

ADVENTURE & FAITH: LESSONS FROM THE LIFE OF ST. BRENDAN THE NAVIGATOR AND BILBO BAGGINS

Ted W. Wright on Voyages and Ventures

Victorian writer George Eliot once wrote that, "Adventure is not outside a man; it is within."¹ Yet most people today do not sense or experience an adventurous life. Mostly, it involves the mundane and the routine. Everyday responsibilities include things like laundry, paying bills, buying groceries, taking kids to school, going to work, and repeating the process week after week, month after month. This dynamic doesn't seem to be a feature of modern life only. In the early 19th century, writer Henry David Thoreau observed:

Most men live lives of quiet desperation. What is called resignation is confirmed desperation. From the desperate city you go into the

¹ Rose Morgan, "George Eliot & George Henry Lewes: Soulmates," *The Victorian Times*, April 2, 2012, accessed February 12, 2022, <https://thevictoriantimes.blogspot.com/2012/01/george-eliot-george-henry-lewes.html>.

desperate country and have to console yourself with the bravery of minks and muskrats. A stereotyped but unconscious despair is concealed even under what is called the games and amusements of mankind.²

Thoreau lived in the early part of the 19th century when none of the distractions of technology, social media, or urgencies of modern life existed. Yet he also sensed an urge to *discover* or *know* something outside the routine and the mundane. Even back then, he decided (as many have done today) to get "off the grid," so to speak. So, he built a small cabin near Walden Pond in the woods near Concord, Massachusetts, to live by himself for a year. His stated purpose in this experiment was "to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived."³

Thoreau's experiment, however, had and has some problems. One he discovered for himself, and the other he states towards the beginning of his book. First is the problem of the recurring *routine*. Even living out in the woods in a cabin alone, Thoreau found himself getting back into a rhythm and a pattern. He states,

I left the woods for as good a reason as I went there . . . It is remarkable how easily and insensibly we fall into a particular route, and make a beaten track for ourselves. I had not lived there for a week before my feet wore a path from my door to the pond-side; and

² Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Other Writings* (New York: The Modern Library, 1950), 7.

³ *Ibid.*, 81.

though it has been five or six years since I trod it, it is still quite distinct . . . How worn and dusty, then, must be the highways of the world, and how deep the ruts of tradition and conformity!⁴

The second problem in Thoreau's search for a solution for men and women of desperation, he states himself. Alluding to the opening question in the *Westminster Catechism*, "What is the chief and highest end of man?" Thoreau writes that,

For most men, it appears to me, are in a strange uncertainty about it [i.e., life], whether it is of the devil or of God, and have somewhat *hastily concluded* that it is the chief end of man here to "glorify God and enjoy him forever."⁵

It is difficult to understand here why Thoreau thinks that glorifying God and enjoying him is a "hasty conclusion"? He doesn't give any indication in *Walden* or elsewhere, however, that faith is an essential component of life. Perhaps his assessment that man's *end* [purpose] is *not* about glorifying and enjoying God is because he did not plunge too deeply into Christian history or into the lives of its greatest saints – many who have lived lives of extraordinary adventure and risk? It is difficult to say. But, as G.K. Chesterton observed,

People have fallen into a foolish habit of speaking of orthodoxy as something heavy,

⁴ Thoreau, *Walden and Other Writings*, 288.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 82 [emphasis in the original text]

humdrum, and safe. There was never anything so perilous or so exciting as orthodoxy.⁶

Chesterton is exactly right. In fact, the primary focus of this article is that the two strands of faith and adventure are woven together and are a part of the same chord. The life of an average Christian is anything but dull, boring, or routine. The life of faith *is* a life of adventure.

But exactly how are faith and adventure related? The answer to this question hinges on several factors, specifically how one defines *faith* and *adventure*. Far better, however, is to take a look at two figures who embody adventure and faith: one, an Irish saint who sailed the high seas in search of a blessed land, and the other a literary figure who went on a dangerous quest to recover a lost hoard of gold guarded by a fire-breathing dragon. In examining these two figures, I hope to draw out some basic observations and a few similarities between faith and adventure.

