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**Pentecost 21 B, October 13, 2024**

**“The Impossible Option”**

**Read: Mark 10:17–31 and/or memorize: Mark 10:27**

Before there was Harry Potter, there was Bilbo Baggins, the hobbit. In Tolkien’s wise fantasy, this short, hairy-footed resident of the shire in middle – earth was a well-to-do bachelor and country squire. Comfortable and conventional, but with just a little touch of bored with life, he nevertheless was shocked when the mysterious wizard, Gandalf knocked on his door one morning and requested his services as, of all things, a thief.

The clever, nimble-fingered hobbit was just the person to help a struggling band of dwarves, reclaim their treasure from a greedy dragon. And of course, there would be a cut of the profits for Bilbo, too! Gandalf proposed more than a business venture, though; he invited Bilbo to an adventure, an adventure with a capital A.

And much to his own surprise, the comfortable, conventional Bilbo, after much hesitation, agreed to do it, running out the door after the departing dwarves without so much as a handkerchief. And with that, the adventure had begun.

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He encountered elves and other wonderful characters, including the magnificent, jewel-encrusted dragon. He trekked through mountains, was lost underground, and found a magic ring. He was carried by eagles, escaped from prison in a beer cask, and finagled his way into the dragon’s lair. There were battles, songs, treasure recovered, friendships made, rewards received, and a long trip home, where he settled back into his comfortable routine.

Except . . . not quite. He was changed by his adventures. He was known as the local eccentric. He entertained strange guests, learned ancient languages and stories, and wrote poetry. At last, he passed into the Uttermost West with the elves.

Surprised that I mentioned this story while hearing the Gospel story of the rich man and Jesus? True, unlike Bilbo, who was recruited, this man came running to Jesus, and not thievery, but eternal life was under discussion. But how like Bilbo that man was!

Comfortable, well-off, law-abiding, but he also sensed that his life didn't quite add up. When Jesus invited him to sell everything, give the proceeds to the poor and follow Him, the poor

fellow was shocked at this crazy proposal, as if Jesus had suggested a stint of thievery for him. Unlike Bilbo, he not only wavered, but finally refused the invitation to an Adventure with a capital A.

Because when all the pious language is stripped away, that's what Jesus was offering. This was an adventure, not a proposal of a business venture. Following Jesus would be taking roads and making choices that might never have occurred to this man in his current situation. His priorities and expectations would be topsy-turvy. Following Jesus wasn't a matter of examining the bottom line of profitability; nor did it mean taking charge of his own destiny, even by doing good and doing right. It meant losing his heart, and possibly his life, to this One who beckoned.

If Bilbo found the label of "thief" off – putting, the rich man found the notion of "Penniless – by – choice disciple" equally unpleasant, and unacceptable. To give away his vast wealth, not as a tax write-off or personal do-good project, but as the necessary paring away of everything that was non-essential to following the Son of Man, was a sort of death.

It meant losing control, control of his image, his plans, and his destiny. It would mean the death of one identity, and who knew what, if any, new identity this Jesus would raise up from those ashes. The up-front loss and sacrifice involved in following this engaging young rabbi outweighed the prospect of a life-transforming journey with Him.

Now, we have to be honest. He, at least, was realistic about what he stood to lose and honest about his fear of losing it! Often, people seem to think you can follow Jesus with baggage, riches, priorities, self-image, identity and control neatly packed, and easily toted. They sometimes act as if following Jesus is more like an occasional weekend ramble, not a life-long journey, with its own logic and demands certainly not as a life-altering adventure.

And we may compound the problem. At times, we're so eager to draw new people into the life of the church that we make it sound like discipleship really is just jaunt in a spiritual Winnebago, complete with all the comforts we're used to.

We can soft-pedal that whole obedience to Jesus' stuff, not even mentioning self-discipline and sacrificial giving, living and loving. Maybe, we fear that, we will scare them off if we don't downplay the kind of radical "stripping down for the journey" part of living as a follower of Jesus Christ. So, we soften it to make it more attractive. Or maybe we really don't believe it ourselves.

