

Hope with Wings: The Carrier Pigeon Post as Public Theology

Sonya S. Cronin, Florida State University
Carey C. Newman, Fortress Press

I

Public Theology shines beyond the stained glass. It walks the streets. It dirties its hands. Public theology inhabits the forgotten, the forsaken – the abandoned house, the lonely space under the overpass, the neglected park. Public theology never sleeps. It has nowhere to lay its head. Public theology blows with the wind. Public theology is the wind.

Public theology lives with those who have been rejected – the poor, the immigrant, the unhoused, the abused, the exploited. It keeps vigil with the brokenhearted. Public theology crosses boundaries, shares meals, mixes with the crowds. Public theology comforts those who have no companion. It is the theology embraced by those who have deep need but no help. It is the theology espoused by those who do not belong. It is a theology truly in public and of the public.

Public theology is not in the thundering announcements from the ivory tower, nor the earthshaking pronouncements by the cloistered elite. Public theology is instead discovered in the whispers of the isolated, the solitary. Public theology thrives in the small. Public theology is never monotone. Its voice emerges from the ground, sings many songs, savors the differing tunes. Public theology never draws the lines dividing insider from outsider, chosen from unchosen. Public theology, prodigal, is unapologetically reckless with its many lavish invitations. Public theology belongs to all.

Public theology is not a clanging symbol. Public theology may insist, but it never demands. Public theology is never just black and white but is always colored by compassion. Public theology abhors injustice. Public theology resists systemic domination by bravely standing as one with the oppressed. Public theology is far more than the politic or the poetic; it is never reducible to the mere partisan or the cultural.¹ Public theology did not arrive when the prophets left; nor was it born on the day they say God died.² Public theology has always been, and still is – God among us. Public theology is God in translation. Public theology is God interpreted in common tongue, a theology which speaks to all in the vernacular of lived life. Public theology: God's koine that binds the whole of God's public together.

II

The Lord of the Rings is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision. That is why I have not put in, or have cut out, practically all references to anything like "religion," to cults or practices, in the imaginary world. *For the religious element is absorbed into the story and the symbolism.*³

The Lord of the Rings performs its miracle in plain sight. *The Lord of the Rings* turns water to wine for all to see, but in a way that leaves all to marvel at how. More than 150 million copies sold. A vast public read without the slightest hint that this work – an example of what Tolkien named Faerie⁴ – is fundamentally Christian. The public didn't need to know. Tolkien chose to convey

Christian dianoia by a public means, not an exclusive, religious one. He created a mythos open to all, welcoming to all. The world Tolkien created did not seek a *religious* conversion; the conversion he sought was nothing short of “the conversion of imagination.”⁵

Church bells never ring in Tolkien’s Middle-earth. Unlike a sermon, which aims to elicit adherence to (a particular) faith, a creed, whose recitation seeks to instill the essentials of (a catholic) faith, a divinity school lecture in systematic theology that seeks to instruct those called in the complexities of (a vocational) faith, Tolkien had something else in mind. Tolkien did not intend *The Lord of the Rings* to be kept behind stained glass or inside ivy-covered halls. His Middle-earth was always a public place. And the means of visiting was just as common as well. Reading. Reading is uncontrolled and unsupervised. Reading is ubiquitous. Reading is to visit. Reading transports from one world to another. Reading is a bridge. Reading suspends to discover, discovers to hope, hopes to believe, and believes to surrender. *The Lord of the Rings* is a typeset and bound theology in public.

Tolkien discovered a secret, a secret that animates and grounds his Faerie. This secret is the way public rhetoric about spiritual truth is intricately tied to human longing. The tighter the bond, the more intricate the blend, the more detailed the interweaving, the more powerful the theology. Public theology is human theology, a theology intimately tied to the particularities of human experience – from the mundane of daily life to the overarching grand themes of both the collective and individual human lives.

