

I. Intro.

A. I don't watch lots of movies, but one of my favorites is **Peter Jackson's Lord of the Rings trilogy**, based on the books by JRR Tolkien



1. Although the unrelenting battle scenes in the films threaten to push me too far, the power and magnitude of the stories make them an epic portrayal of the struggle of good and evil

a) It is often considered in the genre of fantasy fiction, & indeed Middle Earth is one of the most fantastical places you could imagine

b) Since Tolkien wrote these works almost 60 years ago, and the movie trilogy that sold millions has been around for 10 years I will assume some familiarity with the adventures of Bilbo Baggins and his nephew Frodo Baggins.

2. Like all good literature, I believe Tolkien meant for us the readers to find ourselves somewhere in the story, rather than to remain at some unengaged distance from it

B. This leads me to ask, **"Where would we place ourselves in the Lord of the Rings trilogy? Who might we be within that saga?"**

1. I know some of you will debate that question with gusto, while others will hardly have an informed opinion

2. So here's my response to the Q:

a) When thinking about placing most American Mennonites into the Lord of the Rings stories, I would say historically we've been most like the Hobbits ... those diminutive quiet agricultural folks, settled in their

neat houses & tight community

b) Like the Hobbits, for most of the 20th C. we Mennonites preferred to avoid danger & adventure .. content to live a simple quiet life in the Shire & let the dark, violent world of dragons, orcs & nasty beasts stay far away.

In today's world of more educated, urbanized and tech-savvy Mennonites, I do believe that's an oversimplification ... However, the Hobbit impulse for a simple, safe & stable life still is strong within us

We have a few Bilbos and Frodos among us, eager for adventure ... but by & large the American middle class church, including Mennonites, prefers a stable world of equilibrium

Aside from having oversized ears and feet, I think most of us are more like the Hobbits than any other Tolkien characters

c) The safe, stable ways of the Hobbits reminds me of a way of looking at the world, which author Walter Brueggeman described in his helpful little book Praying the Psalms, (©1993, St. Mary's Press, Winona, MN)

3. So bear with me as I describe 3 ways of being with God, which correspond to different kinds of Psalms in the Bible

a) Trust me, Hobbits & Psalms do have something to do with the upcoming holiday we call Thanksgiving

b) Brueggeman suggests that our life of faith consists in moving with God in 3 ways, which will help us understand the Psalms

II. First movement of faith is orientation

A. Another way to describe it is *equilibrium* ... In faith terms, this is basically the world of the Hobbits in the Shire

1. Here, the world is settled & makes sense to us ... God is comfortably in heaven, presiding over the world but not bothering us

2. When we dwell in the orientation zone, life is balanced, seems fair & God is in control

B. Our opening Scripture from Ps. 145 is a good example of a Psalm coming from a place of orientation & equilibrium:

1. Look in your bulletin insert at this part of Ps. 145: notice the focus is almost exclusively on God's greatness & awesome deeds

2. Then notice there is almost no "I" language here, except for the psalmist's own intentions (I will bless you, I will praise you)

3. You see, everything is settled & secure in this place ...

a) God is on his throne & as far as my life goes, things may not be perfect, but they're going pretty good

b) In God's hands, my life is balanced & makes sense

C. This is the kind of simple, easy life so many of us long for and sometimes pray for, but you know what?

1. On our Christian journey, this kind of life is more the exception than the rule ...

- a) Even when the Hobbits try to keep quietly to themselves in the Shire, evil finds them anyway and shatters their little idyllic world
- b) And so it is for us, which is especially reflected in the book of Proverbs.

2. There are some Psalms that reflect this equilibrium viewpoint, but they are a minority of all the Psalms

3. Brueggeman writes:

"The agenda & intention of the Psalms are considerably at odds with the normal speech of most people – the normal speech of a stable, functioning self-deceptive culture in which everything must be kept young and running smoothly." (Praying the Psalms, p. 17)

III. But when things break down and don't run smoothly, that leads to the 2nd main movement of our life with God: disorientation

A. If the 1st movement is about equilibrium, the 2nd is *dislocation*

1. This is where you find yourself with God when things fall apart & all hell breaks loose, much as described in our recent grief series
2. In the midst of crisis & chaos, people sometimes ask the anguished question, "Where is God when it hurts?" and this question comes from the place of disorientation ...

