

A SERMON FROM SAINT FRANCIS

THE JESUS WHO DOESN'T DISAPPEAR

A sermon preached by the Rev. Phillip Channing Ellsworth, Jr., the Last Sunday after the Epiphany, February 14, 2010 at Saint Francis Episcopal Church, Potomac, Maryland. Based on The Gospel according to Luke, 9: 28 – 43.

Et voici, deux hommes s'entretenaient avec lui: c'étaient Moïse et Élie, qui, apparaissant dans la gloire, parlaient de son départ qu'il allait accomplir à Jérusalem.

— *Luc 9: 30 – 31*

What are you doing? Where are you going?" Sam Gamgee cries out to his friend, Frodo. They are hobbits about to battle the overwhelming armies of Sauron, the Orcs and Uruk-hai, when Sam sees Frodo tempted to put on the ring of the Dark Lord Sauron which would give him amazing power (including the power to disappear) and which would also doom him. To stop him Sam tackles Frodo and they tumble down some stairs. Sam lands on Frodo who rolls over drawing his sword on Sam. It is at this point in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* that you hear one of the great speeches in that story.

[Sam, to Frodo] "It's me. It's your Sam. Don't you know your Sam?"

[Frodo comes to his senses, and says] "I can't do this, Sam."

Sam: I know. It's all wrong. By rights we shouldn't even be here. But we are. It's like in the great stories, Mr. Frodo. The ones that really mattered. Full of darkness and danger they were. And sometimes you didn't want to know the end. Because how could the end be happy? How could the world go back to the way it was when so much bad had happened? But in the end, it's only a passing thing, this shadow. Even darkness must pass. A new day will come. And when the sun shines it will shine out the clearer.

Those were the stories that stayed with you. That meant something even if you were too small to understand why. But I think, Mr. Frodo, I do understand. I know now. Folk in those stories had lots of chances of turning back only they didn't. Because they were holding on to something.

Frodo: What are we holding on to, Sam?

Sam: That there's some good in this world, Mr. Frodo. And it's worth fighting for.

Jesus in Luke's Gospel is like Frodo on a quest which is something other than an adventure. An adventure, such as the story Bilbo Baggins is writing when we meet him in Tolkien's saga, is a "there and back again" affair. I undertake an adventure largely as a matter of my own desire — often out of boredom and a lust for excitement. Once the desire is met and the adventure is over, I go back home essentially unchanged by the experience.

A quest by contrast is a fulfillment not of one's desire but of one's calling. Over and over again in *The Lord of the Rings* Frodo asks why he has been chosen for this dreadful task. His summons, after all, is not to find a treasure but to lose one — to cast the ring back into the Crack of Doom and thus destroy it forever.

A quest is an errand in the medieval sense; its outcome involves something immensely larger and more important than one's own happiness. Listen to what Gandalf says at one point to Frodo, who wants to know if he thinks the prophecies will prove true. Frodo thinks their truthfulness is cast into doubt by his apparently having played a role in them. "Of course. And why should *not* they prove true? Surely you do not *disbelieve* the prophecies because you had a hand in bringing them about yourself! You don't really suppose, do you, that all your adventures and escapes were managed by mere luck, just for your sole benefit? You are a very fine person, Mr. Baggins, and I am very fond of you; but you are only quite a little fellow in a wide world after all!"

The Fellowship's calling to destroy the ring, though seemingly an impossible task, is an extreme version of the ordinary calling of life itself. Tolkien believed that like Frodo, Christians are called not so much to *find* a treasure as to *lose* one; to lay down the bounty granted at our birth, to give our lives in service to God and his kingdom.

That is the pattern we see Jesus setting throughout the Epiphany season. At his baptism, when the sinless one to Jordan came and in the river shared our stain. At a wedding in Cana when he performed his first miracle and set in motion a public ministry that could culminate only in a very public crisis. At the synagogue in Nazareth, when he emphasized God's mercy to the Gentile, preaching a sermon that made his home town congregation want to shove him off a cliff.

