

What Would Frodo Do?
(Luke 4:1-13)

It was a long time ago, in another place and in a different time when elves lived side-by-side with dwarves and men and little furry “Halfling” creatures called Hobbits. A time when wisdom came from wizards not books. In those days, evil was not in the hearts of men but in the dragons, goblins, and trolls that lived in the distant Misty Mountains. Mostly, evil stayed in those mountains and did not visit those who minded their own business. There was peace in Middle Earth.

But lately, it was rumored that another kind of older evil was forming once again in Middle Earth. Twenty-five hundred years earlier this evil one had forged a gold ring with mystical powers to control all the world – elves, dwarves, hobbits and men alike, even the wizards. But the “one ring to rule them all” had been lost and fell into silence. But now, the ring had made its way into innocent hands and was trying to return to the evil one who had created it thousands of years earlier.

All power could return to this evil one if only he could get his precious ring back. How could this be prevented? How could the world be rid of the evil one – once and for all time? The wizard Gandalf and the elfin king Elrod studied the question and decided that the “one ring” must be destroyed in the same fires in which it was forged – the fires of Mount Doom.

But the ring held a powerful and hypnotic influence over anyone who possessed it. Who among the elves,

dwarves, and men had the strength and moral character to carry the ring and at the same time resist the temptation to use its power? The one to deliver the ring to Mount Doom had to be an ethical being one who could resist that temptation.

So a high council of elves, dwarves, men, and the wizard Gandalf commissioned a team – a fellowship – to carry the ring to Mount Doom. They agreed that only one of the fellowship should bear the burden of the ring. It had to be the one who could resist the temptation to use it – even for good. And so it was that a young Hobbit, Frodo Baggins was named ring bearer. And so begins the mission of *The Fellowship of the Ring*. Please pray with me.

And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to you, O God. Enlighten us this day with the scripture read and the Word proclaimed. Make us faithful ring bearers in our own right. Give us the strength to resist the temptation to give in to the evil that lurks in the hearts and minds of us all. In the name of Christ Jesus – the one true ring bearer – we pray. Amen.

I hope most of you recognized the story line from J.R.R. Tolkien’s trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings*. Although Tolkien constructs legend and myth

there are many Christian themes that run through this brilliant work – themes that we recognize as truth. C.S. Lewis, who is a Christian author, saw these important truths and actually encouraged Tolkien to finish his epic work.

The struggle between good and evil is always at the heart of the trilogy. And the temptation of the ring bearer, Frodo Baggins, is a frequent theme that is a part of that struggle. Our gospel lesson this morning is all about the struggle between good and evil and temptation.

In the reading from the Gospel of Luke this morning, Jesus goes into the desert after he is baptized by his cousin, John. And there he is confronted by Satan, tempted three times to give in to evil. Jesus is first taunted by Satan who says, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.” What is the response we expect from Jesus? He tells the devil, “One does not live by bread alone.”

The devil is inviting, that is to say, tempting Jesus – like Frodo – to put on that mystical ring and feed himself. But to turn the stone into bread would be to compromise himself as the Son of God. Remember now, Jesus had been in the desert for forty days without food. He was very hungry. A loaf of bread would have satisfied the physical need for nourishment. But Jesus was sent to serve the needs of others, not his own self-interests. This temptation establishes the servanthood of Christ.

The second temptation comes when the devil offers Jesus “authority over all the kingdoms of the world.” Jesus knew that in time he would have authority over all those kingdoms, but his authority would come from God!

In his humanity, Jesus could have accepted Satan’s offer and taken the easy path to kingdom authority. But Jesus also knew that pain and suffering must be a part of establishing that kingdom authority. He resisted putting on the ring and escaping that pain and suffering. We know what Jesus did. What would Frodo do? Could he have done the same? What would we do? Could any of us do the same?

In the third instance, Satan takes Jesus up to the “pinnacle of the temple” – the highest place – known as the “winglet.” Satan says to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, ‘He will command his angels ... to protect you.’” But Jesus replies, “It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

Here, Satan is asking Jesus to call upon God to deliver him from death. But Jesus, knows that his journey must end in death, death on a cross. And that death will be violent and painful – both physically and emotionally.

