

The Powers of the Ring: Longevity
Psalm 90: 1-10; 1 Timothy 6: 12-19
January 20, 2013
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I Introduction

For those of you who are not *The Lord of the Rings* fan, last week I introduced to you the concept of a hobbit, who is a small person, about half our height. Hobbits live in a land called the Shire, which is reminiscent of the English countryside and love good-tilled earth and a quiet life. *The Hobbit* book is about one of these creatures, a man by the name of Bilbo Baggins, who goes on an adventure with a group of dwarves, and along the way finds a magical ring. And what unfolds from that becomes the story of the broader book, which is a more adult work of literature called *The Lord of the Rings*. Now, as *The Lord of the Rings* opens, J.R.R. Tolkien, the author, starts off picking up with Bilbo, and he writes these words, “Time wore on, but it seemed to have little effect on Mr. Baggins. At 90 he was much the same as at 50. And at 99 they began to call him ‘well-preserved,’ but ‘unchanged’ would have been closer the mark. There were some that shook their heads and thought this was too much of a good thing; it seemed unfair that anyone should possess, apparently, perpetual youth as well as, reputedly, inexhaustible wealth.”

“It will have to be paid for,” they said. “It isn’t natural, and trouble will come of it!”

Well, trouble does come of it because Bilbo’s longevity is attributed to this ring that he has found, which although he is not aware of it, is the one great ring that the Dark Lord Sauron created for the domination of the world of Middle-earth, and Sauron’s attempt to get that ring back is the theme of *The Lord of the Rings*.

Now, if you haven't been to church for the last couple of weeks, you may be asking yourself why we are talking about *The Lord of the Rings* in a church service, and the short answer to that is because it's fun, and church should be fun every once in a while, right? We don't want to make it a habit, but periodically, you know, it's a good thing, and it's a nice way for folks who are not maybe regular churchgoers to engage what church is like. And so, for those of you who are regular Metropolitan members, this is a great month to invite somebody who might not have a church home to experience what this might be like, particularly if they happen to be *The Lord of the Rings* fans.

It is also easy to do because there's a lot of theological meat in *The Lord of the Rings*, and J.R.R. Tolkien was very clear that Middle-earth is not some sort of faraway fantasy land. It really is our world and the characters in the story are dealing with the same issues that we all deal with. Tolkien, who's a very devout Roman Catholic, was also clear that *The Lord of the Rings* was a profoundly Christian work, although he worked hard to sublimate some of that theology, so it wasn't so obvious, and gave us as the readers the emotional freedom to explore some of the rich imagery and symbolism that is part of that work.

Last week, we began exploring the nature and the temptations inherent in the One Ring of power. This ring is almost a character in the books and we're told it is wholly evil, but it possesses some attractions for the people who are on the good side. And those attractions, the temptations of the One Ring are the temptations to be invisible, have longevity, and the power to dominate.

II. Denial of Death

We talked last week about invisibility, and we're going to continue that conversation this week with reflecting on the temptation to extend our lives.

The second temptation of the ring is the ability to hold death at bay, apparently, indefinitely. Bilbo, who had the ring for over 60 years, hardly ages at all during the time that he has the ring. And before him, its previous owner, a character named Gollum, had the ring for over 500 years, many times the lifespan of one of his kind.

In 1974, there was a cultural anthropologist named Ernest Becker who wrote a Pulitzer Prize-winning book called *The Denial of Death*, which argues that all of human civilization is essentially a highly organized attempt to hold at bay our awareness of our own mortality. And without going into a lot of the details of his argument, I would suggest we see this all the time in our current culture. We have a culture that worships youth and athleticism and we spend a lot of time denying the reality of the aging process. We even deny it to the point that often in conversation it's hard for us to use the term "death" itself. When someone has died, when people enter into conversation around it, you often will find them using euphemisms: "they've passed on," "they've moved on to a better life," because we have such a hard time saying "death" or "they died."