At other times, we get caught up in the ought's and should's of religion, the duties and responsibilities of the Christian life. We can almost make it sound like following Jesus is

some drudgery, a series of losses, burdens, and duties with precious little joy, . . . and no adventure whatsoever, not even one with a small a.

We are so anxious to talk about "taking up one's cross" that we forget all about how Jesus Himself looked beyond the cross' agony to the joy that was set before Him. Maybe we sympathize a little too much, not only with the rich man, but also the disciples, who bluntly remind Jesus that they have given up plenty to follow Him – and wonder what will they have to show for it?

And sometimes, we're not just in sync with the sweeping nature of Jesus' command or His invitation. Sell everything and give the proceeds to the poor? Follow Jesus? How? Are we supposed to drop everything to become a missionary or evangelist? Our minds boggle. We may even say, under our breath "You've got the wrong person, Lord!" Or protest. "I'm no great saint or preacher or anything, I'm just little old me, trying to muddle through the best I can."

No easier is it for us to put ourselves in Jesus' picture than it was for Bilbo to imagine himself a bold thief or unlikely hero. And yet, the command and the invitation stand, blunt and uncompromising. All the excuses we trot out to defend our wavering lie limp on the ground. We are left with the disciples almost forlorn question, when Jesus said that wealth, whether measured as possessions, power, or ability, hinders entry into heaven. Like them, we whimper, "Then how can anyone be saved?"

"For God," says Jesus flatly, "nothing is impossible. "Nothing?" He actually sounds as if He means it. Nobody has an excuse; there's nothing in our lives that inevitably provides an impenetrable barrier between us and the Kingdom. Our Lord himself has seen to that.

And so, you can look at an earnest, perplexed, rich man . . . Ask him to do what seems impossible, because Jesus Himself intends to accomplish the really, truly impossible. To put it another way, once you believe that God is serious about saving anyone who accepts the offer – rich, poor, bad, good, gentile, Jew, woman, – then visualizing yourself divested of wealth and humbly taking your cues at Jesus' feet ought to be a piece of cake.

The problem, of course, is two-fold: The first problem is it is terribly easy to talk ourselves into believing that what our Lord commands really is impossible, dangerous, fool-hardy, and otherwise inadvisable. If you remember, Bilbo nearly did that, and the rich man certainly did. We re-erect a barrier that our Lord has resolved to tumble down.

The second problem is that the road down which Jesus invites us to follow Him inevitably leads to a cross – and not just for Jesus, at least figuratively. The rich man was right on target

if he feared that following Jesus was a small death, a loss of one identity with no certain prospect of a new one.

So inevitably, it all comes down to the one thing that we struggle with the most, trust, of course. Trust that the Lord, for whom nothing is impossible, will bring any who follow Him into the fullness of his Father's Kingdom. Trust that the goods and houses and eternal life He promises to those who leave everything behind to follow Him, will more than compensate for the losses, dangers, risks, persecutions and deaths, small and great.

And finally, the problem is, does that sound too up in the air for you? Then, imagine the "impossible" options for those who might dare to trust our Lord's promises. A rich man donates his fortunes to charity and works in a drug addiction program. A woman relinquishes a wealth of resentment for Jesus' sake and forgives her estranged sister.

A teenager gives up a chance to play in the championship soccer game to take part in his youth group's Habitat for Humanity project. A family decides to simplify its lifestyle as a response to the Gospel, and gives more time and financial support to the ministry of its church.

Small things? Maybe? They may also be the first fruits of a new life that our Lord raises up when the old dies. Who knows what sort of new life God will shape for us as we begin to take Him at His Word? Who knows what the things that we give up "in order to travel more lightly and gracefully with Him" will be taken up and hallowed and transformed to the good of many? Who knows what marvel we will see, what we will touch, what we will experience on this blessed adventure of discipleship?

Maybe, just maybe, we will end up more like Bilbo, resident eccentric, than like some great, heroic saint. But we'll never know until, graced by God, we lose our hearts to our Savior and set off down the road, hearts quaking, but secretly hunkering to be up-ended, stretched, challenged and changed. And then, who knows? After all, with God, nothing is impossible. Even when He's dealing with us.

Count me in: What Adventure do you hear Jesus calling you to? Will you waver, refuse or go?