The magic of fairy is not an end in itself but the satisfaction of certain primordial human desires. ... But far more important is the consolation of the happy ending. [The fairy story] does not deny the existence of sorrow and failure. It denies (in the face of much evidence) universal final defeat and insofar is *evangelium*, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of this world, poignant as grief.⁶

Hope. A public theology finds its gravitational center in human

hope – hope in so very many things. Hope for belonging, hope for communion, hope for divine and human companionship. Hope for the end to suffering. Hope for a joy that lasts. Hope that tomorrow will be better than today. Hope for meaning. Hope for transformation. Hope for identity. Hope for release from a world walled in, a world guarded by the sentries of suffering and Death. Hope that light will prevail over darkness, and that good will have the last say.

Tolkien understood that Faerie spoke directly to human desire for hope. Faerie awakens hope from its long wintery sleep. The spirit of Faerie stirs the spirit of the human heart to hope. The spirit of Faerie converts human imagination. The spirit of Faerie haunts every page of *The Lord of the Rings*. The spirit of Faerie, though, is not bound to the realm of Faerie; it does not recognize borders, of any kind. Existing above and beyond particular citizenships, the spirit of Faerie is recognized in all realms, though not always by the name Faerie.

III

“The Spirit blows where it will.”⁷ The Spirit has a mind of its own. The Spirit does what it wants, when it wants, as it wants. The Spirit is not bound by precedent or tradition. There’s no predicting the Spirit. The Spirit is uncontrolled and unsupervised. The Spirit, like a miracle, appears in the strangest of places.⁸ The Spirit longs for what’s beyond the stained glass and over the wall. The Spirit aches for dirty hands. The Spirit prefers to keep the company of the neglected and the forgotten. The Spirit is reckless, prodigal in giving its many gifts to the unbaptized.

“And you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it is coming from and where it is going.”⁹ The Spirit’s flourishing baffles. The entrenched’s heavy investment in the past blinds it to possibility. The Spirit’s purposeful re-arc-ing of ἀρχή to τέλος creates legitimate fears about how to maintain a tenuous hold on the present and triggers a panicked attempt to tame an unpredictable future. The Spirit’s tempest, the disheveling power of rushing wind, unsettles even as it creates and comforts.

The Spirit is only truly known in retrospect. The Spirit is known by the Spirit's effects. Its work is improbable, indeterminant, a mystery. "The Spirit was here" – graffiti the only clue the Spirit leaves behind.¹⁰ The Spirit, fully hermeneutical – is an interpreter requiring interpretation. To know the Spirit requires an abduction that defies all known logics. To know the Spirit requires a conversion of imagination. To know the Spirit is to visit another world, the unseen world, the world that's just off stage, the world of hobbits and evil lords, where flowers talk and trees walk, a world where good finally vanquishes all suffering. This world is the world of the Spirit.

This same Spirit hovered over the face of the waters, comfortable, it seems, with the chaos rumbling below. The Spirit enjoys freedom of movement; it savors its wanton powers. Order out of chaos. Creation by the Spirit as the Spirit wills. The corralling or controlling of Spirit, then, is contrary to the Spirit's spirit. The Spirit is defiant, preferring exile to constraint. The Spirit, defiant, prefers the company of those exiled to those who constrain. The Spirit willingly lives the life of dislocation rather than suffering one of subservience. The Spirit is not afraid to ride the wind on its chariot, to leave the comforts of home rather than endure stifling monotony.

While never contained or constrained, the Spirit can be enticed and invited. The Spirit can be coaxed and wooed. All it takes is two, two to agree in their desire, two who seek the power that turns water to wine, and the Spirit miraculously becomes



Photo by Theo Bickel on Unsplash

present. "Love thy neighbor" – and the Spirit descends. "Love your enemies" – and the Spirit appears.

When I was hungry,
you gave me something to eat.

When I was thirsty,
you gave me something to drink.

I was a stranger,
and you invited me in.

I was in prison,
and you came to me.¹¹

Love, not doctrine, is the Spirit's arc. The Spirit writes law upon hearts. The Spirit desires good news be proclaimed to the poor, release for those held captive. The Spirit desires sight for the blind, freedom for the oppressed. The Spirit anoints for these ends.