- a) When we watched unbelievable typhoon devastation with thousands of deaths far away in the Philippines
- b) When tornadoes last week in Indiana & Illinois took lives and flattened dozens of buildings
- c) When on Thursday about 300 people from the Adulam congregation, Prairie View Elementary School & local community packed into our sanctuary to mourn an incomprehensible loss ... the accidental death of a beloved 5th grade boy

3. A person in the place of spiritual dislocation can feel a million miles away from God, much as we heard in the Job story recently

B. This is where some of our most precious Psalms come in, the so-called Psalms of lament

1. Walter Brueggeman writes, "The Psalms offer speech when life has gone beyond our frail efforts to control it." He then adds, "The Psalter is a collection of the eloquent, passionate songs and prayers of people who are at the desperate edges of their life." (p. 17 & 18)

2. There are many of these Psalms of lament, and what we heard today from Psalm 22 is a prime example.

a) This Psalm may be most well-known to us for agonizing words that were spoken by our Lord Jesus dying on the cross "My God, my God why have you forsaken me?"

b) Just as I said 3 weeks ago that Job did not "talk nice" to God when he was suffering & complaining, David the psalmist does not disguise his anger, disappointment and sense of urgency with God. He wants God to save him & save him now!

c) But there's one amazing thing about the Psalms of lament:

Even while voicing pain, anger & doubts about God's apparent absence, the psalmist does not lose all faith

He still manages to recall how his ancestors trusted in God and were not let down

He decides it's still worth the effort to call out to this seemingly absent God for help, rather than giving up on God altogether
(22:19)

IV. After being securely oriented and then disturbingly disoriented comes a wonderful new reorientation in God

A. After feeling dislocated, God helps us be radically *relocated* into a new place of trust in God

1. This is when God makes good on the promise "See I am making all things new"

a) Yet as Brueggeman points out, the new orientation is "... quite unlike the old status quo. This is not an automatic movement that can be presumed or predicted. Nor is it a return to the old form, a return to normalcy as if nothing had happened." (p. 19)

b) When God saves & reorients us from a place of deep disorientation, we cannot be exactly the same as we were before.

2. Spiritual relocation is where people are able to forgive wrongs, and gain new purpose for life where previously such things would have seemed impossible.

a) These are times when people who should be crushed & devastated are instead resolute and resilient!

b) But relocation is not always about dramatic 180° reversals ... sometimes the "new thing" God does comes in the form of gifts of friendship & caring from others ... in gestures of reconciliation & forgiveness ... in risky signs of hope in public life

3. I've seen those signs of hope, in public life, just this past week:

a) Many of you know that a very powerful tornado devastated the town

Text: Ps. 145:1-13a; 22:1-5, 14-21; 107:1-9, 17-22

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of Washington, IL near Peoria last Sunday

There is a Mennonite community around there that did not escape the tornado's fury.



Farmer Curt Zehr, a cousin of Mark Yoder from our congregation, was at church Sunday morning with his elderly father & they hid with others in the church basement. Curt's wife and son Mike Zehr, who's a friend of my son Matthew's, had not gone to church but were home that morning. The tornado spared the church building, but the Zehrs' home took a direct hit, while Mike and his mother took shelter in the basement with their dog.

When the noise of the storm was over, they could see sunlight coming into the basement. They went upstairs and saw that nothing was left of the house, not even a wall standing on the foundation. The barn was flattened and enormous trees uprooted. Their text to Curt at the church said, "House gone."

Monday morning Curt & Mike were interviewed on CNN, as you can see in this image. At one point the interviewer said, "*When you look at this, all this loss, it could consume you ...*"

Mike said, "*I haven't felt that at all. All I've felt is that none of it matters. The most important thing is that I have my life, my mom has her life, our dog's alive and we'll move on.*" Mike laughed and admitted that his dad should also be on that list of important things.

