

**Mopping Up Action**  
**Daniel 9:20-25; Luke 10: 17-20**  
**February 10, 2013**  
**Rev. Dr. Charles Parker**

## **I Introduction**

Perhaps the most significant difference between the movie and the book of *The Lord of the Rings* is the way the story ends. The movie, of course, ends in classic Hollywood fashion with the great battle defeating Sauron and the King Aragorn being installed on the throne of Gondor. The book also ends that way, except the book tacks on an interesting additional chapter to the after-battle. Because as the hobbit, who have been the heroes of the stories, returned back home to their home in the Shire, they realized that the battle isn't over yet, that the traitorous wizard, Saruman, who has been defeated earlier in the story -- and actually, in the movie is killed earlier -- comes from his ruined fortress of Isengard up to the Shire, and begins wreaking havoc in the hobbit's homeland as a way of avenging himself for their role in his defeat. So, although the big climactic battle is over and the world is set right, the hobbits discovered that they've still got a lot more work to do.

Now, if you haven't been in church for a while and you're wondering why I'm talking about *The Lord of the Rings*, it's because we have spent the last several weeks reflecting on the gospel message as seen through the writings of J.R.R. Tolkien, and we are bringing that sermon series to a close today as we look at the close of that wonderful piece of literature.

## **II. The Battle Won**

When I was a younger man, the ending of the story used to bother me. It felt like J.R.R. Tolkien just couldn't figure out where to draw the story to a close, and so he just kept dragging on and dragging on and dragging on. I have come to realize as an older person -- a much older person -- that J.R.R. Tolkien was actually capturing, in that ending, a very profound truth of the gospel, which is this sense that even though the battle has been won by Christ on the cross, that God has set things right with the world, there continues to be work for us to do. The battle against evil appears to be ongoing, and while we know on some level that God's reign of justice has been accomplished through the work of Christ, we also know that we only see that in glimpses now and the fullness of it has yet to come.

There's an interesting moment in *The Lord of the Rings* in the final chapter in which Gandalf, the good wizard, has been traveling with the hobbits back to the Shire. Gandalf clearly knows that something is not right, and he hints at this to the hobbits, that they may find their homes not quite as they had left them. But then he goes off to do other wizard stuff -- it's unclear what -- but he goes off and leaves the hobbits on their own. They plead with Gandalf to stay with them as they get back to the Shire, but he says to them, "Do you not yet understand my time is over? It is no longer my task to set things to right, nor to help folk to do so. And as for you, my dear friends, you will need no help. You are grown up now." And indeed, the hobbits are grown up. They are very different people than the group that left the Shire a year earlier. And in fact, they deal very handily with Saruman and with his gang of ruffians that he had brought that was dominating the Shire, and they raised the Shire and chased the ruffians out, and set their homeland aright.

J.R.R. Tolkien is highlighting the fact that for us as Christians in the modern world, we need to live in this tension of these two apparently contradictory realities. That evil in our world often seems profoundly powerful and even at points victorious. And yet, we also know that the final battle has already been determined and won by the action of our God.

This is what Jesus is talking about in this passage from Luke today. He has sent the disciples out away from Him to do God's work, and they come back really excited about the fact that they can heal and that they're casting out demons and they seem to have this power that they didn't have before. And Jesus replies somewhat elliptically to them as Jesus often does and says, "I saw a Satan fall like a star from heaven." Well, what he's saying there is Satan who is the embodiment of evil and brokenness has been cast out of heaven, he has lost the battle, the battle has been won, and we see that it has been won, he says, by the work that you are doing, casting out demons and healing. That the work of the disciples now is demonstrating that the victory against evil and brokenness has been accomplished by the work of God.

We see this also in this wonderful passage from Daniel which is written to a Jewish community suffering from enormous oppression by the Greek leader, Antiochus IV, and a community that's being persecuted in very violent ways and sees no hope before them, and Daniel comes to say, "This period is going to be limited." God has already determined that Antiochus will be defeated, that you will be freed, and God's justice will win the day. But we're not there yet. We've got this period in front of us to work with. And as you heard in Scripture today, "Seventy weeks," he says, "are decreed for your people and your holy city," here's the key phrase, "to finish the

transgression, to put an end to sin and to atone for iniquity and to bring in everlasting righteousness.”

What Daniel is telling the people is that even though God has already won the battle, we continue to fight it because we need to engage in that work for our own growth and for the life of the world. That even though evil has in a great cosmic sense been defeated, we are left with this mopping up action because we need to engage in that fight as well. We need to be engaged in the work of bringing about justice and healing in a broken world. That that’s important for our ability to live into this new world that God is giving us, that we need to claim the responsibility and the awesome opportunity of continuing God’s work of justice and wholeness and healing.

