

Trinity Church in the City of Boston

The Rev. Morgan S. Allen

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XIV Pentecost (Proper 17) & Blessing of the Backpacks, Matthew 16:21-28

In you, O Lord, have we taken refuge; for the sake of your name, lead us and guide us.¹ *Amen.*

New Line Cinema released Peter Jackson's *The Return of the King* in time for the Christmas rush of 2003. Despite my enthusiasm for the finale of his adaptations, a congested holiday calendar kept me from seeing the film until after the new year. Yet, once we cleared Epiphany, Missy and I splurged for the fancy tickets at the new theater – further from the Shire than I preferred, but just around the corner from our parents' homes in Shreveport, Louisiana.

Settling into our seats, Missy was nearly eight-months pregnant with our first child, and during the great battle for Middle-earth – undertaken in floor-rumbling, Dolby Surround Sound – Michael Stephens Allen began to kick and churn. Though I took heart that our son readied to destroy the “One Ring to rule them all,”² Missy had a different experience. Having endured the discomfort as long as she could, she finally grabbed my arm and whispered, “I have to leave.”

With the years since protecting me like an elven cloak,³ I can confess that my first thought was, “But *Missy* will miss the end of the movie!” Fortunately, that selfish fever quickly passed, and I, like the Ring-bearer before me, left the Fellowship to brave their fates without me. Quietly as we could, Missy and I exited the theater. Though I have re-read *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy more than once since then, I had never seen the films' conclusion until two weeks ago today.

See, fast-forwarding to those first pandemic weeks of 2020, not only was I still new to Trinity, my children were in their very first year of new schools in Boston. A tender moment for all of us, the isolation hit hard. As we could, we leaned into one another, and every evening after supper we would gather around the fireplace, and I would read aloud *The Hobbit*.⁴

Long before then, I had established *reading* Tolkien's classics as a pre-requisite for my children's *watching* the movies. Having completed our happy, *Hobbit* homework, we later enjoyed those films (despite their middling reviews), but life swept us along, and we never made it to *The Lord of the Rings*. Feeling I had failed my firstborn that he might leave his house of origin without knowing this grandest of tales, I made the decision to yield my well-meaning standard. On each of the three last nights before we took Michael to college, our family squished together on a sofa too small for us all to fit, and we watched the glorious epic into the wee hours.

I loved it so much.

Back to church, for us who followed Jesus from his Nazarene home to a deserted place where he (unsuccessfully) sought quiet and solace from the press of the crowds;⁵ who followed him from Gennesaret where he healed the sick⁶ to Tyre and Sydon, where he encountered the courageous Canaanite woman⁷ and fed four thousand gentiles;⁸ today, we who followed Jesus meet him in the district of Ceaserea Philippi, about twenty miles north of the Sea of Galilee. Here, Jesus turns to his disciples and asks, “Who do you say that I am?”⁹ Upon Peter’s answer – “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God” – and Jesus’ affirmation – “Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah” – Jesus then “began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering . . . be killed, and on the third day be raised.”¹⁰

While we visit this conversation across two Sundays, the two lessons remain a single dialogue, and its location would have been immediately known to the disciples as a place of cultic worship – anciently hosting worship of Baal, and, in later years, Hellenist deities. The first readers of Matthew’s Gospel would also have known of Caesarea’s more recent – and infamous – history as a vacation destination for the Roman general Vespasian and the gross brutality of his son, Titus. It was Vespasian “who began the siege of Jerusalem [around the year 66] and then left his son in charge to complete it when he became emperor. [After the Holy City’s fall and the destruction of the Jewish Temple], Titus and his troops returned to Caesarea, where [the historian] Josephus reports [Titus] had [Jewish captives] thrown to wild animals,” a vicious and vulgar demonstration more fit for orcs than humankind.¹¹

Now, on this very same patch of earth, Peter gives voice to Jesus as the Messiah for the first time in the Gospels. In response, so, too, does Jesus first predict his suffering. These pronouncements – praise and Passion – are bound to one another; here, at the intersection of Baal and Jesus, of faith’s profession and imperial oppression, Peter, Jesus, and all of us encounter the promise of life and the inevitability of grief.

When we reached Michael’s college campus Tuesday-before-last, I conjured on our car stereo the magic of *The Lord Of The Rings*’ farewell hymns.¹² Valedictory pan flute our soundtrack, we entered the athletic center’s large parking area and joined a line of cars tightly woven like a Disney attraction’s queue. Sophomores and Juniors in matching “Orientation Team” t-shirts played their own loud music on portable speakers they held above their heads like Lloyd Dobbler [though they didn’t know who Lloyd Dobbler is].¹³ They danced around the cars, their homemade signs dusting the lot with winking glitter, and our place in the procession passed through stations where Michael signed paperwork, received a map and an ID card, and, finally, took possession of his keys.

The ranks of cars then split for their respective dorms, and we pulled into the circle drive of my son’s new home – where more of these green-shirted upperclassmen met us, opened our car, and, with the strength of Ents, carried all our teeming plastic bins to Michael’s room. His roommate had arrived earlier than we did, and, having finished readying his side of the room, he and his parents left – leaving us Allens to unpack and arrange with Michael as a family.

Peter understandably protests Jesus' foreboding vision: "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you."¹⁴ Though Jesus responds sharply – "Get behind me, Satan!"¹⁵ – he also reveals an interior struggle. Jesus continues, "You are a stumbling block **to me**"¹⁶... *to me*. That is, Peter does not impede the coming of God's Kingdom – that's *not* what Jesus says – rather, Peter surfaces Jesus' heartache, a kindred grief to that which Peter expresses. And this swell of their love for one another makes this hard moment, *harder*.

