

Sermon: Just as I am

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, St Giles Presbyterian Church, May 30, 2021)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

The Lord of the Ring is an epic fantasy novel written by the English author J.R.R. Tolkien, and subsequently turned into movies, three-part trilogy, directed by Peter Jackson in the early 2000's. The widely read novel and the blockbuster films depict a long standing struggle in Middle-Earth between forces of evil led by the Dark Lord Sauron, against forces of good cobbled together in a fragile alliance of elves, dwarfs, hobbits and men.

A set of rings with magical powers were crafted, nefariously by Sauron, and distributed to those allied against him, in an attempt to corrupt them from within. Even more sinister, a master ring was secretly crafted, described as "one ring to rule them all, one ring to find them, one ring to bring them all, and in the darkness bind them".

The only way to break the power of Sauron over Middle-Earth was to destroy that one ring, by casting it into the volcanic lava of Mount Doom, deep in the land of Mordor. The bearer of that one ring, on top of overcoming external challenges of that journey, must also resist the internal temptation to use and possess the ring. Using the one ring gives its wearer near absolute power, but as we know very well—absolute power corrupts absolutely.

So in one particular scene (here I am referring to the movie version), a dispute was breaking out, among representatives of various race of elves, dwarfs and men: folks of good intention and superb capabilities, over who should bear that ring. Who was strong enough to complete the journey? Who was pure enough to finish the task?

During that heated dispute, as those would be heroes were literally shouting down each other, as the prospect of an alliance melting under the heated testosterone, stood Frodo Baggins, a demure and diminutive hobbit. He quietly declared, "I will take it." His utterance ignored by most at first, so he said it again, this time more confidently, "I will take it!" Now eyes of all are on him: some shocked, some bemused, and some with nods of approval. Frodo declared again, "I will take the ring to Mordor, though I do not know the way."

Whenever I come across the passage of Isaiah, chapter 6, the account of the prophet's call and commissioning, especially when the Lord of Host inquired, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And Isaiah replied, "Here am I; send me!", I always think of Frodo Baggins in the Lord of the Ring.

The vision of Isaiah is truly fantastical. In the year of the death of Uzziah, the King of Judah, so about 740 B.C., the prophet was brought in vision to a heavenly court, where he saw the Lord of Hosts seated on an elevated throne. Seraphs, which literally means “burning one” in Hebrew, angelic creatures each with six wings, flew about the throne in reverent attendance, uttering to one another *“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.”*

Some biblical scholars have equated the three-fold ‘holy’ as an affirmation to the trinitarian nature of God, but others have questioned that line of thinking. The basic sense of the word “holy” is ‘to be set apart from that which is common’. Three-fold repetition of ‘holy’ intensifies acknowledgement of the absolute sovereignty of the Lord of Hosts, as ruler of both heaven, earth and all of creation.

Isaiah, realizing that he is probably not supposed to be there, not supposed to have seen Lord God with his naked eyes, he prostrated before the throne and said: “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!” So a Seraph flew to him, bringing a burning coal. After touching the prophet’s lips with the hot coal, said, “Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.”

Having now been cleansed, sins forgiven, possessing a newfound courage and confidence, the prophet boldly accepted God’s commissioning, in a question form, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” The prophet, way back in the heavenly court, probably started to jump up and down, raising his hand, “Here am I; send me!”

What a wonderful vision, an endearing example to follow for many seminarians, those who are called by God, and have responded positively to their own call to ministry. This passage of Isaiah chapter 6:1-8, is by far the favourite one used in ordination and/or induction ceremonies that I had attended. However, I often wonder if the naive enthusiasm of Isaiah, and of many other newly graduating seminarians should be tempered by the subsequent two verses where God clarified what the prophet was actually sent to do, that is

*“Go and say to this people (that is the people of God):
‘Keep listening, but do not comprehend;
keep looking, but do not understand.’
Make the mind of this people dull,
and stop their ears, and shut their eyes,
so that they may not look with their eyes,
and listen with their ears,
and comprehend with their minds,*

and turn and be healed.” (Isaiah 6:9-10)

Thinking that such an ominous task to be short-lived, a temporary judgement that will result in the eventual repentance and restoration, the prophet inquired, “How long, O Lord?” God responded,

*“Until cities lie waste without inhabitant,
and houses without people, and the land is utterly desolate;
until the Lord sends everyone far away,
and vast is the emptiness in the midst of the land.” (Isaiah 6:11-12)*

Ouch! Who would want to do that job? Honestly. Certainly not me! Send me! Yes, Lord! But send me only to where I want to go, to what I want to do. If only our journey of faith could be that simple.