SAINT BRENDAN THE NAVIGATOR (CA. A.D. 486–577)

In the 6th and 7th centuries, when the native peoples of England, Ireland, and Scotland were being evangelized by missionaries, there arose a handful of men who inspired and inflamed the imaginations of many – *Saints*, they were called. As historian D.H. Farmer observes,

Each was an attractive pioneer both of monasticism and of the primacy of the spiritual. In an age and environment in which

⁶ G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), 107.

the heroic was deeply appreciated, each of them embodied a heroism comparable to, yet different from, that of the mythical gods and warriors. They fought spiritual battles against invisible diabolical enemies with the weapons of prayer, fasting and solitude; yet each also contributed powerfully to building Christian cities, communities of monks. Each obtained posthumous and permanent, as well as transient, glory.⁷

One Saint stands out: Saint Brendan of Clonfert, often called "the Navigator," "the Voyager," "the anchorite," or "the bold." From the most reliable historical sources, Brendan was born in about A.D. 484 and died in 575.⁸ In a devotional work on St. Brendan, David Adam, Vicar of Holy Island, points out,

St. Brendan was born at the "edge of the world" in what is now County Kerry. His birthplace was near Tralee on the north side of the bay overlooking the Western Sea. There is no other landmass from there until you come to Labrador or Newfoundland. Brandon Mountain near his home overlooks the sea . . . It is not surprising that adventuring in the sea and sailing was in Brendan's blood; he saw the

⁷ D.H. Farmer, *The Age of Bede*, trans. and ed. J.F. Webb (London: Penguin Books, 2004, Reprint), 9.

⁸ Adomnán of Iona, *Life of St. Columba*, trans. Richard Sharpe, (London: Penguin Books, 1995).

ocean as a place to adventure and reach out into the unknown.⁹

There are two primary manuscripts or historical sources on the life of Saint Brendan. The earliest mention of Brendan is in the *Vita Sancti Columbae* (Life of Saint Columba) of Adamnan, written between A.D. 679 and 704. Adamnan's work is primarily a hagiography of St. Columba, the founder of Iona.¹⁰ The focus of the *Vita Sancti Columbae* is Columba but also includes other notable and important figures of Columba's era, including St. Brendan. The second source is the *Navigatio Sancti Brendani Abbatis* ("Voyage of Saint Brendan the Abbot") – sometimes abbreviated as just *Navigatio*. It was written around 200 years after the historical Brendan.

Saint Brendan is most remembered for his bold and adventurous journey to find a mythical and blessed island across the sea where it was always day and where Christian saints would dwell in blessed happiness and joy. Saint Brendan's Feast Day is remembered on May 16 and is celebrated by Anglicans, Catholics, and Orthodox Christians. He is the patron saint of sailors, mariners, travelers, divers, and whales.

The *Navigatio Sancti Brendani Abbatis* ("Voyage of Saint Brendan the Abbot"), which describes Brendan's voyage across the sea, likely contains literary embellishment, as the earliest manuscripts mention

⁹ David Adam, *A Desert in the Ocean: The Spiritual Journey according to St Brendan the Navigator* (New York: Paulist Press, 2000), 18.

¹⁰ Columba's Irish name (in Gaelic) means "dove," the exact Hebrew word for Jonah. The latinized version Jonah is "Iona," hence the name of the famous Irish Abbey.

little on specific details. As historian D.H. Farmer observes,

The author of the *Navigatio* knew the *Life* of Brendan and wrote an attractive story to harmonize with it. As it stands, his work is a fascinating mixture of fact, fantasy and literary borrowing. Its basic theme, the quest for a paradise on earth, can be traced back through early Christian writings to Greek, Roman and Egyptian literature.¹¹

The *Navigatio* is part of an even larger body of writings that appear in early Medieval Ireland, called *Imram*, [*Imrama*, plural], Irish (Gaelic) for "voyage." The *Imrama* were old Irish legends and tales which told of a hero's adventurous and often perilous journey across the sea to other worlds in order to fulfill his destiny.