Truly I say to you,
when you did it for one of the least of these,
you did it for me.¹²

Spirit, the presence of the mighty God of the universe, sojourns with the poor, the blind, the oppressed, the prisoner. The Spirit is the sign of the creator God's solidarity. When anyone suffers, God, through Spirit, suffers with them. To unbind, to set free, to visit, to feed, to clothe, is to do it all to and for God. To save one is to save the world – and to save one is to save God.¹³

IV

In the beginning was the Spirit. The Spirit was with God.
The Spirit was God.

Words create. Words create out of nothing. Words make chaos behave. Words interrupt. Words make new worlds. They make possible the impossible. Words are power. Words are thus a sign, a sign that divides. Those with words possess power. Those without words are without power. There are many without words in the world.

Remote, isolated, and deliberately so – America’s 1,600 prisons incarcerate two million of America’s people. Two million. Disproportionality reigns. More black. More brown. More poor. More uneducated. More lacking. More of the absence of everything. The lack carves a path to prison, and the experience of prison makes living life even harder. A destiny of doom and condemnation governs. The path to prison is also the path back to prison.

The statistics are grim, arguably scandalous. Of the two million who are incarcerated in America 62 percent did not complete tenth grade – as if their fourth-grade test scores prophesied their path to prison. Even more staggering is the racial and financial disproportionality of those incarcerated: 32 percent are Black, 23 percent are Hispanic. At least 66 percent (maybe as high as 80 percent) grew up in poverty. The compounding effects of poverty, race, class, a lack of education, and a compromised family life sabotage the future of countless childhoods. The cyclical, causal, and multi-directional links demonstrating the pipeline to incarceration and recidivism are well established. It all seems hopeless – and for most it is.

Prisons are said to protect, and nobly so, from those who have and can still do others harm. Prisons are said to punish, and righteously so, those whose public behavior merits punishment. But prisons, it goes without saying, are places of dominance and control – and powerfully so. Prisons always watch. Prisons always inspect. Prisons always limit. Prisons constrain, deny, demean. Prisons control by erasing human identity. They mark by number, not by name. They tear down, not build up. They trade in trauma rather than heal and restore. Though prisons house those who have committed crimes, they themselves steal and destroy – robbing from their already impoverished residents what’s left of their humanity while stealing all hope. The absence of hope corresponds to the absence of words.

The Carrier Pigeon Post (CPP) is eight pages of words delivered inside prisons, eight pages of newsprint, chock-full of color

images and short stories, written at a sixth-grade level. CPP’s stories feature narratives about paintings, sculpture, photography, landmarks, celebrities, political figures, literature, historical events, documents and monuments, multicultural folktales, finance, and science. CPP is specifically crafted and curated for those who



Photo courtesy of carrierpigeonpost.org

experience incarceration. CPP offers words to the weary soul.

The Carrier Pigeon Post does not harbor its words. It does not guard them or hoard them. CPP gives its words away, generously so. It tosses them about like seed sown by a reckless sower. CPP shares its words with those thirsty for words, those who didn’t even know they were thirsty for words. CPP relinquishes its words to empower. In its giving CPP becomes a word to those who have no words.

Words affirm. Words teach. Words inspire. Words explain. Words become passwords – keys that open doors. Words become ships – vessels that transport other worlds. Words become neighbor – an inner ring of community. But words ring hollow without Spirit. Spirit gives life to words.

Words show up when tragedy strikes. Words do the Spirit's bidding. Whether the straight and narrow with the unfortunate wrong turn, or the natural culmination of life set upon a long-crooked path, lives are turned upside down. Catastrophe. The guilty and broken, shuttled off to exile. Reeling, they scrape their wounds while they sit in the dust. From dust I came, to dust I will return... but not yet. Words keep company with those in the dust. Words sit in the silences and weep with those who sorrow. Words pass no judgment of those who do not. Their contagion, their guilt, their sin does not frighten away. Words fear not. Words absorb the contagion. Words heal the hurt. Words bind the broken. Words woo the heart once again. Words, when attended by Spirit, change catastrophe to eucatastrophe, even for those locked inside prison walls. Words uttered over bread and wine make miracles in the strangest of places.

