

THE POWER OF THE RING
A sermon by Rev. Elizabeth L. Greene
Boise Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
March 2, 2003

Reading

[Gandalf spoke solemnly], "There is only one way [to destroy the One Ring]: to find the Cracks of Doom in the depths of Orodruin, the Fire-mountain, and cast the Ring in there, if you really wish to destroy it, to put it beyond the grasp of the Enemy for ever." (F, 67)

"I do really wish to destroy it!" cried Frodo. "Or, well, to have it destroyed. I am not made for perilous quests. (F,67)

"Of course, I have sometimes thought of going away, but I imagined that as a kind of holiday, a series of adventures like Bilbo's or better, ending in peace. But this would mean exile, a flight from danger into danger, drawing it after me. And I suppose I must go alone, if I am to do that save the Shire. But I feel very small, and very uprooted, and well--desperate. The Enemy is so strong and terrible." (F, 69)

Sermon

It is a strangely-assorted bunch. A motley crew, you might say.

Four of them are hobbits, "halflings": they are very short, with a tendency toward roundness; they dress well, but wear no shoes and have furry feet; they are a hospitable and comfort-loving race, given to good food and happy parties. They pride themselves on the tidy homes and neat gardens of the Shire, their untroubled home for generation upon generation.

Two of the group are humans: the tall and reserved man known as Strider (Aragorn), observing much in his travels upon the earth; the noble Boromir, of the fearless horse people of Rohan. One is the dwarf Gimli, short, squat, incredibly powerful—grumpy most of the time, with a fierce and loyal heart. One is an elf, tall and lithe and fair—an enchanting man of peace, whose arrows always find their mark. One is a wizard, wry and humorous, carrying with grace the enormous burdens of wisdom and power.

This oddly-assembled group has one small job: to save the world. They have to cross league after league of unimaginable dangers, enter the deathly and torturous land of Mordor, and throw the One Ring back into Mount Doom, whence it came. They have to destroy it, so that its original owner, the arch-evil Sauron will not recapture it and spoil all that is good in the world. The hobbit Frodo is the Ringbearer.

Most of you know what I'm talking about. *The Lord of the Rings*, three-volume tale of Middle Earth and its creatures, battling good and evil, was published by British linguistic scholar J.R.R. Tolkien in 1955. (Although he created Middle Earth's comprehensive history and language over many years, starting as early as 1937.) The trilogy, with its introductory book, *The Hobbit*, exploded into popularity in the 'sixties. People like me read and re-read the books, losing ourselves in the saga, in the appealing

and appalling characters that people it. A friend my age, a man I do not usually associate with fantasy (a retired judge who shall remain nameless) heard I was going to preach on the books. As he left our conversation, he spoke with appropriate histrionics:

One Ring to rule them all, One Ring to find them,
One Ring to bring them all and in the darkness bind them
In the Land of Mordor where the Shadows lie.

The epic's raging popularity faded as the optimism and utopianism of the 'sixties faded, but now the movies have been made, meeting the same wild acclaim the books met forty years ago.

What is it about this story? Why are so many of us so passionate about *The Lord of the Rings*? Why does it appeal so deeply to so many of us? What is it that is so compelling, to those of us who love it?

On an obvious level, there's just a lot of cool stuff in it.

Hobbits are sturdy and cute and ever-so-much braver than anyone would think. Elves are sort of Buddhists with magical powers: detached, loving, beautiful. They speaking a flowing language of easy vowels and soft consonants: Galadriel, Elrond, Rivendell are all proper names. Orcs are horrible shambling creatures, oozing pus from their faces, speaking in the guttural language of Dark Speech. The soldier Orcs are Uruk-Hai, carrying torches of *gnash* (fire) through the darkness. There are the Ents, the most ancient race in Middle Earth, huge trees that walk. Gollum, a poor despised and debased creature, seems something like a large salamander, something like a four-legged spider, a slimy, bulgy-eyed, formerly humanish being, scrambling like a grotesque hairless monkey in the hope of regaining his "preciousssss." (The Ring.) Battle scenes are genuinely, truly epic, especially in the movie. Really intriguing evil things constantly cross the paths of our good companions.