Our family had dinner with some friends last week and we got to talking about movies that were out, and in the course of the conversation, I acknowledged a tiny bit of a crush on Michelle Pfeiffer. And the teenage daughter of this family said to me, "Well, she is pretty but she's so old." As if -- and in reality in her mind -- beauty and age were juxtaposed, that you can't have one with the other.

We see this tendency to romanticize youth and to avoid age at all cost in a lot of different areas of our life. Of course, we've got a multi-billion-dollar-a-year industry around hair color and anti-wrinkles and cosmetic surgery, which are not really about enhancing our life. They're about extending the illusion that we are young, right?

But it is an illusion, really. And in fact, there's a wonderful moment in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, in which Gandalf is talking to Frodo, and he says to Frodo, "A mortal, Frodo, who keeps one of the great rings does not die, but he does not grow or obtain more life. He merely continues until every last moment is a weariness." Very powerful language about the way we seek to extend life, which is often not about more life as just keeping it going.

III. Other Ways of Denying Death

Now, I know that in our extraordinary and unusual Metropolitan community, none of us is so vain and shallow as to try to stave off our own aging process. Amen? But I want to suggest that the denial of death manifests itself in a number of other interesting ways for us. Because on some level, every change, every moment of change, involves some dying to the way things were, and we all avoid that in many and sundry ways. Think of the ways in which we fall back on behaviors which may have served us well at some past period in our life, but have ceased to be productive or life-giving and how we continue in those habits. Think of the relationships or periods of our life that we have a hard time letting go. For those of us who are parents, that often involves places in our life where we had a lot of who we are wrapped up in a certain phase in our child's life,

and we've got to let that go, and there's a dying that is part of that, that sometimes it's very hard.

I had a number of years where I worked with senior citizens and wrestled with a lot of folks who had a lot of hoarding behaviors that keep on to holding on to stuff, and I had a social worker whose very deep conviction was that hoarding behaviors were really an attempt to cling to some past period of a person's life. And so, her way of dealing with hoarding behaviors in seniors was to go spend time with them and take a picture of whatever it was that they were having a hard time parting with, and then listen to their stories about that: where that chair came from, and it was my grandmother's chair, and my mother nursed me in it and I nursed my children in it. And you get this wonderful richness of stories that reflect how we associate important events with objects that then become hard for us to get rid of.

Last weekend, as a matter of fact, I was trying to free up some filing space in my desk. And, of course, if you can manage to just pick up a folder and throw it away, it's easy. But as soon as you open the folder, you're dead, right? Because all of a sudden, you know, "Oh, I remember that article. That was a good one. I'm going to come back to that later on," and you know, you start going through. And then the process of getting rid of it is really hard, because whenever we do that, we're letting go of some piece of our past that was important.

On a national level, I want to suggest that some of our dysfunctionality around the whole very current issue of gun control has to do with a difficulty letting go of part of our historic past, a place where maybe we hunted for our food or we gathered in militia

to defend our communities. Letting go of that piece of our history and living fully into where we are now is part of the debate that we're having currently on gun control.

And, of course, the church is the poster child for not letting things go, right? I mean, we celebrate, appropriately, the incredibly rich traditions that have brought us to this place as a community of faith, but often have a hard time acknowledging when pieces of that tradition are no longer as productive as maybe they were at some point in our history. So you get a lot of romanticizing about, "give me that old-time religion," "can it get me back to that place where everything felt like it had the right place," and that lives itself out in our church in a lot of different ways. Whenever we wrestle with a new committee structure, for example, we wrestle with, "Well, that's not the way we used to do it," because we have a hard time letting go of some of those pieces. When we talk about evangelism, how we share the good news of Jesus Christ, we very quickly fall into old patterns of how it was always done before and it brought people in -- why can't we just do that now -- without really acknowledging that we live in a very different kind of world.