Nicodemus knew all about complexity. His journey of faith was anything but simple. He came to Jesus at night, recorded in the Gospel of John, chapter 3. Nicodemus was a respected Pharisee, a wealthy person of high stature, a member of the council of Sanhedrin, part of the ruling elite. According to the way the author of John’s Gospel had arranged, Nicodemus came to Jesus, shortly after Jesus confronted money changers in the temple of Jerusalem, upsetting the Jewish religious authority in the process.

I think it was Kim Campbell, the first and the only female Prime Minister of Canada, who was infamously quoted in the 1993 federal election, that “an election is no time to discuss serious issue”. That comment may have sunk her prospect of re-election, as she was mercilessly ridiculed by both media and the public. But I honestly think she was right. Discussing serious issues in any highly charged, emotional or political context is close to impossible. I think that is what Nicodemus was trying to avoid—he wanted to have a serious dialogue without the unnecessary interference or drama.

So this respected leader of the Jews came to Jesus by night, seeking to have a respectful dialogue, began by saying “*Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.*” Seemingly already knowing what Nicodemus had really wanted to ask, Jesus provided a cryptic response, “*Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.*”

The adverb ‘from above’, *anōthen* in Greek, has a number possible meanings, including from heaven, from the beginning, for of old, or again, anew. Seizing this possible confusion, Nicodemus retorted, “*How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born again?*”

This highly educated leader of the Jewish religious authority had misunderstood the words of Jesus. He over-literalized them, and thought Jesus was talking about repeated physical birth, when he was in fact referring to a new spiritual birth. As if intending to add more to the confusion of Nicodemus, Jesus began to speak of 'born of water and spirit', of 'wind blows where it chooses', of 'no one knowing where it comes from or where it goes'.

Now thoroughly perplexed and frustrated, completely missing out on the fact that the Son of God was referring to the Spirit of God to bring a fuller understanding of the Triune God, Nicodemus asked in exasperation, "*How can these things be?*" **How can these things be?**

I didn't use to have sympathy for Nicodemus. However, the more I minister to people, the more conversations I have had with those who are truly puzzled by the ways of the Triune God, the more I feel for Nicodemus. Genuine questionings about faith, be it about free will, or about suffering, or evil in the world, or how to live a truly resurrected life, or what it means to be born again, or about the all encompassing love of God, these questions deserve our utmost attention. The answers that I am able to provide are often limited, often not very satisfying, and God is usually not available, at least not immediately. Yet, just as Isaiah stood before the Lord of Hosts, or Nicodemus stood before Jesus, we stand also before the mysterious divine. Just as I am, just as we are, without one plea

Nicodemus left that meeting with Jesus, probably not very satisfied, probably more confused than when he went in. But he continued to grapple with the unknown, the mysterious ways of the Triune God. He would seize an opportunity later in chapter 7 of John's Gospel, briefly speaking in favour of Jesus, defending his right before the Law, in front of other Pharisees. Later still, after Jesus was crucified on the cross, Nicodemus would accompany Joseph of Arimathea to ask for the body of Jesus for burial, carefully prepared it with a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seven-five pounds, an extraordinary gesture, fitting only for a royal burial.

Early Reformers, particularly John Calvin, had coined the phrase 'Nicodemite' to disparage those who were suspected of public misrepresentation of their actual religious beliefs. I suppose given the context of religious tension and violence between Protestants and Catholics in the 16th and 17th century, being a Nicodemite maybe a desperate necessity for many.

Nicodemus was a complex and complicated man. Not perfect, certainly not blameless. Yet just as he was, he stood before the mysterious divine. And God was and is merciful.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.