But there's more than that to this classic tale.

My daughter, Betsy, fell in love with these books in her early teens, reading and re-reading them through the years. I sent her an e-mail, posing the above questions to her.

First, she replies, "Well, yikes. Ask me difficult questions, why don't you?"

Then she goes on to reflect:

So, just off the top of my head: ...the heroes are flawed, but basically good, and redemption happens all over the place. The men are manly and at the least one woman gets to pick up a sword and defend her homeland and bring down the Nazgul, which is pretty cool. Hobbits are endearing, and Sam Gamgee is a prince among hobbits. He is such a fine example of selfless loyalty that it practically brings tears to my eyes. Frodo is kind of fainty and saggy, but he has reason. Gandalf is my favorite – he's powerful, autocratic, wise, and has a wicked sense of humor. The books are well-written, and the story is a pretty universal-little-man-battles-evil-and-saves-the-world kind of tale.

A lot of good traits there: flawed goodness, courage regardless of gender, selfless loyalty, wisdom, humor.

There's redemption. And there's little-man-battles-evil-and-saves-the-world—often known as the Hero's Quest.

We are always, always in need of redemption. As human beings, we do the things we wish we didn't, and we neglect the things we know are right. Boromir, one of the noble men of Rohan, succumbs to temptation—the lure of absolute power—and tries to take the ring from Frodo, who escapes in panic, to fall into a pack of orcs. Boromir comes back to his true nature, and dashes into the fray to defend the hobbit. He is mortally wounded in the successful defense and says on his deathbed, “I tried to take the Ring from Frodo. I am sorry. I have paid.” (*TT*, 4)

I ask each of us to reflect on a time when we betrayed our consciences, our best selves, perhaps another person. Did we come back to our true nature. Did we repent?

It doesn't have to be a matter of life or death. The other day, I realized that I was gleefully repeating a rumor about the morals of one of the people currently involved in our great Boise City Scandal. What I was saying had little to do with the serious questions of ethics and competency raised by the whole mess. It was just idle gossip. It was spreading a sordid third- or fourth-hand rumor about whose truth or falsehood I have absolutely no idea. I thought of the times I have been the victim of defamatory rumors (not about my morals!), and I suddenly realized what a nasty thing I was doing. I am sorry. I will stop repeating my salacious little tale, and will not accept it when I hear it told.

Betsy's other main point is at least as important as redemption. We need stories in which the little person prevails, through initial reluctance, incredibly-daunting obstacles, to save the world. We need heroes, from every walk of life. More precisely, we need to be reminded—mythically, in this case—that we little people *are* the heroes who save the world, day after day after day. In Margaret Mead's famous words,

ever doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world, indeed it's the only thing that ever has. (*Singing the Living Tradition*, #561)

The problem is, it's really hard to see our heroism in daily life, most of the time. So we are greatly drawn to larger-than-life stories with heroes who have some of the same feelings that we do, and who go ahead and do what has to be done. We easily understand Frodo's feelings when Gandalf is telling him the awe-full story of the Ring, the magnitude of what has to be done: “very small, and very uprooted, and well--desperate.” The Enemy, whatever it may be for us, is sometimes strong and terrible and sometimes sneaky and subtle, allowing us to weasel our way out by giving plausible excuses.

I think about the pressures in our schools, to be cool and join in the harassment of “fags,” “dorks” and other undesirables that goes on. Like my gossiping about the hapless city employee, putting someone else down feels kind of like fun, and we feel a part of an “in group.” (A minor version of Boromir's lust for power.) But we always know that it is wrong. We know, when we think about the victims, that going through one's school day as the butt of cruelty and “jokes” is a living hell. The students I admire most are those who have the considerable self-esteem and courage to heed the call of their higher selves. They not only refuse to join in, they actually speak out against the mean-spiritedness. Around 1994, our church took an official position against an anti-

homosexual initiative on the ballot, and I was very visible speaking against it. The classmate of one of our then-teenagers said sneeringly, “Oh, you go to that lesbian church.” Amber just looked at her and said, “So?” She very matter-of-factly took the redemptive path. Every time I hear of our kids joining those who carry the banner of dignity and respect, I am proud.