"Then Jesus told his disciples, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life?'¹⁷ Jesus concludes this dialogue: "Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will ... see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."¹⁸

So, too, do I say: "Truly I tell *you* – you at the corner of Boylston and Clarendon ... you at the edge of a new school year ... you at the turn of a new season ... we who sit here at Trinity Church will see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

I had been imagining this moment in Michael's dorm room for most of this summer, giving myself over to what it might look like, feel like, *smell* like. The scene before me bore flashes of those imaginations, but the reality was more harried than I had pictured or hoped. There was a lot to accomplish, and Michael's "New Student Orientation" was soon to begin. Focused on our tasks rather than our feelings, we all sent a few emotions out sideways.

After I followed instructions to turn the bed one way ... and then another ... and then another ... and then back to the way that it was when I started ... I retreated into the open doorway. Watching my son arrange his desk with the few items he deemed precious enough to bring into this new world, I could glimpse him in all the seasons our family had spent together: bone deep, I could remember that noisy night at the movies before he was born, and, like yesterday – *yesterday!* – I could see him as an infant, when he was long and skinny and shivering as his mother and I fearfully gave him his first bath in our tiny bathroom sink. I could see him in each of the rooms where he grew up, surrounded by his posters and his toys, his books and his baseball cards, and I could see his entirely unburdened exuberance – his hallmark for what still accounts for most of his life – and I could see, too, that necessary sheet of reserve our teenage-years seems to pull over all of us. On fields and courts and stages, on the first days of Kindergarten and Junior High and High School – Lord, have mercy! – I could see all those moments just behind his glasses, on his brow, in his gestures.

But I could not see what would happen next – *cannot* see how and who he will become in a week, a month, or after these formational years ahead. My soul stood in a crashing intersection – pride and regret, relief and terror, rolling through forcefully and all at once ... love and hope and the breathtaking incredulity that this beautiful, imperfect, utterly exhausting and joy-filled season of our family's life – the one we had known for so long and treasured in our little Hobbit hole –

really was ending. Something new was beginning, something filled with both the promise of life and the inevitability of grief.

Early in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Frodo confesses to Gandalf that he preferred his life in the Shire, and he did not want to adventure into an uncertain future. “I wish it need not have happened in my time,” he says forthrightly.¹⁹

“So do I,” replies Gandalf. “And so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us.”²⁰

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Now, be assured: I do not suggest that my experience of a son leaving for college is akin either to Frodo facing the Nazgûl, or Peter enduring Jesus’ arrest and death. For the Fellowship’s quest does not ask all of us to pick up and head to Mordor,²¹ no more than Jesus’ call to “take up our cross” intends our crucifixion.²² Rather, Tolkien invites us to find adventure in our lives as they are, where they are, when they are. And rather than dwelling in a past that will always remain past – no matter how lovely, no matter how winsome; rather than wringing our hands about what is distantly ahead of us – a future that may or may not be; Jesus invites us to follow him into this moment – *this one!* – that is always epic, always grand.

See, we are forever passing through Caesarea Philippi and the Misty Mountains, forever crossing the forceful, fast-moving intersections of life’s promise and grief’s inevitability. Yet, Jesus, the Christ who loved his friends so well, remains with us! *All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us.* And to join God in blessing this moment with our whole hearts is how we both lose our life for Jesus’ sake, and how we gain it for the same.

So, to all those who have come bearing backpacks, cue the pan flute! Give yourselves to your new school adventure, for these days are wondrous, magic, and holy.²³ And I can testify, it all goes by *so fast*.

And for everyone at Trinity Church, let us begin this new Program Year as companions in a loving household of God, for celebrating our share in this ministry and our place in this community *is* the Son of Man coming in his kingdom – the fullness of life! – and it is *good ... very, very good*.

In the name of God,
Amen.

¹ From Psalm 31.

² *Is it secret? Is it safe?*

³ That means I'm hidden from view by camouflage.

⁴ The most successful “as-a-family” undertaking in our parenting career. It only took a pandemic to eliminate our distractions and focus our effort.

⁵ Matthew 14:13.

⁶ Matthew 14:34-36.

⁷ Matthew 15:21-28.

⁸ Matthew 15:32-39.

⁹ Matthew 16:15.

¹⁰ Matthew 16:17-18, 21.

¹¹ Boring, M. Eugene. “Matthew.” *The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. VIII*, Keck, et al, editors. Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1995.

¹² I'm a Eurythmics fand, and I enjoy Annie Lennox lending her voice on “[Into the West](#)” – but we listened to the instrumental, “[Elanor](#).”

¹³ [Looking back, the trailer gives away a lot of the movie.](#)

¹⁴ Matthew 16:22.

¹⁵ Matthew 16:23a.

¹⁶ Matthew 16:23b. In an especially clever turn, Boring notes: “Peter the rock becomes Peter stone of ‘stumbling.’” That reading reinforces my claim of Jesus’ response as a personal appeal, rather than an eschatological concern.

¹⁷ Matthew 16:24-26.

¹⁸ Matthew 16:28.

¹⁹ Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*. Houghton-Mifflin, 1994.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Though, if called, he hopes we will.

²² Ibid.

²³ Be well, grow strong, have fun, and make good decisions, Michael Stephens! I miss you so dang much already.