

I first heard of *The Hobbit* in 5th grade, you know, the classic epic by JRR Tolkien. It was Read Across America week and our school had parents come in and share some of their favorite books with the class. I literally don't remember any other book that was read during that week, but I do remember *The Hobbit*. Having heard just a single chapter, I was hooked. And even today, *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* Trilogy are still some of my favorite stories. Books, movies, I love it all. But it wasn't until many years later that I learned of what Tolkien considered a significant piece to his novels. It was something he called "eucatastrophe."

You see, in Ancient Greece, a catastrophe was simply a sudden turn of events. It was a narrative device in Grecian theater, that today we'd call the plot twist. It could be devastating and destructive, but it could just as easily be something joyful, something good. The point of a catastrophe was to surprise the audience, stirring up an emotional reaction. But over time, the connotation of catastrophe has changed quite a bit, and so Tolkien, using the flexibility of the Greek language, created his own word. He added the prefix eu-, which means "good", to emphasize that this was a plot twist so profoundly good that it would move hearers to tears of joy. And so when something unbelievably miraculous happens, something that feels like the divine has entered into the story to bring life and hope and salvation, it's a eucatastrophe.

So today is Transfiguration Sunday and I'll be honest, this is always a challenging text to deal with. Because on the one hand, we recognize that it's a pretty significant moment. A moment where we get a glimpse of all that we hope for in Christ, that one day, we'll all be in the presence and glory of God. But on the other hand, we know that the Transfiguration was just that – a moment. It didn't last. The story of Christ doesn't end in that one glorious moment. There is still more to be done in order for what we experience in the Transfiguration to be fully and completely realized.

Which is why the Gospel of Luke does this really unique thing. The Transfiguration is sandwiched between two of Jesus' predictions of what will happen to him in Jerusalem. Before they go up to the mountain, Jesus foretells his death and resurrection. And once they come down from the mountain, he again reminds the disciples, and us, of this inevitable fact. And so we are forced to accept the complexity of the moment. The glory of the Transfiguration, contrasted by what must and will take place. A reminder that one day all will be made new, overshadowed by the brokenness of human life. A moment of incredible joy surrounded by very real sorrow and pain and loss.

Because it's a eucatastrophe. A eucatastrophe doesn't mean that everything is suddenly good. It means that we know goodness will win at the end, in spite of all that happens. It's interesting that Luke is the only Gospel to include detail as to what Jesus is talking about with Moses and Elijah. And it has to do with the journey to the end. Luke says, "They were discussing his departure," but that's just a poor translation because it clearly says that they were preparing for his exodus. You know, Exodus, like the central story in the Old Testament that reveals who God is to the people of Israel. The Exodus, the reason why the Bible is filled with passages like, "I am the Lord, your God, who led the people Israel out of slavery in Egypt."

And the thing about an exodus is that it's all about freedom and it's never easy. God calls Moses to go to Egypt because God desires for the beloved creation to be free – free from all that binds, freedom from oppression, freedom so that those who are made free can now become agents and advocates for freedom for others. But such freedom comes at great cost. The Passover came at great cost to human life, the crossing of the Red Sea meant salvation for Israel and destruction for Pharaoh and the Egyptians – losses that certainly are not lost upon the God of the universe who creates, sustains, and loves all. Which is why Jesus' exodus cannot end here. It's why the Transfiguration is prefaced and postfaced by Christ's impending passion. Because the world must be freed. And such freedom comes with great cost – a cost that God is willing to pay.

We stand on the cusp of the Lenten season, knowing what must happen for the world to be set free from the powers of sin and death. Jesus is going to Jerusalem. He will be arrested and killed. Because such an exodus comes at great cost. But this is a eucatastrophe. We know this is a story that begins and ends with joy. The Transfiguration points us to the end, where there is eternal life and love and joy. It calls us to continue on the journey of our lives, not fearing or dreading what happens along the way, because we know how it ends. The plot twist has been revealed. And though there are times when the suffering is real, the pain is real, the brokenness is real, the hurt and struggle is so, so very real, none of these things are the end. You've heard me say it before and I will say it again and again and again, because it's sometimes the only thing we have: The worst things in life are never the last thing. Resurrection is the last thing. Love is the last thing. Freedom in the God is the last thing. Life in Christ is the last thing. Because the story of Christianity is a series of eucatastrophes, pointing us to the final exodus. And that means it can only end in joy. Amen.