

It Will Not Always Be So

**A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on December 20, 2020
Friendship Presbyterian Church**

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

And Mary said,

*"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.*

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.

He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;

he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,

*according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants
forever."* (Luke 1:39-55, NRSV)

It is no secret that I am a long-standing devotee of the English fantasy author J.R.R. Tolkien and the world he created in his classic trilogy *The Lord of the Rings*. On many occasions I have given a sermon illustration involving its many quests, battles, heroes and heroines, and of course, its mythic Ring of Power. But today, I want to tell you about a quest for another ring which is perhaps equally *mythic*, but not at all fictitious.

I'm talking about the ring I wear around my finger – my wedding band – given to me by Lisa on the day we married almost 15 years ago. When I look at that ring and reflect, so many memories come rushing into my mind: All the love, arguments, dreams, passion, pain, and hopes of a life shared with another ... All in a small ring.

Which explains why I was so upset about 13 or so years ago when I lost it. I know that some of you have heard this story before, but it's a good one and makes the message I have for today all the clearer! Lisa and I had been married for a little over a year. I don't know what happened. I just remember waking up one morning and realizing that it wasn't on my finger. It must have slipped off in the middle of the night – and so it would be somewhere on the bed or near my pillow. I checked, and I couldn't find it.

Was I just forgetting about taking it off for some reason? Only I couldn't imagine why I would do that. I tried to re-trace my steps and then went looking accordingly, but with no success. I kept up the search for a week, so desperate I was, but then was finally forced to confess that I had *lost* it.

There's a poignancy in this season that is shared by many of us, though it's something we tend to keep to ourselves. It's a sense of *loss* – a sense that something we once had is now gone and isn't coming back, and these days of COVID-19 have only magnified it. Many of us silently struggle in this time of year – and perhaps especially this year.

We may remember days when all seemed right with the world, a time of innocence, a time when life was safe and secure, and those who loved us and whom we loved were right there beside the Christmas tree, opening presents, drinking eggnog, and sharing stories.

But then something happened on the road from this past to the present ... That for whatever reason, the magic is over. And we can re-watch "Miracle on 34th Street" and "It's a Wonderful Life", or go caroling in the neighborhood, or do whatever we think it might take to get ourselves into the Christmas spirit, but little seems to work. Like trying and trying to find a lost wedding band, we may try desperately to recover these lost days of light and glory, but often come up short.

The Bible, too, knows and gives voice to this sadness, this sense of loss. In fact, the Bible is the story of a people intimately acquainted with it.

Those to whom the prophet Micah spoke gloried in Israel's legendary past – back when it lived in peace and security, ruled by a mighty and righteous king. But they knew all too well that *those days were not their days*. Their sacred stories, passed down for generations, told of a God of love who in the past had acted in power to save them – with a "mighty hand and an outstretched arm." But in Micah's time, and in *Mary's* time centuries later, no one alive had ever seen anything like that. Those stories – stories of rivers parting, fire coming down from Heaven, angels taking care of business – *those* were the glory days. But days that were no more.

Sort of like so many childhood memories of Christmas.

But we need not dwell here. And it's best that we don't. Life goes on, and hopefully we make peace with our lives as we find them. With the love and support of others – others who may be as broken as we are – we learn to live and find a way to carry on.

I did with my ring, of course. After a little more than a week without a wedding ring on my finger, I broke down and went to the jewelry store to replace it. I couldn't continue without one – lest all the single ladies get the wrong idea ☺ It wasn't the "original", the one Lisa gave me on that day, but it was the best I could do. Time to get on with getting on.

And there's much to be said for getting on. It certainly beats the alternative. But then ever-so-often, the wind blows in a certain way and the heart is filled with a longing ... a longing for something deeper ... a longing for something more ... that somehow, we are meant for more than just getting on. The Spirit of Christmas calls out for more.

C.S. Lewis was deeply familiar with this sense of longing, and he believed that it pointed to a deeper truth. In 1942 he gave a talk titled "The Weight of Glory" in which he said, "At present we are on the outside of the world, the wrong side of the door. We discern the freshness and purity of morning, but they do not make *us* fresh and pure. We cannot mingle with the splendors we see. But all the leaves of the New Testament are rustling with the rumor that it will not always be so."

It will not always be so.

How this can be – *how* it will not always be so – is a mystery. How it is even possible makes one wonder. It may strike us as a fool's hope. But the leaves of scripture do rustle with the rumor all the same, and then with shocking directness, it escapes out into the open air.