The third temptation to test God is a counterpart to another temptation that Jesus will face later in the Garden of Gethsemane. There, as he prepares for the cross, Jesus is tempted to ask God to take away his burden, to spare him from death. But we know the story well. Jesus does not give in; he keeps the ring safe and avoids the temptation to put it on, to disappear and escape death.

The three temptations are good examples of the temptations Jesus will confront throughout his ministry. Luke lets his readers know that the devil will return to Jesus by telling us that, “When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.”

This, my friends, is characteristic of evil in the world. Whether you believe in Satan as a real counter force to God and Christ, or believe that all evil originates from within our own hearts and minds makes no difference. Evil will depart from us until a more opportune time. That opportune time is the essence of temptation, and it always comes when we are at our weakest.

There are some basic reasons we give in to temptation. The first reason is instant gratification. We give in to temptation for pleasure, to feel good, even if it's only a temporary experience. Our human desire for pleasure is often too strong to overcome unless we look outward for help. What would Frodo do? What did Jesus do?

Another reason we give in to temptation is for personal gain – to create wealth and to live by fortune and fame rather than by faith. The larger problem here is that such personal gain usually comes at the expense of others – innocent victims. Cheating on the old income tax return, padding the expense account, stealing from the company are good examples. On a grander scale, consider the sins of the corporate world – like Enron.

A few high-level executives reaped obscene wealth where they sowed little or nothing. In the end, even though they may be brought to justice many others lost their jobs, their pensions, their homes, even their way of life. And do you remember the savings and loan scandals. A few greedy people benefited and gained great wealth at the cost of the life savings of ordinary people who trusted a system. What would Frodo do? What did- Jesus do?

There is yet another reason why we often succumb to temptation. When

Frodo got into trouble on the road to Mount Doom he could slip the ring on his finger and become invisible. He could escape, at least for the instant time, from the present danger. But wearing the ring made him vulnerable to those who searched for the ring. In fact, putting on the ring brought him closer to the evil that sought to control Middle Earth.

We give in to temptation to avoid the path of sacrifice and suffering, sometimes to escape the consequences of our own actions. I recall a summer from my scouting days when I gave in to temptation to avoid a difficult task. A friend of mine and I were asked to lead a group of young scouts on a ten mile hike. Those who completed the hike earned a fancy neckerchief slide.

Well, it seems that I had a sore toe and really wasn't in to leading a bunch of young kids into the wilderness. So my friend Dave and I decided we could do half the mileage and mess around along the way to make it seem like we had done the full ten miles. And that's what we did. But just like an episode right out of *Leave It to Beaver*, we got caught. The next day, shamefully, we were back on that same trail with an even sorer toe – doing the full ten miles this time.

Frodo's journey to Mount Doom, just like Jesus' journey to the cross, was set upon a path of sacrifice and suffering. In fact, our journey to salvation is often set upon that very same path. When evil presents itself and suggests that we can take a detour from that path – that we can avoid sacrifice and suffering – what will we do. What did Frodo do? What did Jesus do?

So we give in to temptation for many reasons; to escape sacrifice and suffering; to achieve success and fame;

for wealth; for pleasure or instant gratification. I wish I could tell you that Frodo was a model for resisting temptation, but he slipped on the ring many times. And in the end, Frodo could not destroy the ring without the help of his faithful companion, Samwise Gamgee. So perhaps asking "What would Frodo do?" might not always be the right and good thing to do.

While Jesus is our model for resisting evil in the world, there is still a lesson we can learn from Frodo. You see, The Fellowship of the Ring never intended for Frodo to journey to Mount Doom alone. And God doesn't intend for us to journey through this life toward our salvation alone either.

Jesus, who was fully human and fully divine, walked alone through the final days of his journey to the cross so that we don't have to go there by ourselves. Today we have Jesus, the Christ of faith, to walk with us on our journey to salvation.

It's important for us to appreciate that we are not alone on this journey. Our path only takes us by the cross. It doesn't end there. It goes on. We don't have to go to the cross because Jesus has already "been-there-done-that" all for us, each and every one of us. He knows the path we are called to walk. And he is ready to walk it with us. Trust him, he has been down that path before.