered a dangerous trickster and enemy named King Herod. Scholars estimate it took the magi two years to actually arrive at the feet of Jesus before taking a very different way back home, in order to protect the young king from murder. Their many delays are why we liturgically celebrate the wisemen's arrival on January 6th—the Feast of the Epiphany—not on Christmas day.

In the story of the magi, we recognize that we, too, are on a journey; we, too, will encounter and face trials and tribulations, make wrong turns, require the help of God and angelic beings, face danger, and will gain enemies along the way. But we are urged on in our journey not to give up, not to get bogged down in this moment's battle, trial, or in any momentary afflictions, challenging as they may be, but to "keep on keeping on," knowing that the story of our lives is part of a much greater story, one that has significance far beyond ourselves, because we too are part of God's story.

In the final conversation that takes place in *The Hobbit*, between Gandalf, the wise wizard, and Bilbo Baggins, the reluctant adventurer, Bilbo says: *"Then the prophecies of the old songs have turned out to be true, after a fashion!" ... "Of course!" said Gandalf. "And why should not they prove true? Surely you don't disbelieve the prophecies because you had a hand in bringing them about yourself? You don't really suppose, do you, that all your adventures and*

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*escapes were managed by mere luck, just for **your sole benefit**? You are a very fine person, Mr. Baggins, and I am very fond of you; but you are only quite a little fellow in a wide world after all!" "Thank goodness!" said Bilbo laughing…."*

Our journeys are not solely for ourselves either, and we are part of a much bigger story that God has called us into. Scripture reminds us, like all the best tales do, of this amazing truth.

So whether you are facing old age or giant spiders, illness or cave trolls, addiction or the dungeons, depression or goblins, grief or a band of orcs, relationship troubles or dragons, stay on this journey and keep fighting the battle—don't give up. Keep the faith, like the magi.

The ultimate story of our journeys will have a good ending if we press on, just like the journey of the magi. It will end at the feet of Christ the King, where we, too, ragged and weary as we may be, will finally get to bow down and worship our Lord, finding our healing and redemption by God's grace. Thanks be to God!

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