

## **The Flame of Hope**

11/29/21  
Rev. J. Koyama

### **Advent Themes**

Here we are in Advent, and we have begun lighting the candles that remind us, not only of the approaching birth of the Baby Jesus on Christmas Eve, but also of important steps we take, so that our hearts can be prepared for his coming.

This morning, the Gospel advises us to heighten our awareness in order to safely handle the dangers that swirl around us. “Be on your guard,” Jesus says, “so that your hearts are not weighed down by dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and the day catch you unexpectedly, like a trap.”

And the candle of Hope that we lit this morning further aids us in our preparation. It’s flame reminds us to tend the hope that burns in our hearts and gives us strength to go forward when times are hard.

### **The Lord of the Rings: Background**

I don’t know how many of you are familiar with the “Lord of the Rings” by JRR Tolkien. It is a three volume book about a great adventure embarked on by several hobbits and a group of elves, dwarves and

men, to save the lands of “Middle Earth” from a terrible evil that is spreading across the land.

The hobbits are a humble folk, short in stature with furry feet, who live a gentle and peaceful rural life in a place called the Shire. The Hobbit Frodo, his trusty friend Sam and the others are given the task of destroying a powerful and dangerous ring which the evil Sauron is searching for to complete his power. But the only fire powerful enough to melt and destroy the ring is the fire that burns inside Mount Doom, upon which Sauron has his built his fortress.

The journey the fellowship takes is an arduous one, filled with danger and deprivation. And the last leg of it requires that Frodo leave the others behind and to go it alone, in order to avoid detection by the fearsome orcs, trolls, death breathing horsemen and all manner of threat. But Frodo’s faithful companion Sam will not let him go alone and stays with him through all the hardships.

### **Something Good Worth Fighting For**

And in one of the darkest and most hopeless moments of the journey, as Frodo feels his resolve slipping away, he confesses to his companion,

“I can’t do this, Sam.” And Sam responds with these often quoted words of encouragement:

I know. It’s all wrong. By rights we shouldn’t even be here. But we are. It’s like in the great stories, Mr. Frodo. The ones that really mattered. Full of darkness and danger, they were. And sometimes you didn’t want to know the end. Because how could the end be happy? How could the world go back to the way it was when so much bad had happened? But in the end, it’s only a passing thing, this shadow. Even darkness must pass. A new day will come. And when the sun shines it will shine out the clearer. Those were the stories that stayed with you. That meant something, even if you were too small to understand why. But I think, Mr. Frodo, I do understand. I know now. Folk in those stories had lots of chances of turning back, only they didn’t. They kept going. Because they were holding on to something.

“What are we holding onto, Sam?” asks Frodo. And Sam answers, “That there’s some good in this world, Mr. Frodo... and it’s worth fighting for.”

### **The Flame of Hope**

Coming in the midst of their struggle and in the moment when Frodo feels all hope slipping away, Sam is, in a sense, reminding him of the same flame of hope that we lit this morning. The warm flame of hope is a gift of grace, a reminder that there is good in the world that is worth fighting for, whether we can see it in the midst of our current calamities or not.

For Sam and Frodo, the good that fires the flame of hope in their hearts comes from the happiness they knew, enjoying the peacefulness and simple pleasures of the rural life they had lived in their beloved Shire, before the shadow of fear and suspicion cast by Sauron came upon the land. And in his words of encouragement, Sam reminds Frodo of the stories from their childhood that were told to shape the character of the Hobbit community.

As we hear Sam's words to Frodo, we too can look to our own formative stories and to the memories of the good in the world that we have experienced. And these blessed memories can fuel the flame of hope in our own lives, especially in times when hardship causes our own flame to sputter in our own hearts.

### **Iowa Farm Families in the 1930's**

Over Thanksgiving week, my own thoughts strayed over and over again to memories of my mother. She was the daughter of a minister, but her dad came from a large farm family in Iowa and her growing up years were shaped by the daily life of the farming community.

It occurred to me this past week that with so much video footage now available on the internet, I might be able to see some Iowa farm

footage from the 1930's and get a glimpse into the world in which she grew up. So I spent part of an evening looking at some old footage I found, put together by Iowa PBS.

