

Matthew 26: 36-39 (New Revised Standard Version)

Jesus Prays in Gethsemane

36 Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, “Sit here while I go over there and pray.” **37** He took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and agitated. **38** Then he said to them, “I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me.” **39** And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want.”

The Word of Our Lord.

Sermon “In Defense of Frodo” Nancy Marshall

I have Facebook essayist Mary Nikkel to thank for the inspiration for today’s talk. It particularly struck me because I myself have been burdened lately by my own inner weaknesses and torment, and have been feeling very inadequate to the tasks set before me. She wrote an impassioned defense of Frodo from The Lord of the Rings, in response to a popular trend to see him as a weak, failed character, and to see his loyal friend Samwise as the true hero.

I must say, like Mary, that this is primarily a view of those WHO DIDN’T READ THE BOOKS. Be that as it may, I personally see Frodo as a biblical character, the archetype of a prophet, if not even Christ-like. He is also the result of Tolkien’s experiences in the frontlines of World War I. For Tolkien, Sam is the everyday hero, the courageous, good-hearted men he saw die in the trenches. But Sam’s obstacles are all external — battling Orcs, Mordor, Frodo’s own difficulties. By contrast, Frodo’s obstacles are primarily internal. While Sam did much to blunt the external dangers, Frodo had to carry a tremendous inner darkness without allowing it to consume his soul. C.S. Lewis, a Biblical scholar as well as an author of fantasy, said of this inner darkness: “Mental pain is less dramatic than physical pain, but it is more common and also more hard to bear. The frequent attempt to conceal mental pain increases the burden: it is easier to say “My tooth is aching” than to say “My heart is broken.””

And that is why Frodo, like Moses, could not enter the “promised land” and return to the Shire. Sam, whose soul was untouched by his battles, returned home,

married, had children. For Frodo, as for many soldiers of Tolkien's generation, the end of the war could not mend the immense mental weight and soul-destroying burden of trauma that he carried.

And here is where I see Frodo as a patron saint of a sort. If Sam is the patron saint of the good-hearted soldier, Frodo is the patron saint of the depressed, the suicidal, the addicted, the ones living with trauma, illness, and other burdens. At Mount Doom, where Frodo's soul has been worn down to nearly nothing, he says "No taste of food, no feel of water, no sound of wind, no memory of tree or grass or flower, no image of moon or star are left to me. I am naked in the dark, Sam, and there is no veil between me and the wheel of fire. I begin to see it even with my waking eyes, and all else fades."

If you've ever been deeply depressed, ever been chained in the prison of PTSD, you will have experienced something like this. And I get it — that isn't the most likeable character, or even the easiest one to portray. But it is exactly WHY Frodo is truly the hero of The Lord of The Rings. And it was through Frodo that Tolkien displayed that internal anguish, fear, and pain were not moral failings.

Tolkien himself was asked if he saw Frodo as a weak and failed hero. Tolkien replied: "I do not think that Frodo was a moral failure. At the last moment the pressure of the Ring would reach its maximum — impossible, I should have said, for anyone to resist, certainly after long possession, months of increasing torment, and when starved and exhausted...I do not myself see that the breaking of his mind and will under demonic pressure after torment was any more a moral failure than the breaking of his body would have been."

There are many examples of Frodo-like characters in the Bible, men and women who undertook to save those around them from disaster at their own expense, in complete humility, acknowledging that they were completely inadequate to the task. Many of these same characters -- David, Elijah, Jeremiah, Moses, even Jesus, to name only a few -- suffered from fear, anger, trauma, and depression, although the Bible instead uses words like grief, torment, great sorrow, or internal demons. Isaiah prophesied of Jesus himself that he would be "a man of sorrow, and acquainted with grief." David, in Psalm 38, pours out his torment: "For my iniquities have gone over my head; they weigh like a burden too heavy for me...I am utterly spent and crushed; I groan because of the tumult of my heart", but in the next line he affirms "O Lord, all my longing is known to you; my sighing is not hidden from you."

And there lies the one constant for all of these persons, and for ourselves: God, like Frodo's loyal companion Sam, is always near. But unlike Sam, God clearly sees our hidden struggles, and is always there, always ready to gather us to him or her and to brace us, comfort us, or just to be with us when we face our own Mount Doom.

For any of us carrying the weight of horror, trauma, grief, dread, sickness, anxiety, depression, or despair -- our hope is the same as Frodo's, the same as those Biblical prophets and teachers. With our constant companion by our side, to do what we can. To know that, even when our minds give out under the tremendous weight, we are still enough. To know that we are never alone. And to know that, in God's eyes, we are true heroes.

Alleluia and amen.