### **III. Fighting a Won Battle**

So, what does that mean for us in a place like Metropolitan as we struggle to build a world of justice and peace and wholeness? The first thing to note is that Jesus tells the disciples that the purpose of their work is to be a sign that the kingdom is at hand. In other words, he says, don’t get excited because you’ve got a little bit of extra juice. That’s not what it’s about. What it’s about is you’re showing the world that that victory has been won. We are to be signs of hope to a broken world that God has won the victory and that our living out of that is a witness to God’s ultimate purposes. And what that means, friends, is that how we engage in the battle for justice and peace has got to reflect the values of the kingdom that we are living out of. This is an idea that gets repeated over and over again in *The Lord of the Rings* by so many characters and in so many different ways that it was clearly a central idea to J.R.R. Tolkien, that we

cannot accomplish good ends by the use of evil means. The ends, Tolkien wants us to understand, never justify the means, or to put it in another way, that evil means and devices will always lead to evil ends.

There's a Tolkien scholar, Stratford Caldecott, who writes, "The real danger in Tolkien's story is not that the free world might be defeated. It is that we might be corrupted, brutalized, and degraded by the conflict itself, and in particular, by the means we employ to secure victory."

This idea has a lot of different applications, but I want to suggest one of the obvious ones that has been in the news this week. It has to do with how we as a free people respond to the threat of terror in our world. Tolkien reminds us that how we respond to terror is a profoundly important question, that it's not simply a matter of overcoming, of winning the day, which is how we like to think of it, that we're going to win the war on terror. If we engage in the war on terror in ways that compromise who we are as disciples of Christ, as children of God, then we have lost the war on terror, no matter who wins. That our ability to respond to injustice with love and compassion is as important as the outcome itself. It is very easy for us to see ourselves as the good guys in this fight, and we are in many respects. But we're only the good guys as long as the means that we use are moral and ethical, and that we don't allow our fear and our anger to dominate how we respond to those who attack us.

We see this over and over again in this last chapter of *The Lord of the Rings* through the voice of Frodo who has helped to raise this revolt against Saruman and his thugs, but who over and over again reminds the hobbits that no hobbit is to kill another, even if the other has gone to the dark side, that our call is always to bring them back to

the light. And not even to kill the thugs that Saruman has brought into the Shire if we can help it. Over and over again, he says to the hobbits, “Never let anger make the decision.”

Which segues to a story from a Quaker tradition about a man named Joseph Hoag who was a Vermont Quaker during the war of 1812, and he traveled through Tennessee during the campaign that Andrew Jackson led that ultimately culminated in the Battle of New Orleans. He stopped by a tavern to spend the night one evening and got into a conversation with some officers from General Jackson’s army who pushed him pretty hard on the Quaker stance of non-violence. A particular officer said to Hoag, “How do you sit by when a foreign power has invaded our land?” And Hoag spent some time in conversation with him – a good conversation, not hostile -- about the Quaker call to pacifism. The officer responded to him, “I cannot in conscience set down my gun as long as those who oppose us have their arms, even though,” he says, “I desire peace.” And Hoag responded, “So then, you have a mind to be one of the last men in the world to be good. I have a mind to be one of the first and to set the rest an example.”

How we engage with those who hate us, how we respond to violence and oppression and injustice is as important as the fact that we do engage and respond, because we are models and examples of what the kingdom is supposed to look like, which also means that we can engage oppression and violence and injustice and brokenness with a song in our heart and a smile on our lips because we know that God has won the victory. We can, therefore, respond with great joy even as we respond with forcefulness to the forces of injustice. We see this again in this gospel lesson, as the

disciples come back, they're filled with joy because of what God has been doing through them.

I think this is an important message for us too because we as Christians are not always joyful people, have you noticed that? Sometimes we even seem kind of angry. I spent a lot of years doing social justice work, and I've spent a lot of years working with angry people, and it's good righteous anger at injustice and brokenness in the world that oppression and people who are being mistreated. It's an appropriate response, except who wants to be around angry people, right? What are we saying about who God is and who we are as children of God if our response is anger and hostility, even if it's anger against injustice. We can engage injustice full bore, full body, with utter and complete commitment and still do it joyfully, because we know God has already won the battle and all we're doing is the mopping up action.

In his wonderful essay *On Fairy-Stories* that I've quoted several times the last month, Tolkien said that the particular quality of joy in successful fairy stories can be experienced as a sudden glimpse of the underlying truth of reality. What he's saying is fairy stories are joyful because we get little glimpses, little pictures of the fact that God is in charge and that we can rest easy and live joyful and abundant lives even in the face of injustice and violence because God has won the battle.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

In that essay, Tolkien also noted that the essence of all fairy stories is that they satisfy our hearts' deepest desire to know a world that has not been emptied of mystery. So, if you have opportunity to be in dialogue with anybody who asks you, "What in the

world are you doing in your church when you're talking about *The Lord of the Rings*," your answer is, "Because *The Lord of the Rings* and all good fairy stories are about reclaiming a view of the world that celebrates and values mystery, that is looking for the places where God is moving in unexpected ways as God works to bring about the final kingdom.

So, it feels like a fitting place to end our Tolkien journey today celebrating a God who has already won the battle, and that our struggle is simply to finish up the process that God has made possible. Or in the words of Frodo, who confronting one of Saruman's ruffians at the end of the story says, "I see that you are behind the times. Much has happened since you left the South. Your day is over. The Dark Tower has fallen, and there is a king in Gondor."

Amen.