That pattern of self-giving we see here on the mount of transfiguration. His friends Peter, James, and John are with him. They see Jesus talking with Moses and Elijah who appear with him in glory. Matthew, Mark and Luke tell us they were talking but only Luke vouchsafes to tell us what they were talking about: Jesus' departure that he was to accomplish at Jerusalem. They spoke of his death.

Departure is an old and trusted English euphemism for death. We pray for "the faithful departed." Just before the beginning of Lent 1631, John Donne, the greatest of the metaphysical poets and England's spellbinding preacher, preached at the Palace of Whitehall before the King's Majesty. Donne would be dead within a few weeks; he knew this sermon would be his last. His text was Psalm 68, verse 20. "He that is our God is the God of salvation. And unto God the Lord belong the issues from death." Reading the Bible in Latin, Hebrew and Greek, he notices that the word translated 'issues' is in the Latin *exitus* and with exquisite interpretive skill he hears in the Psalm an echo of the conversation Jesus has with Moses and Elijah. He says, "Moses, who in his exodus had prefigured this issue of our Lord, and in passing Israel out of Egypt through the Red Sea, had foretold in that actual prophecy Christ passing of mankind through the sea of his blood; and Elijah, whose exodus and issue of this world was a figure of Christ's ascension had no doubt a great satisfaction in talking with our blessed Lord." They spoke of his departure. In the original Greek of Luke's Gospel the word is *exodus* [ἐξοδος]. That rang bells in the heart of John Donne; it should ring bells in yours, too.

An artful writer, Luke in his Gospel gives us a kind of chiasmic structure that compares and contrasts what happens at the transfiguration and what happens at the crucifixion which is our Lord's exodus. At the transfiguration, Jesus is flanked by Moses and Elijah on each side, two celebrated heroes of Israel; on the cross Jesus is flanked by two insurrectionists. At the transfiguration,

Jesus's garments radiate with his glory; at Golgotha they are stripped from him in humiliation. On the mountain, Jesus is confessed the Son of God by a divine voice; at the cross, a Roman soldier confesses the same thing. His transfiguration was witnessed by the innermost circle of his disciples; his crucifixion was witnessed by his mother and the dwindled few who to the end stayed with him amid a crowd of strangers. In both scenes, Elijah is mentioned; in both witnesses are terrified. On the mountain it's evident in spades that Jesus has available to him all the good and overwhelming power associated with Moses and Elijah; at the cross he uses his freedom to claim that power by not using it.

This is the counterfactual to all Jesus does to save us from death and the adversary; what Jesus *doesn't* do. When Moses and Elijah vanish from the disciples' view Jesus doesn't vanish with them. His feet are still on the ground. When vanishing would spare him the awful peril he puts himself in, Jesus does not disappear. He descends from the mountain and the next day a man pleads with him to heal his son. For the fool who thinks the awful task Jesus is chosen for is for him all peaches and cream, listen to what he says to that man pleading for his only son. "You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and bear with you? Bring your son to me." And Jesus healed the boy, and gave him back to his father.

"What are you doing? Where are you going?" Sam Gamgee asks Frodo who is tempted to disappear. Watching Jesus walk down from the mountain, Peter, James and John had to be asking Jesus the same questions. You would do well to ask them of him yourself this Lent. Put those questions to him all the way to Good Friday when he stands trial before a two-bit middle manager named Pilate. "When Jesus was brought before the judgment seat of Pontius Pilate, he did not vanish," wrote G. K. Chesterton. "It was the crisis and the goal; it was the hour and the power of darkness. It was the supremely supernatural act of all his miraculous life, that he did not vanish."

It is the nature of God's love to bind itself. That is what Jesus is doing, moving away from his own safety and walking headlong toward Gethsemane and Jerusalem. At his baptism at the Jordan; at his first miracle at a wedding in Cana of Galilee; on the mountain with Moses and Elijah — by the power of the Spirit Jesus is binding himself to his exodus, his departure, his death. He does it for the Father. And he does it, beloved, for you. Amen.