And, of course, there is also the question of how we prepare for our own deaths and the deaths of our loved ones. I want to suggest that one of the greatest struggles with our current healthcare system is the vast amount of resources we pour into people in the last moments of their life because we have a hard time letting them go. We spend mind-numbing amounts of money of prolonging people's lives for a few more hours or a few more days because the concept of letting a loved one go is so hard for us. Or we don't prepare for our loved ones to let us go by being clear with them how we would like to end our lives or how we would like to see our lives end. And so, we

prolong people in ways that are not life-enhancing, but to use Gandalf's phrase "simply continuing a diminished life."

Part of our ability to do that in a healthy way is dependent on our being able to bring closure to some of those relationships, to say the things to our parents, to our grandparents, to any loved one that we want to say and that we sometimes avoid.

There's a very powerful subplot in *The Lord of the Rings* in which Aragorn, who is one of the heroes of the book and a descendant of a long line of great kings of Gondor, is going to the aid of Gondor which is under attack by Sauron. And he takes a path through some mountains in which there is this huge company of essentially ghosts who were a group of men who had pledged their lives to Aragorn's forbearer in another battle against Sauron. They had broken their oath and fled the battle and were cursed to live in this shadow state for eternity until they could fulfill their pledge, and Aragorn gives them the opportunity to fight in the battle that he is leading, and therefore, fulfill their pledge and move on into death in a healthy way. It's a very powerful image for the fact that unresolved issues with loved ones often keep us from allowing them the freedom to move into the next phase of their journey with God. We can't let people die well because we haven't lived well.

IV. Christ Offers Us Another Way

Our Psalm reading this morning from Psalm 90 is a very wonderful reminder that in God's great plan, we are all born and live and die, and it's part of a cycle that is inevitable and that we can trust that no matter how long our lives are, they are cradled within the hands of a loving God, and the work that we do gets carried on.

I was reading this week the saying that, “Nothing of value gets done in one lifetime.” And I like that image that the work I do is building on the shoulders of people who came before me, and the work I’m doing now will get continued by the people who come after me, and that’s part of the way God works. That God is the eternal. That it’s God’s plan that is shaping our destinies and that we can live and die secure in that knowledge.

This wonderful letter that Paul wrote to Timothy reminds that even more than we can -- trusting that God’s plan is in control, Paul wants Timothy to understand that until we can with freedom die in a healthy way, we can’t experience the new life that God offers us through the power of resurrection. That eternal life is not a matter of living forever. It is a matter of embracing the cycle of birth and life and death and resurrection that God promises us. That we can do that in the knowledge that God uses the gateway of death to usher us into new chapters of life, both literally and figuratively, and that we can’t engage in the new chapter with health and life until we can let go of the old chapter, until we can acknowledge the dying, and then allow God to take that death and transform it through the power of resurrection into a new chapter, a new life. If we can’t let go of the past, if we can’t let go of past relationships, past phases of our life, secure in the knowledge that we are with God, it’s hard to move forward into the new chapter that God is offering us.

V. Conclusion

In a letter that J.R.R. Tolkien wrote to a friend of his, he said, “The chief power of the ring is the preservation or slowing of decay, the preservation of what is desired or

loved.” And we all instinctually understand that, that it’s hard to let go of things that we value and we love, even when their time is passed.

What our gospel reminds us is that when we can do that, when we can move through the process of dying, the little deaths that occur daily, the deaths of loved ones around us and our own death, when we can do that in a healthy way, we free ourselves up to experience the new life that God offers us in the resurrection.

Paul reminds Timothy to warn those of us who are wealthy that we have a great tendency to try to hold on to the past through our accumulation of stuff, and he says to Timothy to encourage us to give generously, storing up for ourselves the treasures of a good foundation for the future and allowing us -- this is Paul’s phrase -- “to take hold of the life that is really life.” Not simply extending what has been, but letting go of the past, celebrating it, moving through the process of dying, and embracing new life with God.

Amen.