

As many of you know, I stan JRR Tolkien and his books, especially the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Every year or two I reread the them, and not unlike with scripture, every time I find something new that resonates.

Tolkien was a master of mythology, lore, language, and history. He fought in World War I and watched the unfolding of World War II. And in the *Hobbit* and the *Lord of the Rings*, he created an antidote of sorts to the despair found in the world around him. Stick with me here as I give you a *very* abbreviated and sparse run down of the plot of the books.

They follow the quest of a one hobbit, Bilbo Baggins, as he joins a group of dwarves seeking to reclaim their mountain home from the dragon Smaug. Along the way they have many adventures and he picks up a magical ring; that ring is what continues the tale when he passes it on to his “nephew” Frodo.

The ring is the source of power for the evil Lord Sauron, and a new quest arises to destroy the ring, and therefore Sauron and his minions – the very face of evil in the world – for good. And so a fellowship is created, made up of people from the different races of Middle Earth (human, elf, dwarf, hobbit, and wizard) to accomplish the task.

Along the way the fellowship bonds as they face setback after setback, and the heartbreak of deaths. Eventually the group is further splintered, going in multiple directions and continuing on as best they can – not knowing how it will be possible to withstand the evil building around them.

Little do they know that it is the individual strands of their disparate paths that will weave together to create the circumstances necessary for victory in the end, even if it is costly. And yet, even not knowing this they all continue on, despite the odds.

Why? Why do they persevere and not give up? Time and again throughout the trilogy, when their backs are against the wall, the odds are impossible, and the end is staring them in the face – time and again – one or more character proclaims **hope**. Not assurance that everything will be okay (no cheap grace), but **hope** – hope in each other and in the call to resist evil and fight for what’s good in the world.

I think this is why these books mean so much to me. They teach me always and ever to hope in a way not unlike the scriptures do. And today, in our passage from Isaiah, we read one of the most hopeful passages ever written.

From the shoot growing out of the stump of Jesse, to the prophecy of a leader with a spirit of wisdom and understanding who judges with poor with equity, to the vision of the peaceable kingdom where the leopard lies down with the kid – there is nothing but hope.

This oracle has two parts, the first reflecting hope for a righteous ruler in the line of David (hence the shoot from the stump of Jesse, David’s father), and the second an expression of hope for an age of harmony and peace.

The context was a difficult period of tensions around the Syro-Ephraimitic war in 733 BC when the northern kingdom of Israel and the Aramaeans of Damascus tried to force the southern kingdom of Judah and King Ahaz to join their rebellion against Assyria. On Isaiah’s advice, Ahaz refused; then then instead of joining the rebel alliance, he called Assyria to intervene.¹

¹ *Feasting on the Word*, Exegetical Perspective, Year A, Volume 1.

This they did, with devastating impact, eventually leading to the destruction of Samaria and the end of the northern kingdom. Isaiah objected to this dangerous move by Ahaz, and turned a hopeful eye toward the next ruler who might be the righteous Davidic ruler long hoped for.² And so following a period of brutal war, he offered a hopeful vision of a time of peace and security.

Casting out for hope, when chaos and evil rule in the world around us, is a human inclination. It is a story as old as time, and retold again and again in every age – it's what connects Isaiah to Tolkien even though they're separate by millenia. Because we always need hope.

For this reason, as amazing as our Gospel reading is this week (packed full of John the Baptist and his wild shenanigans) I had to choose hope to preach about today. It is, after all, what this season of Advent points us toward.

Hope is what grounds us as we await our Savior and as we anticipate his three-fold coming:
as a child at Bethlehem on Christmas morning;
daily, in our own experience;
and his coming again in glory, as he has promised.³

And so these are the questions I've been pondering all week and that I invite you to reflect on as well:⁴

What is the stump that seems to sit squarely in the middle of your life?

And how is God drawing up from that stump a hopeful shoot, new life, new promise, new hope?

² *Feasting on the Word, Exegetical Perspective, Year A, Volume 1.*

³ From the Preface to *O Wisdom: Advent Devotions on the Names of Jesus.*

⁴ Weekly Seeds written by Kathryn Matthews.

When we take time to pray on where we find hope in our lives, we join with others throughout time who have trusted in hope, and in the promise that God is with us always.

All we have to do, as Gandalf told Frodo in a moment when he felt desolation, is to decide what to do with the time that is given to us. I pray that again and again and always, we will choose hope.

~ Amen ~