Words on paper, correspondence, provides the comradeship of the Spirit when physical companionship is not possible. *The Carrier Pigeon Post* operates with dual vocation. CPP sends the stories that portray all the various undefinable ideals: friendship, solidarity, resilience, love, bravery. But CPP also acts as that proxy that sends solidarity to those in exile. CPP tells them they are not alone; they are not unloved. CPP defines friend, acts as friend, and is proxy for friend. And for this very particular purpose and this very particular audience, those who have no possessions, the digital won't do. It must be corpus, presence through print, the tangible in their hand. The Word of hope comes to those imprisoned through words of hope, and that hope can set them free. Story, imagined and formed in the mind, becomes physical, touchable paper. Story is the raiment that Spirit chooses to wear. This is public incarnation – this is incarnation in public.¹⁴

V

The Christian good news is that Jesus is Word become flesh. Jesus came to a people who were sentenced to exile, a seemingly never-ending exile. The people of God were never at home no matter where they were, even when located at home. The people of

God were deprived no matter what they possessed. The sentence of exile had gone far beyond its prescribed time. The promised end never quite came, dragging on incomplete, generation after generation. The hope that God's tomorrow might finally be God's today faded. Despair wore many masks. God had forgotten, or so it seemed.

But into the midst of exile, when hope was fleeting, salvation arrived. A baby, not born of aristocracy or wealth, but among the people. God became common – and dwelt among God's people. The Spirit had hovered over this baby's mother, and Jesus came into being. He participated in communal baptism and repentance, and the Spirit showed up again, consecrating him to set the oppressed free: rich, poor, domestic, foreign, all who suffered under the weight of darkness and death.

The ways of God have not changed. The movement of the Spirit no more predictable. The small. The unexpected. The surprise. "Didn't our hearts burn within us as he taught us on the way?"¹⁵

The crucified and resurrected Jesus lit hearts on fire with his teaching. He did not monologue on who he was. He did not flash his wounds on the Emmaus Walk. Instead, he told stories. He told stories of God and God's intentions. He told them the stories that bound people to each other, and to God. He told stories that gave meaning and purpose to individual and communal life.

CPP's arrival announces to its readers they have not been forgotten. In the midst of all the worldly-wise technology, CPP's flourishing baffles. How can something so simple do something significant in comparison? All great things start small. And all great things live in the small. The small, the foolish, the insignificant is how the Spirit first enters. CPP goes into the darkness, into the despair, into the loneliness, into the misery that thrives in confined spaces. *The Carrier Pigeon Post* shines as light in the darkness. **CPP teaches.** It teaches the stories of a people, of a culture, giving identity, drawing into community. *The Carrier Pigeon Post* stretches its wings, and the Spirit hitches a ride. CPP teaches by the power of

the Spirit. CPP's word becomes print and dwells among those on the margins, transforming the cell through the printed page.

Incarnation is a sacrament, the sacrament of a tangible, this-worldly encounter, with God. Something ordinary, it becomes a physical beacon of God's love, when breathed upon by the Spirit. CPP's offering is ordinary, its knowledge common. But like simple fishes and loaves, bread and wine, when touched by the Spirit, it becomes something transcendent. *Hoc est corpus meum*, and there is miracle. Creating unity where there was division, and communion that cannot be contained by walls, borders, race, ethnicity, or class, the Spirit unites person to person, and people with the divine.

"I don't know what it is," says Gerald, "but I don't want the other newspapers and magazines that make their way into the prison library. But I love *Carrier Pigeon*. I love every story and article that is in there." Gerald didn't realize that the paper was written just for him, curated for his interests, his reading level, his tastes, his situation. What he confirmed by letter was that the *Carrier Pigeon* was hitting its mark. "Write for us and change the lives of those who are incarcerated" – the call that CPP sent out. Answers came from all walks of life, desperately wanting to do something to mitigate the tragedy of mass incarceration. The problem had seemed too big, with no point of entrance for someone who couldn't dedicate their life, their career, or at the very least hours a month. But now opportunity came. A small contribution that feeds thousands of people, a writer's offering that probably never landed upon a more receptive and grateful audience.