More personally, I remember embarking upon the journey of becoming a Unitarian Universalist minister, and the several points at which my reluctance kicked in. I was called to the ministry, as surely as if Gandalf had knocked on my door and told me that was what I was supposed to do. I understood the “call” as beckoning me toward more honesty, more integrity, less self-centeredness. I understood the ideal of ministry as promoting acceptance, respect, love, justice and peace—a king of modest world saving. I think I figured that all that stuff would just descend upon me like a gentle rain from heaven, as I wended my way through the hallowed halls and libraries of the Graduate Theological Union.

I was very excited about getting into Starr King School For the Ministry in Berkeley. At the same time, a terrible heaviness came over me when I got the news of acceptance, a heaviness mixed with anxiety I didn’t understand. It was so strong that I asked for, and got, permission to wait a year and enter seminary then. That year helped me get used to the idea and prepare—spiritually and practically—but I still felt an almost-physical pull toward the north, as I drove south out of Seattle, snapping a picture of Mt. Rainier, camera in one hand, other hand on the wheel.

Turns out I had pretty good reason for feeling anxious. I loved seminary with a passion. And I also sort of hated it, because the expectation is that you will engage in rigorously honest self-examination—finding out the orcs and trolls and Balrogs of your character, in order to be at least minimally worthy to receive the boon of ordination by a congregation. In order to be at least minimally worthy of the respect accorded to the position of ministry, and hence to be about the business of helping make the world better. In seminary, I discovered a self-centeredness that horrified me. I wrestled with a tendency to dismiss people if I deemed them unworthy (translate: didn’t like them). I really, really hated facing the times I had let down people I cared about most, particularly my children.

Seminary offered for me both the wonders and the awfulness of the hero’s quest: it was Rivendell, enchanted and safe home of the elves of knowledge; it was Ents of great power, helping puny me toward the Good. It was also the Dark Forest and the Dismal Marshes and even, it seemed sometimes, the gates of Mordor. But I had the fellowship and guidance of my trusted classmates. I developed a lively, continuing spiritual life at that time. I had help and wisdom from exalted ones far wiser than I. I emerged a very different person.

I returned to “ordinary life”—Bise and ordination and testing the results of my “hero’s journey.” The first few years of ministry here in Boise also had their Mordorlike moments, but that is a story for another day.

Those of us who love *The Lord of the Rings* feel the deep mythical pull of the story, at the same time delighting in the action and the details and the nobility and the humanness of the trek.

We know we need to be redeemed, and we all have hero’s journeys with which we wrestle, usually internally in the modern world. I wager that we might be surprised if

I asked for a show of hands asking, “How many of you are struggling or have recently struggled with a ‘call’ to somehow be better than you are now—a struggle of no little proportions?” I won’t ask, but we may rest assured we are not alone.

The *Ring* trilogy’s rousing action tale gives us hope. We, like the comfort-loving hobbit race, have depths of strength and courage we do not know we possess. We have the fellowship of others, if we allow that to happen. We have guidance from powers greater than ourselves, whatever we call them, even if we don’t think we do. With our courage, our beloved companions, our tie with the Mystery, we can keep on trekking, and we can emerge able to return to ordinariness—an ordinariness we are now capable of making more generous and fair and loving.

“I will take the ring,” Frodo said. “Though I do not know the way.”

May we do no less.

Sources consulted

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Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings* (trilogy). New York: Ballantine Books. 1954-1966, 1994.

Part One: *The Fellowship of the Ring*

Part Two: *The Two Towers*

Part Three: *The Return of the King*