Not surprisingly, J.R.R. Tolkien not only knew of these legendary *Imrama*, in 1955, but he also published a poem titled, *Imram*, based on the legendary voyage of Saint Brendan.¹² The poem, which is based on the *Navigatio*, contains many elements which show up later (in different forms) in Tolkien's Middle-earth. The beginning of the fourth stanza in Tolkien's poem reaches an adventurous crescendo in St. Brendan's perilous journey across the sea:

Upreamed from sea to cloud then sheer
a shoreless mountain stood;
its sides were black from the sullen tide

¹¹ Farmer, *The Age of Bede*, 12.

¹² J.R.R. Tolkien, "Imram," *Time and Tide* (3 December 1955), 1561.

to the red lining of its hood.
No cloak of cloud, no lowering smoke,
no looming storm of thunder
in the world of men saw I ever unfurled
like the pall that we passed under.
We turned away, and we left astern
the rumbling and the gloom;
then the smoking cloud asunder broke,
and we saw the Tower of Doom¹³

In an excellent article published in 1991, Norma Roche explores the deep connections between the *Navigatio* of Saint Brendan and Tolkien's cosmology. She uncovers many fascinating connections between St. Brendan's journey and Tolkien's world, including magical stars (Eärendil), legendary trees (the White Tree of Gondor), and the main one being Brendan's journey to the West to an undying land.¹⁴ Throughout the centuries, St. Brendan has continued to inspire and encourage Christians to dare great adventures for God.

The second figure we'll consider on this matter is Tolkien's fictional character, Bilbo Baggins, in *The Hobbit* – a homebody who never once in his life thought he'd be going on adventures of any kind. In fact, the adventure he found was quite unexpected.

¹³ From J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Notion Club Papers: History of Middle Earth*, vol. 9, 1992 edition, accessed December 27, 2020, <https://englewoodreview.org/poem-the-death-of-st-brendan-j-r-r-tolkien/>.

¹⁴ Norma Roche, "Sailing West: Tolkien, the Saint Brendan Story, and the Idea of Paradise in the West," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature* 17, No. 4: (1991), Article 3.

BILBO BAGGINS & THE ADVENTURE OF THE UNEXPECTED

In *The Lord of the Rings: Fellowship of the Ring*, Bilbo Baggins had just arrived home to his hobbit-hole from his self-described "eleventy-first" birthday party celebration. To his surprise, Bilbo finds Gandalf, the wizard, waiting for him there. Bilbo's sudden departure, or rather sudden disappearance, from the party gets Gandalf to thinking. Gandalf knew that Bilbo had a magical ring, but *could* Bilbo's ring possibly be *the* One Ring to rule them all? After a brief conversation about his sudden disappearance from the party, Bilbo tells Gandalf that he is leaving permanently. "I feel I need a holiday, a very long holiday as I have told you before. Probably a permanent holiday: I don't expect I should return."¹⁵ The next thing Bilbo says to Gandalf is greatly significant to his character, given his family history and background: a thread that runs throughout *The Hobbit* and the entire *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. "I want to see mountains again, Gandalf – *mountains*; and then find somewhere I can rest."¹⁶ Most first-time readers won't pick up on this, but after seeing his story unfold, Bilbo undergoes a transformation of sorts. Why did Bilbo want to see mountains again? Exactly what was it that caused him to long for mountains?

Before his "unexpected journey" with Gandalf and the dwarves in *The Hobbit*, Bilbo did not care for adventures of any kind or getting out of his comfort zone. He enjoyed a life of ease and convenience. It only makes sense because, in *The Hobbit*, we learn that on his father's

¹⁵ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1982), 34.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

side of the family, the Bagginses never had *any* adventures. "The Bagginses had lived in the neighborhood of The Hill for time out of mind, and people considered them very respectable, not only because they were rich, but because they never had adventures or did anything unexpected."¹⁷ Tolkien then goes on to tell us, "This is a story of how a Baggins had an adventure, and found himself doing and saying things rather unexpected. He may have lost his neighbours' respect, but he gained, -- well, you will see whether he gained anything in the end."¹⁸