It was a rigorous life. People worked from sun up to sun down, shoveling, planting, feeding, cleaning. Every day without fail the animals had to be fed, clothes had to be washed by hand or in primitive washers. Most of the food they ate was the food they grew, and money was spent with an eye to every penny.

At harvest time, each family needed to gather together as many people as they could muster, including neighbors to get all the work done. So, even if there were disagreements, they had no choice but to set them aside and work together until the harvest was in.

Iowa PBS also had a series of interviews with people, now elderly, who had grown up in the nineteen-thirties on the farm. One elderly woman remembered that her family was very poor and that her parents worked so hard just to keep their farm and the little they had. But now, all she remembers is how happy her childhood was.

One after the other, elderly folk testified to how grateful they were for growing up on the farm, with its hard work and simple pleasures.

And their testimonials also, very often included gratitude for the moral character that was shaped by farm life.

At its best, farm life produced people who were industrious and held a person's willingness to work hard as an important value. They were also frugal and thrifty. Nothing should be wasted and every penny was to be well spent. They believed in the importance of being humble, honest, responsible and generous. My mother told me about how her mother always fed the hobos who rode the trains and came to the door asking for food. They also believed very strongly that you should never complain or behave like a victim. And all these values were reinforced on Sundays in Sunday school and in church.

Looking back, I think it would be foolish to believe that everyone behaved in accordance with these values all the time. There has always been a dark side to life in human communities. But something has radically changed that does not bode well for us today. These values that we are speaking of were not considered optional, as we often think of them today. Engaging in the formation of good character was seen as essential, not as a matter of "freedom of choice."

## **Mother's Legacy**

I grew up very differently, as a child of the industrial age. (The only thing I know about farm life is that chocolate milk comes from brown cows. I learned that from my farmer friends up in Heath). All my life, my food has come in packages from supermarkets, bought by money that comes in a monthly pay packet. Automation has made tasks that once took farmers all day, happen for me at the flick of a switch. And while my farming forebears had no time off, I can basically choose when and how much I want to work. When things break or clothes get worn, I can throw them away and order new ones. My hands are soft, while the hands of my forebears were like leather.

And yet, I recognize the values and sentiments of those farmers interviewed on PBS, because my mother, even though she moved away from the farm, had many of those values ingrained in her. And so, even though I grew up in a different time, I think that my own life has been anchored in some way by those values she learned from her farm community upbringing.

I don't know what life was like in New England, or what your lives were like wherever you grew up. When I read the autobiography of John Adams, the quintessential New Englander, I recognized the same

strength of moral character, dedication to hard work and appreciation of simple things.

My guess is that you recognize something of your own past in all of this. And I say this partly, because I don't think I am just describing Iowa farm values. I think I am describing universal values that come from a time when all of our cultures were bound to the earth in ways that technology has now separated them from it. Even my father, who grew up in Japan, had a commitment to these fundamental values.

### **Past, Present, Future**

Why am I bringing the past up like this on a Sunday that is supposed to be about hope for the future? Because I think that the moral beauty and strength that has come to us out of the past gives us hope and a way to separate ourselves from and fight against the distortions of the present, for the sake of the future.

We can't shoe horn the past or the present into the future. But we can live the best values from our past, those things we are most grateful for. And we can strive to bequeath them to the next generation, to give them fuel for the flame of hope that they will need to draw on to face the challenges that they will face.

Hard work, faith, honesty, compassion, generosity, cooperation, thrift and the avoidance of waste, these are critical values that come to us from the past and find their purest form in Jesus in whom the flame burns most brightly. And these are the tools God has given us to fight the good fight for the sake of the good that is in this world. And I believe that the next generation needs us to pass these values on to them.

And there is still another source of hope that we have to draw on, and that is the one who is to be born to us anew on Christmas Eve. How exactly he will be reborn in our midst, none of us can fully say. So let us be vigilant and alert to learn of his coming. For our faith teaches us that his coming will be the vindication of our hope and the salvation of the world.