Curt laughed too and then reflected, "*You know, we've got insurance and we can rebuild a house, but you can't rebuild lives ...*"

The interviewer added his own observation, "*This is so hard whenever it happens, and certainly*

Text: Ps. 145:1-13a; 22:1-5, 14-21; 107:1-9, 17-22

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heading into the holidays, but then you think about it, especially as a prayerful community ... what you want the holidays to be about ... you know you've got the biggest gift, the reminder."

Mike chimed in, *"Everything's in perspective."*

And Curt quickly added, *"The Lord was looking out for us. There's no question about it."*

b) I saw another risky sign of hope and reorientation this week, right here in this sanctuary.

Monday morning the Prairie View Elementary School, where our church has 5 staff members, was rocked by the news of the tragic accidental death of 11-year-old Jeremy Gallegos. Since his family was active at the Adulam church with whom we've done many joint activities, I called the pastor there and offered our church facility as a larger venue for the funeral and a family meal.

As you might expect, on Thursday our sanctuary was packed with rows of chairs filled out into the foyer for little Jeremy's funeral, held in English and Spanish. It was a time of smiles and many tears. Amazingly to me, both of this little boy's parents, amid their shattered world, spoke to the gathered mourners with unbelievable poise.

What struck me most was the fact that on perhaps the darkest day a parent could ever live through, exactly one week before Thanksgiving Day, Jeremy's father Hector basically said he still asks God, "Why did you take my son?" But then he went on to say in a breaking voice, "I'm very thankful for the eleven years God did give me with my little angel."

4. What allows people to be thankful when their entire farm is gone ... or when their sweet little boy is suddenly ripped from their lives? I believe *this is the reorientation that only God can work in our lives.*

b. By grace, people found ways to thank God even when they had lost so much ... this is where the giving of thanks becomes important:

1. We need to regularly and prayerfully enter the world of the psalms (both the anguished parts and the joyful ones, both the complaints and the gratefulness)

a) When we do this, God can more easily work in us this crucial movement from a shallow orientation thru disorientation to reorientation.

b) As Walter Brueggeman puts it, the psalms of dislocation & relocation *"... attest that a life of faith does not protect us from the pit. Rather the power of God brings us out of the pit to new life, which is not the same as pre-pit existence."* (p. 38)

2. Even if life's outward circumstances appear much as they were, we now draw on the experience and encouragement of a God who has drawn us out of the pit!

V. Conclusion

A. For the past week or 2 the question was posed on the WMC facebook page, "What are you thankful for?"

1. Some of you responded online, with thoughts that perhaps come from a place of equilibrium, like thankfulness for creativity or for good friends and good books to read.
2. Other responses seem to clearly imply past troubles or difficulties out of which God is doing new things.
3. Examples:
 - a) a church who welcomes new attenders and is inclusive of people with special needs!
 - b) a measure of justice and also joy for new happiness in my children's lives.
 - c) My church family who walks with me through the joyful and the tough times

B. This is a short work week for most people as we anticipate the Thanksgiving holiday

1. As we sit down to comfortable feasts in hopefully comforting surroundings, we may, like many other Christians, say our thanks from the metaphorical place of the nameless majority of Hobbits, where God is good, life is good and things don't change much.
2. That's not a wrong place to be if our thanks to God are genuine and we're not denying or suppressing the realities of our lives
3. But as for me, I aspire to be more like one particular Hobbit from the Lord of the Rings
 - a) Rather than the run-of-the-mill Hobbits of the Shire who avoided all discomforts (& thus all adventures), I want to be more like Sam Wise Gamgee ... the unassuming and faithful companion of Frodo, who didn't relish the spotlight but also shouldered whatever challenges came his way, in service of a mission that was much larger than himself
 - b) Sam did eventually return to a quiet life in the Shire after his great adventure, but he came back profoundly grateful for the journey that had taken him "there and back again"
 - c) But he did not come back to the Shire just the same as he had left it ... He came back better, wiser, bolder and more loving.
4. I pray it be so for each of us as we give thanks to God this week for his gifts and blessings that have strengthened and reoriented us