The Hobbit is, in every sense, an *adventure* story. It's the story of a hobbit who lived a rather ordinary life but was swept into a story of epic proportions. Bilbo's adventure was certainly something that he hadn't planned on. It was the very *unexpectedness* of it that highlighted everything that happened to him after he left the comforts of the Shire. One might be tempted, however, to think that adventures are only *unexpected* events. Certainly, unexpected events *can* lead to adventures, as in the case of Bilbo, but adventures can also be planned as well. However, even when adventures *are* planned and maps are used, the *unexpected* and the *unplanned* can (and often does) happen as well.

ELEMENTS OF ADVENTURE & FAITH: SOME OBSERVATIONS

No one has written more extensively on adventure (and what it is) than the British mountaineer and scholar

¹⁷ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt: Boston, New York, 2012), 3.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

Wilfrid Noyce. Noyce was educated at Cambridge University and was a member of the 1953 British expedition to climb Mount Everest. In his book, *The Springs of Adventure* (1958), Noyce explores various theories on exactly *why* humans go on adventures and why they take great risks with little or no reward, at times risking their very lives. In some cases, the reward is nothing monetary or tangible, other than the accomplishment of the feat, whether it is crossing Antarctica or summiting the Matterhorn. Noyce asks, "Do *all* adventures involve risk? I think not . . . Many people do daily jobs involving a certain risk, but these are not classed as adventures, and the motive is usually money."¹⁹ One of the most common elements of adventure is that of *self-knowledge*, one of the very core Delphic maxims of ancient Greece.

Like real-life adventurers who have climbed alpine peaks, crossed barren deserts, and survived wars, the wisdom Bilbo gained after his adventures was not monetary but deeply personal and spiritual in nature. One is reminded of the words of legendary British mountaineer George Leigh Mallory who eloquently described his experience in summiting multiple peaks, including Mont Blanc.

Have we vanquished an enemy? None but ourselves. Have we gained success? That word means nothing here. Have we won a

¹⁹ Wilfred Noyce, *The Springs of Adventure* (Cleveland and New York: The World Publishing Co., 1958), 16 [italics in the original].

kingdom? No . . . and yes. We have achieved an ultimate satisfaction . . . fulfilled a destiny.²⁰

The word, adventure dates from about 1300, from the Old French, *aventuren*, "to risk the loss of," from *aventurer* (12th Cent.) "wander, travel; seek adventure; happen by chance," from *aventure*.²¹ The subject of adventure and its meaning is as deep and wide as all of literature and history. As was alluded to above, this article is an exploration of adventure from the viewpoint of the hagiographical, the poetic, and the literary: specifically, the Irish Saint, Brendan the Navigator, and fictional character, Bilbo Baggins. There is obviously overlap between the two figures, which I accidentally discovered in the work of Tolkien scholar Norma Roche.²² The question at hand is what exactly *are* some commonalities between St. Brendan and Bilbo Baggins as far as adventure and faith are concerned?

One of the most foundational questions in answering this question is simply, *why*? Why risk the dangers of adventure? Why did St. Brendan leave the comforts of his home? Why did Bilbo leave the comforts of the Shire? Why do explorers risk life and limb for what seems like nothing? What benefits does one gain by standing on a

²⁰ G.L. Mallory, "Mont Blanc from the Col du Géant by the Eastern Buttress of Mont Maudit," *The Alpine Journal: A Record of Mountain Adventure and Scientific Observation by Members of the Alpine Club* 32, no. 218, (September 1918): 148-162.

²¹ "Adventure," *Online Etymology Dictionary*, accessed January 3, 2022, <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=Adventure>.

²² Norma Roche, "Sailing West: Tolkien, the Saint Brendan Story, and the Idea of Paradise in the West," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature* 17, No. 4: (1991), Article 3.

barren, windswept summit or discovering a new species of fish in the plutonian depths of the oceans?