The efforts of CPP's writers are "shalom," the peace that comes from making what is broken whole. Their efforts are not simply for "the other," but for themselves as well. Writing for those incarcerated becomes an act of personal responsibility. For some, it is even an act of communal repentance, an act of communal restoration. What it is not, is an act of "charity." The same act, the same paper, the same story, blesses both the writer and the reader. This same act honors the divine and makes the transcendent immanent. This is public sacrament – this is sacrament in public.

VI

Escape. Without question, *The Carrier Pigeon Post* is about escape. It is the rare individual that finds themselves in prison as a fluke of their otherwise great life and good luck.

Why should a man be scorned if, finding himself in prison he tries to get out and go home? Or if, when he cannot do so, he thinks and talks about other topics than jailers and prison-walls? The world outside has not become less real because the prisoner cannot see it.¹⁶

CPP begins with simple stories, fodder for fresh thoughts, and the potential for new conversations. Its stories present an absented education. They are the stories of old, the tales that connect individuals to their collective. CPP's articles bring creation into the cell – people, places, animals, nature, science. CPP imposes color into gray. With art and illustration, paintings and portraits, CPP brings a vibrancy to accompany its tales. It interrupts the cycles of negative thought, eventually interrupting the cycles of negative life. CPP fosters hope, confidence, self-esteem. CPP provides escape from the cell and paves the way for eventual release from the cell. CPP is public, open to all, welcoming all. CPP peddles hope and highlights virtue. CPP teaches, by means of Spirit.

CPP operates like a fairy story par excellence. CPP through narrative tells the reader they want friendship and community, and then offers it. CPP tells its reader that they want a transformed life, and then slowly begins the work of transforming it. CPP tells the reader that they long for communion with all living things, nature and neighbor, and then begins to envelop them in it.

While the articles in *The Carrier Pigeon Post* often depict stories of adversity and the hardship of overcoming, CPP is about happy endings. CPP employs the happy endings in narrative after narrative, to work the real happy ending in the lives of its readers. CPP is not benign, but comes forth with power, the power to effect real change in real lives. CPP takes the catastrophe of their life and makes it good again. CPP is eucatastrophe.

Everything from the cover story to the content stories make the argument that not only is redemption from a past life possible, but the past life is not a waste. The life lived until now has meaning. It is not just a new story that is on offer, but the redemption of the past, a salvaging of his-story and her-story. The catastrophe has become good. Month after month CPP pulls the reader in and offers them the power to rewrite the script of their own lives, turning their past devastation into personal narratives that overcome the past and forge a new future. CPP not only illustrates, it simulates. CPP grounds the story of their redemption in the power of communal narrative and does so with the power of the Spirit. CPP offers its readers good news. This is a public gospel. This is gospel in public.

The Gospel comes through story. It comes through teaching. It comes with the anointing of the Spirit. It comes nonpartisan; it was always for all – Jews and gentiles alike. Religion in the public square, in a world hurting, is to bind wounds and proclaim liberty to the captive. It is to offer bread and wine and oil for dusty, dirty, unhoused heads. It is solidarity. It is to sit with the captives in their prisons and tell them they are not alone. It is to give them voice, not muffle it. It is to say something to all that includes their voices, their experiences – not to use the power of words to exclude them.

The Carrier Pigeon Post goes to the isolated, the ignored, and oppressed: those in prison. It offers words – words of hope that life can be different. The Carrier Pigeon Post speaks to human longing. CPP is spiritual Faerie. CPP is theology in public.

Notes & Bibliography

¹ Public theology is notoriously difficult to define – but it is known when seen (*ipsa res loquitur*). It is often confused with political theology (on the one hand) which addresses the issues of systemic injustice, the environment, and racism or a theo poetic rhetoric (on the other) which employs the language of religion to craft a strong cultural prophetic stance. But public theology differs from political theology by being less issue driven and more space- and person-centered (public theology focuses on bolstering human weakness rather than dismantling

institutional power) and public theology differs from theo poetic rhetoric by retaining a belief (deemed naive by some) that what's observed is not all there is to this world. Public theology sees God in justice and language but does not identify God with either without remainder. See Scott Holland, "Political Theology, Public Theology, or a Theo poetic Anatheism for Post-Ecclesial, Post-Secular Age?" *Cross Currents* 72 (2022): 137-149.