It will not always be so, says the prophet Micah. It will not always be so, declares the young Mary. Something new is going to happen. It is already being whispered in the wind. *It is coming*, sure as the kicks of a baby in the womb leaping for joy! The promise comes as a piercing word of light to eyes which are accustomed to darkness, a vivifying word of new life to unsettle our pools of stagnation.

Only, don't look for this fulfillment, the prophet tells his people, where you might expect. Don't look in the grand centers of empire for the one coming who will ennoble human life, but rather, to one of the "little clans of Judah".

Don't look to palace walls for the one destined to rule forever. Look instead to a poor, young, unwed girl who must go away from home, to an older cousin in the distant hill country, to escape the eyes of judgment before she begins to show. No sane person would expect a *king* to come out of all this.

And the fact that Mary and Elizabeth seem every bit as surprised, confused, overwhelmed, and deliriously happy about what was happening *to* them ... *in* them ... *around* them ... as any of us would be, is what seals the joyous absurdity of it all. The winds of the Spirit are picking up the impossible theme: *It will not always be so.*

Speaking of joyful absurdity, it was a few years after losing my original wedding band that Lisa's brother Ben up in New York finally decided to tie the knot with his longtime girlfriend and get married. Lisa and I were thrilled. We had hoped that the day would eventually come. When he told us the good news, we were at first amazed, perhaps a bit confused, but certainly thrilled. Love was in the air! Hell was freezing over! Something wonderful was about to happen.

Well, the time was coming soon, and I made hotel arrangements. They lived in Brooklyn and their wedding would be under the Brooklyn Bridge, but not being familiar with the lay of the land and *badly* misinterpreting a New York City map, I somehow made reservations for a hotel that I *thought* was nearby – but wasn't exactly. After we landed at LaGuardia and took a taxi out to the hotel address, we realized we weren't anywhere near beautiful Brooklyn Heights. We were way out in Bedford Stuyvesant! You may or may not be familiar with the area, but suffice to say that it is for good reason that Billy Joel has that line about "walking through Bedford Stuy alone" as an example of something only a crazy person would do. In any case, we were stuck there for two nights.

The first night passed uneventfully, and the morning came – the day of the wedding had arrived – and we were showering and getting ready to catch a cab to Brooklyn. And then it happened. You may think that I am making this up, but I'm not. I had just put on my clothes and was about to close my suitcase ... *and I saw it*. It was right there on top of my remaining clothes inside. I reached down, and in silent wonder and astonishment I picked it up. *It was my long-lost wedding band*. The replacement ring was already on my finger, so it wasn't that I had misplaced *that* one.

The lost ring re-appeared. In truth, I suppose, it had never really left. I still don't know what happened or how I lost it, but for those several days when I couldn't find it, for those few years when I had given up all hope of ever seeing it again, it had always been with me – in a sense, hidden in plain view, though nowhere I could have deduced ... nowhere I could have figured out. And then one day, in a crappy, remote hotel room in Bedford Stuy, as the whispers of newness were in the air with a wedding to come, the greatest gift I have ever received appeared before my eyes again.

Of course, lost rings don't always come back, and there are some losses which simply can't be recovered. And many of us do struggle in silence even now with a pervasive sense of loss – a loss of something far more intangible – and we try to fill the void or try to make ourselves feel something we haven't felt in a long time. And it doesn't seem like enough.

But however we feel, there *is* something in the wind. There is more going on than we could grasp. On Thursday night, we will hopefully gather for a drive-in Christmas Eve here at Friendship. We will worship online too. We look ahead to Christmas carols, to candlelight, to hearing the old, old story of Mary and Joseph and angels and shepherds once again, and in them all we may discern a word.

It is the word directed to the people of Micah's time as they struggled to see where God was in their world. It is the word that Mary and Elizabeth fearfully and joyfully struggled with together, as they knew themselves to be caught up into something that would change everything. It is the word of the Spirit of Life in every age, in the face of that which has been lost: *It will not always be so*.

We may or may not be able to see that now. This word of good news may be hard to hear. But this greatest Gift of all – that which alone can satisfy our heart’s deepest desire – is coming to us, again. Even for those of us who struggle to see it, and for those of us who wonder if they will ever see it, it comes to us again. It may seem hidden from us – hidden from us forever – but it will not always be so. Like a certain lost wedding band, the Gift has never really left us and waits patiently for us, hidden in plain view, right in the midst of our gloriously ordinary lives.

In this season, may Love open our eyes to see it ... May Grace open our ears to hear the word that comes to us even now, as it came to shepherds long ago and to the broken-hearted of every age: “For unto *you* is born this day in the City of David, a Savior who is Christ the Lord.”

To the Glory of God! Amen.