

Anna Burnham:

Good morning and welcome to morning prayers at Memorial Church. Please excuse my voice, I'm recovering from a cold. Today's service will begin with the responsive reading from the black Appleton Psalter book, Psalm 17 found on page 9. Please stand if you are able.

Anna Burnham:

Hear a just cause, oh Lord, attend to my cry. Dip here to my prayer from lips free of deceit.

Congregation:

From thee let my vindication come! Let thy eyes see the right!

Anna Burnham:

If thou triest my heart, if thou visitest me at night, if thou testest me, thou wilt find no wickedness in me, my mouth does not transgress.

Congregation:

With regard to the works of men, by the word of thy lips I have avoided the ways of the violent.

Anna Burnham:

My steps have held fast to thy paths. My feet have not slipped.

Congregation:

I call upon thee, for thou wilt answer me, O God; incline thy ear to me, hear my words.

Anna Burnham:

Wonderfully show that steadfast love, oh savior of those who seek refuge from their adversaries at thy right hand.

Congregation:

Keep me as the apple of the eye; hide me in the shadow of thy wings.

Anna Burnham:

From the wicked who to spoil me. My deadly enemies who surround me.

Choir:

(Singing)

Anna Burnham:

The following is an excerpt from the first volume of J. R. Tolkien, the Lord of the Rings, The Fellowship of the Ring. I have never been out of my own land before, said Merry. And if I had known what the world outside was like, I don't think I should have had the heart to leave it. Not even to see fair Lothlorien?

said Haldir. The world is indeed full of peril and in it there are many dark places, but still there is much that is fair. And though in all lands love is now mingled with grief, it grows perhaps the greater.

In the Columbia River Gorge outside of Portland, Oregon, there is a place called Eagle Creek. I used to live out there and on one April day, about eight years ago, I hiked into the gorge to a thunderous waterfall deep in a cove, lush with all colors of green, coated in moss and pine and fragrant with all their aromas. I was the only person there and I remember the joy of being there so clearly, feeling fresh and alive in the damp and mist of a Pacific Northwest spring. I remember thinking how ancient that place felt, how sacred and untouchable. The memory became a totem for me, a touchstone as I moved back east and spent a few years feeling rootless. Knowing that no matter where I was or what happened to me, that place would continue to exist for long after I was gone, unconstrained by human time. I would return there in my mind, finding comfort in knowing that such peace and beauty existed even when I did not feel it within myself.

But then just a few years after my encounter with that waterfall, a 15 year old boy threw some fireworks into Eagle Creek Canyon during a burn ban and the gorge went up in flames. By the time the fire was put out, it had burned for three months and destroyed 50000 acres. I looked in a map and knew that the place that I loved was no longer as I remembered it, that human folly had burned it bare. I remember watching with horror from the other side of the country as this place that so rooted me went up in flames. And so my love for it mingled with and became irrevocably tangled with a deep sense of grief, pain, and loss. The world is indeed full of peril and in it there are many dark places, but still there is much that is fair. And though in all lands love is now mingled with grief, it grows, perhaps the greater.

The Lord of the Rings was shaped by J. R. R Tolkien's experience fighting in the unspeakable horror of World War I. He survived that World War emerging out of what must have felt like the very end of the world. He spent 12 years writing the story, some of which were during the Second World War. One that must have been impossible to imagine could come after the cataclysm of the first. Reading Fellowship of the Ring recently, I was struck by the elegant wisdom with which Tolkien writes, but also by the deep current of grief that runs throughout the text. His characters too live in a time of apocalypse. It is an epic story of good and evil, of blighted action land contrasted with good tiled earth, of the ability of unlikely individuals to be heroic and brave, all wrapped up in wizards, elves, anthropomorphized trees, and of course hobbits.

By this point in the story, the fellowship that has formed to help destroy the one ring of power has lost a member and retreated to the Elven forest of Lothlorien, a place of impossible beauty of golden trees and peaceful crystal streams of calm and safety. They are hurt and grieving and yet there are so much of the stories still to come.

Merry the hobbit says to Haldir, an elf, if I had known what the world outside was like, I don't think I should have had the heart to leave my own land. I understand that as I don't know if I would've wanted to go out into the world, if I knew it might cause pain or fear or vulnerability. If I had known I might lose something, I don't know if I would've been brave enough to love it. Would it have been better if I had never seen that place in Oregon if I knew it might be gone? But as Haldir responds, not even to see fair Lothlorien? Not even to see this beauty, this place of peace all around you? Not even to feel what it is to

love and be loved? Would you have left home, ventured out, risk loss and sadness if you knew you might see this?

In writing about loss and fear, Tolkien is so often pointing to I think the goodness and beauty and love that persists throughout it. We live as Tolkien did, in a time of cataclysm and apocalypse, both existentially with our climate and our social and political structures. And merely because we are fragile human bodies walking around every day constantly teetering on the edge of catastrophe.

Perhaps love is always, as Haldir said, mingled with grief. Care and joy are tied up constantly with sadness. I love that place in Oregon and it is lost as I knew it and that still brings me great pain, but also it has already begun to regenerate. The people and things we love are finite and mortal. Due to our own human actions, the land on which we live increasingly feels mortal too. Eagle Creek, the place I so loved burned because a human being, carelessly tossed a firework into its heart. But I think the beauty of its memory is still worth the pain felt at its absence. Just as seeing fair Lothlorien was perhaps worth the fright of Merry venturing into the world outside.

This is part of what it means to love, to love finite and mortal things and people. Love will always lead to loss. But despite this fact as Tolkien writes, it grows perhaps the greater. It seems hard to imagine that a man who saw what Tolkien saw in the trenches might emerge with hope. But ultimately the story he writes is one of hope, of love growing perhaps the greater even as it is mingled with grief. Perhaps even due to the preciousness and temporality that that grief brings into relief. Because as Haldir says, still there is much that is fair.

Please rise as you are able and together let us recite the prayer that Jesus taught us, saying, our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us and lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom, the power and glory, for ever and ever. Amen.

Together let us sing the hymn, great God we sing that mighty hand. Number 73 found in your crimson Hymnal.

Congregation/Choir:

(singing)

Anna Burnham:

Today is the feast of St. Francis of Assisi. And since both he and Tolkien were Catholics who loved the natural world, I thought I'd share the prayer of St. Francis as our benediction today. Lord make us instruments of your peace. Where there is hatred let us sow love. Where there is injury, pardon. Where there is doubt, faith. Where is despair, hope. Where there is darkness, light. Where there is sadness, joy. Oh divine master, grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console, to be understood as to understand, to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive, it is in pardoning that we are pardoned and it is in dying, that we are born to eternal life. Amen.

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