² Time's April 8, 1966 cover story (John T. Elson, "Is God Dead? Toward a Hidden God") sparked an open discussion about the place of religion, and specifically God, in America. It is tempting to trace both the "Spiritual but not Religious" and the "Nones" to the announcement of God's demise. It is more likely, though, that organized religion had already lost its firm grip on American culture long before Time bothered to publish God's obituary. More telling is the diptych formed by Time's 1948 cover story of Reinhold Niebuhr (Whittaker Chambers, "Religion: Faith for a Lenten Age," March 8) and its 2001 featuring of Stanley Hauerwas (Jean Bethke Elshtain, "Theologian: Christian Contrarian," September 17) – a pairing which tracks the arc from Niebuhr's (reformed) Christian realism to Hauerwas's (anabaptist) post-liberal ecclesiology. The former inspired engaged state craft and diplomacy while the latter fostered individual virtues.

³ "Letter 142" (to Father Murray) in J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, ed. Humphrey Carpenter (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013), 191.

⁴ J. R. R. Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," in *Tree and Leaf* (Houghton Mifflin, 1965), 3-73.

⁵ Richard B. Hays, *The Conversion of Imagination: Paul as Interpreter of Israel's Scripture* (Eerdmans, 2005). Paul's use of analeptic echoes of his scriptural world to craft his Christian message is an analogy to the way Tolkien used Catholicism to craft *The Lord of the Rings*.

⁶ Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," 68.

⁷ John 3:8. ⁸ "Miracles appear in the strangest of places / Fancy me finding you here" (from "Yesterday's Wine," on Willie Nelson, *Yesterday's Wine*, RCA Nashville, 1971). A case can be made that "Outlaw" country music across the decades is a sustained example of the performance of public theology. See Charles Howell, *Too Sick to Pray: A Theology of Outlaw Country* (Fortress, forthcoming), especially chapter 2, "Spirit: Willie Nelson."

⁹ John 3:8.

¹⁰ Paul Simon's "the words of the prophets are written on the subway wall" in "The Sound of Silence" (1964) not only captures the public nature of a public theology but it points to how graffiti seeks to "overwrite" and to do so in a public space. Early on, Christians adopted graffiti to mark their presence in public. See Roger Bagnall, *Everyday Writing in the Graeco-Roman East* (University of California Press, 2011), 22-23.

¹¹ Matthew 25:35-36.

¹² Matthew 25:40.

¹³ Mishna Sanhedrin 4:5: "When will the messiah come?" "He is at the gates of the city, sitting among the poor. Like them he changes the bindings of his wounds, but he does so one at a time [rather than all at once] so that he can be ready at a moment's notice."

¹⁴ Shad Maruna's *Making Good: How Ex-Convicts Reform and Rebuild Their Lives* (American Psychological Association, 2001) demonstrates the power of words in transformation of those who experience incarceration. What is true of those inside the fence is equally true for those on this side. See Dan McAdams, *The Stories We Live By: Personal Myths and the Making of the Self* (Guilford Press, 1997) and *The Redemptive Self: Stories Americans Live By, Revised and Expanded* (Oxford University Press, 2013).

¹⁵ Luke 24:32.

¹⁶ Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," 60.

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Dr. Carey C. Newman is Executive Editor at Fortress Press and Chairman of the Board at *The Carrier Pigeon Post*. Newman has 35 years of experience as a university professor, scholar, and author, and has spent 30 years as an academic book publisher and editor, overseeing 800+ academic books into print. As a book editor, Newman taught authors the craft of storytelling. Newman has decades of experience across the social sciences, humanities, and professional disciplines.

Carey C. Newman, Ph.D.,
Fortress Press / The Carrier Pigeon Post



Dr. Sonya S. Cronin is a lecturer at Florida State University and teaches for their International Programs in London and Florence. She is the founder of *The Carrier Pigeon Post*, a nonprofit periodical that sends hope and help into prisons by means of stories and humanities education. She is author *Repentance of YHWH: Mark's Gospel of Universal Inclusion* with Fortress Press.

Sonya S. Cronin, Ph.D.,
Florida State University / The Carrier Pigeon Post

