

Sermon; Lent I, Church of the Ascension, Chicago
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March 6, 2022

“One Ring to rule them all, . . . and in the darkness bind them”

You are wise and fearless and fair, Lady Galadriel,’ said Frodo. ‘I will give you the One Ring, if you ask for it. “For many long years”, she said, “I had pondered what I might do, should the Great Ring come into my hands, And now at last it comes. . . . In place of the Dark Lord you (Frodo) will set up a Queen. And I shall not be dark, but beautiful and terrible. . . Dreadful as the Storm and the Lightning! . . . All shall love me and despair!”

She lifted up her hand and from the ring that she wore there issued a great light that illuminated her alone and left all else dark. Then she let her hand fall, and the light faded, and suddenly she laughed again, and lo! she was shrunk: a slender elf-woman, clad in simple white, whose gentle voice was soft and sad. “I pass the test,” she said. “I will diminish and go into the West and remain Galadriel.” (Tolkien, The Lord of the Rings)

This brief and poetic exchange between Galadriel, of the Elves, and Frodo, a Hobbit, is one of the ways J.R.R. Tolkien, the fantasy novelist, records one of the numerous temptations to seize personal power by the possession of a great Ring, in his novel, The Lord of the Rings.

It is an ancient story, as old as humankind, the story of a pilgrimage, a fellowship, a journey about the vanquishing of evil.

It is a story that comes to us in many forms - the story of Adam and Eve, who fell prey to the temptation of choosing the proverbial apple, and its all-powerful knowledge of good and evil, which began their journey away from Eden. It is the story of the Israelites fleeing from Egypt and tempted to return again into slavery because the way forward was so hard. And it is the story of Jesus driven by the Spirit into the wilderness and tempted by Satan but refusing Satan’s seductive invitation.

But what are these stories about, and what is the special meaning of the temptations of Jesus? How does his temptation proclaimed at the beginning of Lent relate to ours?

An early bishop of the Christian Church began HIS Lenten Sermon with the following words: “The glad time of Lent is upon us”. I often wonder why he began in this way. Afterall, what is so glad about a Season of Penitence, this season of giving things up, this season of deprivation?

If we think about Lent theologically it is not really a season about giving things up, but rather a season of making right decisions.

Lent is a season that makes the extraordinary claim that we humans are free to decide the path our lives will take. We are free to make decisions that initiate a spiritual journey of integration and healing, rather than a journey of disintegration and death.

Lent begins with the assumption that we are all broken, and deeply flawed; that we are dust and destined for the grave. It is also a season that reminds us of who we really are out of God’s creation, broken but not having lost the original luster of our Divinely created image.

Lent and its beginning with ashes, is a somber reminder of our end time. It is also a way of startling us unto the right path, a spiritual path where we are invited to decide on the kinds of love that will characterize our lives. If

we choose the wrong love, we may find ourselves far from the will of God and our deepest fulfillment, “in a dark wood, where the right road is wholly lost and gone”. (Dante; Inferno, Canto I)

Lent invites to be awake to our lostness and turn anew onto the path that leads to the joy of the Christian life and its’ fulfillment in our fellowship with the blessed’, and in the embrace of the Triune God.

Lent is a joyful time because it is a spiritual opportunity initiated by the Spirit, as was the journey of Jesus into the desert. Lent is a joy because for a few short weeks, there is a deep clarity, about who we are and our need for repentance. It is a time when we come to ourselves, as did the prodigal son, where the path is self-evident, and we are invited to follow and find our way home.

Lent is a time when we can emerge out of the dark wood, where we so often lose our way, and come at long last onto a road clearly marked – “this way please”.

In the image of the desert, the metaphorical context of our Lenten journey, away from distractions, the conflict between good and evil can come into sharper relief. And so Jesus is led by the Spirit into this liminal space where he enters a spiritual conversation with Satan. The conversation focuses on Jesus as he makes several significant decisions.

First, Jesus is tempted by Satan to turn stones into bread, to turn divine power to worldly ends, and to satisfy earthly desires. Jesus decides not “to live by bread alone, but by the Word of God”. This is the temptation of materialism and the false security it offers.

Second, Satan shows Jesus the kingdoms of the world. "To you I will give their glory and all this authority. If you worship me, it will all be yours." Jesus answers, "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" This is the temptation of independency in the fear of insecurity, to have no need of others, except to control them.

It is the primary temptation embedded in the Great Ring of Tolkien’s story, the temptation to see ourselves in the place of God. It is a temptation informed by illusion, pride and ambition, because it denies the limitations of our human condition.

The third temptation is a testing of divine powers: "If thou be the Son of God, cast thyself down." It is the temptation to deny our creatureliness, to deny our mortality. Jesus decides to worship the Lord God, and to serve only him.

These temptations are also ours - materialism, power over others, and the desire to be more than human.

In the season of Lent, we are led by the Spirit into a spiritual practice and a liturgical observance; and to make decisions about our lives that are true to our human nature, that in God we “live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28).

We are invited to see ourselves more clearly as creatures of God who find our ultimate fulfillment in him only, by following a truly human path, a path characterized by faith, hope and charity.

So, from a practical point of view what does this Lenten discipline look like? The inner life of Lent looks something like this:

Decide to turn away from the food that perishes, symbolized by the small things we let go of during Lent. Recognize our deep hunger for these things, for security, for power, for vengeance, even our gluttony for them, and recognize that the pleasures we seek through them can only come from the soul.

Make a different choice, then these pleasures, something ultimately more satisfying, if more difficult to attain.

In choosing the spiritual path of prayer, sacred reading, fasting and abstinence, we engage in those ancient disciplines that have the power to place us more deeply in touch with the Divine Life. We cultivate the conscious awareness of presence of God through these small disciplines, in good times and bad. We are invited to trust in that presence, believe in that presence, struggle with that presence. In these spiritual practices we learn that we are more than flesh and blood, but embodied souls that God seeks to find, no matter how often we stray and become lost.

More than anything, Jesus chooses his humanity in the desert. And we are to choose ours as well, a humanity created in God's image with a God given divine identity. Like Galadriel, are to refuse the Great Ring and choose instead our creatureliness.

Then she let her hand fall, and the light faded, and suddenly she laughed again, and lo! she was shrunken: a slender elf-woman, . . . , whose gentle voice was soft and sad. "I pass the test," she said. "I will diminish and go into the West and remain Galadriel."

What is Galadriel, our example of Lenten discipline, saying to the innocent Frodo, as she drops her hand and let's go of her desire for the Great Ring? "I pass the test" she says. I make a different choice. "I will diminish and go into the West." I will assent to my mortality. I will accept my creatureliness. "I will remain Galadriel", I will remain true to my creaturely identity, with all its limitations, AND its created and divine life.

We are invited, like Galadriel, to choose and be content to go, with hope into the West, into the setting sun, in the company of the saints and the risen Christ, who has overcome the world.