

Like Lambs among Wolves

There are some who say we are in the end times, that future forecast by scripture in which God's Kingdom finally arrives in its fullness. Scripture hints that these times will be marked by a battle between God and Satan, in which Satan would be defeated, thrown out of heaven, or even fall from it, as we have in this morning's text, when Jesus dramatically tells his disciples that he "*watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning*" [10:18]. It's like God's final victory, God's promised happy ending in our cosmic struggle between good and evil.

One of my all-time favorite reading pleasures has been the trilogy *Lord of the Rings*, by J. R. R. Tolkien. (How many of you have read it? The movies are excellent as well.) The trilogy is basically a saga of a conflict between good and evil, taking place in the fictional and fantastical land of Middle Earth. The role of Satan (that is, the arch-enemy of good) is personified by a powerful, evil being known as Sauron. And such is the lasting resonance of this saga that another book has been recently written about it called *The Gospel According to Tolkien*. Here is what this author says about *The Lord of the Rings*. "J. R. R. Tolkien's masterpiece is a deeply Christian work because it does not blink back the horrors of our terrible times but confronts them with startling honesty. Readers keep turning to this work because here they are immersed in significance and meaning—perceiving the Hope that can be found amidst despair; the Charity that overcomes vengeance; and the Faith that springs from the strange power of weakness." Sure sounds like the gospel to me! I will come back to *The Lord of the Rings*, but for now let's look at this morning's story from the Gospel of, not Tolkien, but Luke.

You may recall that Jesus is on the long, slow, ominous journey to Jerusalem. And just before our text he had been talking with his disciples about the high cost of following him.

"*After this,*" Luke begins, "*the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him.*" Notice first of all that these seventy are different from or in addition to the twelve disciples. The time has come in Jesus' God-given mission to get more people involved. Why? There is a lot of work to be done. Or as Jesus says, "*the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few.*" Notice also that there is no mention here of any battle between good and evil. The metaphor of harvest is a happy one, right? A celebrative one. Assuming of course that the weather is cooperative long enough to get the crop into the silos. ☺ And, that farmers have the help they need. (I don't know; do you think the wheat harvest is done yet in Marion County?)

There's nothing particularly special about the number seventy. It could merely be a nod to Numbers 11:16, in which God tells Moses to "Gather for me seventy of the elders of Israel" to help Moses "bear the burden of the people." The seventy that Jesus now appoints have a different mission, however—namely to go out and proclaim to the nations, one village at a time, that "*the kingdom of God has come near.*" Which sounds like good news, right? But apparently, not to everyone. Jesus warns the seventy that some will receive their message, and some will reject it.

You do know, don't you, that we have also been sent out by Christ, with a mission to proclaim the Kingdom of God? (If this is news to you, then I haven't been doing my job preaching the gospel!) Once again, the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. There are

people out there, lots of them, who need to hear about the kingdom of God. What God is like. And what God's kingdom are like. You could say, as Mennonite author Donald Kraybill did, that it's an "upside-down" kingdom. A time and place where love overcomes hate. Where forgiveness is more powerful than revenge. Where hospitality and welcome overpower exclusion and closed doors. Where weakness is stronger than strength. Where self-sacrifice trumps self-importance.

But not everyone will be able to receive this message we are called to proclaim—at least, not with joy. Which is why Jesus says to the seventy, "*See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves.*" Wolves are often portrayed as vicious, blood-thirsty predators. Lambs, on the other hand, are the epitome of meekness and innocence. In Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, the "wolves," which is to say, the servants of Sauron, are easy to spot. "Orcs," he calls them. No confusing them with the gentle, innocent hobbits in the story.

In our world, in our saga, the wolves are much more disguised. They are more like invisible, evil spirits, that can threaten to possess any one of us. But these wolves (both those inside and outside us) oppose the news of God's kingdom. And we, like lambs, are at their mercy. That is, until we remember where our true strength lies.

Jesus gives the seventy very specific instructions. "*Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals.*" (He didn't actually say, "no swords," but that was surely assumed.) He was basically saying, "carry with you only your meekness." "*Greet no one on the road.*" An odd, seemingly unfriendly thing to say. But perhaps what he was really saying was, do not allow yourselves to be distracted, to turn aside from the mission I am giving you.

"*Whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace to this house!'*" Peace, in other words, is a key part of their mission, their message about God's Kingdom. That's because peace is a part of God's kingdom. But they need to be ready: some will refuse that peace. In which case, the seventy are to simply "wipe the dust off their feet," which is like saying, "Well, at least I tried!" and move on. "*Whoever listens to you listens to me,*" Jesus tells them, "*and whoever rejects you rejects me, and whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me.*" Their mission, in other words, and our mission, is to simply represent Christ to the world around us.

Yes, it is risky—in fact downright dangerous. Perhaps even more so for us because we are no longer seventy in number. We are barely half that. So maybe we're not big enough or strong enough anymore. Maybe it's time to give up, to close our doors, to resign from our role in Jesus'/Christ's'/God's mission.

But here's the thing. Seventy is not the most important number in this story. Can anyone guess what the most important number is? (I bet Sue can, from her *Children's Story!*) Two. Jesus sent the seventy out two by two. Two is enough. Two is strong. Strong enough even to cast out demons. Jesus even adds, "*See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you.*" I'd say that's pretty strong!

In *The Lord of the Rings*, a very small fellowship is formed, called "The Fellowship of the Ring" (which was also the title of the first book in Tolkien's trilogy). It was comprised of four small hobbits, two men, one elf, one dwarf, and one wise wizard. That's nine members, and their job is simply to stay together, to protect each other whenever possible from the nine fearsome ring wraiths of Sauron. And above all, they are to encourage one another, to remain true to the mission. But as it turns out, when the end neared and they were assailed by Sauron's forces, it was in twos and threes that this fellowship prevailed.

One week ago yesterday, a relatively small “fellowship” or group from First Mennonite Church came together in committed solidarity, and they—you—succeeded in sharing God’s Kingdom with the broader community around us. I’m talking about the two funerals we hosted back-to-back. I’m not saying we can or even should keep doing that. That’s up to us to wisely decide, and I know it was taxing. But for that one day we came together, to give of ourselves in acts of hospitality. You heard the results (in the appreciative letter we received from one of those families).

I highly recommend you read the trilogy *The Lord of the Rings* if you haven’t yet, and also the separately authored book about it called *The Gospel According to Tolkien*. Even more, I highly recommend we read and re-read the gospels of Jesus Christ. So that we remain clear about our message, and our mission, until the end—the glorious, joyful end—finally comes, and Satan falls from heaven like lightning, and God’s kingdom finally prevails.

Amen.

Here is one of my all-time favorite hymns. You will hopefully also know it; it’s been in the last three hymnals. Not every church can pull it off. But we’ve got Shirley on the organ!