

The tale we've fallen into?

Among other family gatherings, my holiday time has been occupied with the enchanted vision of J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle Earth. Both on paper and on the big screen The Lord of the Rings has stretched my imagination and challenged my convictions of what it means to live in the world. In offering an alternative world, a fantasy world, Tolkien confronts our world with questions of good and evil, of friendship and loyalty, of beauty and darkness, of power and hope. The characters are held together by an adventure of grand scale, perhaps grander than even the wisest of them imagine. The hope of Middle Earth rests on the efforts of two hobbits.

Frodo and Sam are on a quest to return a ring, one that possesses great power. If the ring is acquired it will ultimately be for evil. Frodo as ring-bearer and Sam, his servant-companion on the journey, go to Mount Doom to destroy the ring. In a world of elves and dwarves and orcs and eagles and men and wraiths and wizards, these hobbits, or halflings as they appear (when full grown they are the size of a child), are the most unlikely of adventurers, the most unlikely of heroes.

During this reflective time of the year we would do well to listen in on one conversation between Sam and Frodo. At this point in the story they have already faced tremendous danger and have refused to turn back even though they doubt any possibility of completing their task. Now exhausted and despairing, they rest and eat a small meal and talk together in the shadows of great evil before they continue on their quest. The darkest and most dangerous part of the journey is right in front of them and they sense it.

'I don't like anything here at all,' said Frodo, 'step or stone, breath or bone. Earth, air and water all seem accursed. But so our path is laid.'

'Yes, that's so,' said Sam. 'And we shouldn't be here at all, if we'd known more about it before we started. But I suppose it's often that way. The brave things in the old tales and songs, Mr. Frodo: adventures, as I used to call them. I used to think that they were things the wonderful folk of the stories went out and looked for, because they wanted them, because they were exciting and life was a bit dull, a kind of sport, as you might say. But that's not the way of it with the tales that really mattered, or the ones that stay in the mind. Folk seem to have just landed in them, usually—their paths were laid that way, as you put it. But I expect they had lots of chances, like us, of turning back, only they didn't. And if they had, we shouldn't know, because they'd have been forgotten. We hear about those as just went on—and not all to a good end, mind you; at least not to what folk inside a story and not outside it call a good end. You know, coming home, and finding things all right, though not quite the same—like Mr. Bilbo. But those aren't always the best tales to hear, though they may be the best tales to get landed in! I wonder what sort of tale we've fallen into?'

[Tolkien, *The Two Towers: Being the Second Part of The Lord of the Rings*, 2nd edition, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1982), 320-321.]

Sam asks, ‘*I wonder what sort of tale we’ve fallen into?*’ This week we end one year and begin another. It is a time of reflection and anticipation. Can any question be more apt in your community of family and friends than Sam’s question? Will you sit around a table or in a café or in the pew and consider what story you are a part of? Or perhaps you think this question is nonsensical to your life and circumstances?

Certainly there are relentless and subtle pressures in this modern culture that cause us to see our lives as less than what they are. Early in our development, seeds are planted which take root and grow and give shape to our understanding of ourselves and of the world in which we live. When full grown these seeds blossom into a conception of life that is most often individually defined: I am what I do or I am what others say about me or I am what I have (for these ideas I am indebted to Henri Nouwen). With this self-understanding, we have a difficult time of imagining anything grander than our own life with perhaps a few coworkers, neighbors, family and friends. We grow blind to the possibility of any larger tale. Unless we resist this understanding, even the Christian life is misunderstood more and more individually in terms of virtue and morality and knowledge and a few emotional experiences. But the sort of adventure of faith, hope and love in Christ, of which Paul speaks, is difficult to imagine lived out, particularly in our set of circumstances.

Later in the same conversation with Frodo, Sam recounts the tales told of adventurers in ancient times. He remembers their struggles and their dangers and their successes. He then realizes that part of the ancient tale is now a part of theirs. For Frodo holds in a vessel given to him some light from elves of ancient tales. Sam exclaims:

‘And, why, sir, I never thought of that before! We’ve got—you’ve got some of the light of it in that star-glass that the Lady gave you! Why, to think of it, we’re in the same tale still! It’s going on. Don’t the great tales never end?’

‘No, they never end as tales,’ said Frodo. ‘But the people in them come, and go when their part’s ended. Our part will end later—or sooner.’ [321]

“Don’t the great tales never end?”

It is a wonderful moment when we realize God’s Spirit has entered our story. Amidst the circumstances of our lives – of work and family, of neighborhood and nation -- when we seemingly turn around and realize that God has been lovingly present all along -- a great conversion that is.

Yet it is a greater moment when we realize not only that God is a real part of our story, but *we are a part of God’s story*. The great tales never end – and “we’re in the same tale still.” The tale that tells us of Abram leaving his home and going where he will be lead, the tale that tells of Moses returning to Egypt and leading the Israelites out of slavery, the

tale that tells of God disclosing himself so vulnerably and compassionately in the person and work of Jesus Christ, the tale that tells of a promised return – this same Jesus. These stories and much more compose God's story of reconciling this world to himself. In the 21st century we have fallen into a part of this same tale—this work of faith, hope and love by the Spirit is our part.

One of the greatest dangers we face today is the failure to see our lives as part of this grand tale. We settle on living a life we imagine much smaller. We understand the plot line of God entering our story, but we fail to realize we have entered God's story. Our stories are too small. And consequently our God is too small. Such ignorance is the enemy's strategy in this age.

God help us! You, who are beyond all we can imagine, help us see and understand our lives as part of this larger tale. Enlarge our vision of this drama.

Like Sam and Frodo, may we ask this question of each other in the New Year: *What sort of tale have we fallen into? Of what sort of story are we a part?*