

One New Book for the Preacher

William V. Arnold
Myer Creek, Virginia

Tolstoy, Leo. *Walk in the Light and Twenty-Three Tales*. Reprinted by Plough Publishing, 1998. 351 pages.

Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Tolkien Reader*. Ballantine Books, 1966. 251 pages.

Okay, it's not one book, but two. And sometimes the "new" can be something "old." Hence, this commendation of two books by older, well-known, and dependable authors.

In retirement, I have found time (though not much!) to appreciate some of the resources that I called on much too hurriedly during my full-time ministry. My avocation then and now is that of a sacred storyteller, and the two authors I want to commend are Leo Tolstoy and J.R.R. Tolkien.

I know, I know. When you hear those names, your first association is with long tomes, but those well-known authors also wrote short stories. And their short stories have been, and continue to be, valuable sources of reflection for both personal meditation and sermonic material. And it's not just the content that is valuable. Their use of language is also remarkable. If you want the experience of talented writers guiding you to destinations that you do not expect, then here are two mentors for you to digest.

Take, for instance, the story of "The Three Hermits" by Tolstoy, found in the work cited above as well as other compilations of his work. It is based on Matthew 6:7-8, wherein Jesus directs his listeners not to "heap up empty phrases" in their praying, because God "knows what you need before you ask."

In brief, the story begins on shipboard with a traveling bishop. Overhearing a story told by a crew member about a shipwreck and that crewman's rescue by three curious men living on a small island in the distance, the bishop is fascinated and intrigued. He persuades the ship's captain (with a few coins) to change course and head for the island in order for the bishop to make a pastoral call. After all, if the three men are still there, they probably are his parishioners! His encounter with the three hermits turns his pride as a "higher church dignitary" and his belief that he is an authority on prayer into a dramatic lesson in humility. Read it and you, too, might be changed. Looking for additional inspiration on the power and dangers of prayer? Check here.

Or, with the approach of Easter, consider Jesus' saying in the gospel of John 4: "The hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship God in spirit and truth, for God seeks such as these to worship him." After reading it, consider Tolstoy's story "Two Old Men," linked with that passage. Both are intent on making a once-in-a-lifetime pilgrimage to worship God in Jerusalem on Easter. After years of both anticipation and delay, they finally set out for Jerusalem together. One arrives, and one does not, but which one *really* arrived and worshiped in spirit and truth? Tolstoy takes *us* on a journey, a pilgrimage. Through the power of his language and the visions that he creates through the artistic use of vocabulary, we may find a new pathway to the power of resurrection and true worship.

Most of us think of *Lord of the Rings* when we hear the name J.R.R. Tolkien.

Consequently, we think of many pages and long hours of reading. But Tolkien also wrote short stories. He makes no specific allusions to scripture, but many interpreters attribute a deep faith to him and credit him with a motivation to communicate the faith without relying on traditional language.

In his collection of tales, cited above, one that moves me each time I read it is his “Leaf by Niggle,” contained in a larger chapter on “Tree and Leaf.” It’s the story of a little man named Niggle, who “had a long journey to make,” on which he did not want to go. He is a painter “who can paint leaves better than trees,” and he is frustrated with the process of satisfactorily completing his painting of a leaf caught in the wind. No matter how hard he tries to concentrate on painting this particular leaf, he is continually interrupted, in large part because “he could not get rid of his kind heart.” Multiple interruptions ensue, interruptions calling on him for help, interruptions from which that kind heart of his cannot turn away. Then comes the arrival of the news that he has dreaded – that he must depart on that unwanted journey immediately. Without betraying the nature of the trip, let me simply say that it would be hard to find a better illustration, or at least inspiration, for a Lenten sermon or meditation as we struggle with our own issues of life and death – and our mortality.

In our days of being surrounded by so much distraction and often frivolous approaches to spirituality, it is comforting and engaging to dig into the works of two writers who know the terrain. And, not only do they know it, but they also possess the skill and insight to lead us into that terrain in ways that leave us with nourishing bread for our own journeys, both personal and pastoral.