Wilfred Noyce rightly observes:

Why did they do it? Of course you can maintain that much of this hardship was endured in the cause of science. People measure ice caps, collect penguins' eggs, and even sit under the snow for months in order to add to the sum of the world's meteorological knowledge. But that seems to me only very partially the answer. I think that the reasons are many, and that one of them is part of the human make-up to want to "prove" yourself, to show that you can do something you thought impossible.²³

Truly, the reasons for risk and adventure are many. In the case of St. Brendan and Bilbo, one of the primary reasons was a spiritual vision inspired by beauty.

A SPIRITUAL VISION: A RISK FOR SOMETHING INTANGIBLE

What was it that inspired Bilbo to leave the comforts of the Shire? What inflamed St. Brendan to set off across the sea in search of a mythical land of endless light where Christian saints could live in peace? As for Bilbo, at the beginning of *The Hobbit*, Tolkien gives us a good indication why.

The spark which inflamed Bilbo Baggins to break away from his predictable life at the Shire was the singing of the dwarves in their lament-like song, *Far Over the Misty Mountains*.

²³ Noyce, *The Springs of Adventure*, 27.

The dark filled all the room, and the fire died down, and the shadows were lost, and still they played on. And suddenly the first one and then another began to sing as they played, deep throated singing of the dwarves in the deep places of their ancient homes.²⁴

Then the dwarves began to sing.

*Far over the misty mountains cold
To dungeons deep and caverns old
We must away, ere break of day,
To claim our long-forgotten gold.*

*Goblets they carved there for themselves
And harps of gold; where no man delves
There lay they long, and many a song
We sang unheard by men or elves.*

*The pines were roaring on the height,
The winds were moaning in the night.
The fire was red, it flaming spread;
The trees like torches blazed with light.²⁵*

After hearing the dwarves sing of their lost gold, and lost home, something began to stir in Bilbo's heart.

As they sang the hobbit felt the love of beautiful things made by hands and by cunning and by magic moving through him, a fierce and a jealous love, the desire of the

²⁴ Tolkien, *The Hobbit*, 14.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 14-15.

hearts of dwarves. Then something Tookish woke up inside him, and he wished to go and see the great mountains, and hear the pine-trees and the waterfalls, and explore the caves, and wear the sword instead of a walking-stick. He looked out of the window. The stars were out in a dark sky above the trees. He thought of the jewels of the dwarves shining in dark caverns. Suddenly in the wood beyond The Water a flame leapt up – probably somebody lighting a wood-fire – and he thought of the plundering dragons settling on his quiet Hill and kindling it all to flames. He shuddered.²⁶

Of course, after first objecting to it and having many questions about Thorin's proposal to be a burglar for their lost gold, Bilbo had a change of heart and joined the dwarves in their quest. Not too far into their journey, Bilbo Baggins, who "never went on any adventures," was starting to change.

The party went along very merrily, and they told stories or sang songs as they rode forward all day, except of course when they stopped for meals. These didn't come quite as often as Bilbo would have liked them, but still he began to feel that adventures were not so bad after all.²⁷

In the legendary *Navigatio of St. Brendan*, the writer recounts Brendan's first hearing of a mystical island of the blessed saints from a fellow abbot named Barinthus,

²⁶ Tolkien, *The Hobbit*, 16.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 29-30.

the abbot of Drumcullen and spiritual confidant of St. Brendan. Brendan asked Barinthus to recount the wonders he had discovered across the sea.

In answer to this request Barinthus started to tell them about an island he had visited . . . “Clouds came down and covered us on all sides, so completely that we could scarcely make out the prow or stern of the vessel, but after we had sailed for an hour or two a brilliant light shone around us and a country appeared before us, spacious and green, and exceedingly fruitful. The ship put into land and we disembarked to make a tour of the island. We walked for fifteen days and still did not reach the farther shore. All the plants we saw were flowering plants and every tree was a fruit tree; the very stones beneath our feet were precious.”²⁸

Upon hearing more details of this blessed island, the writer of the *Navigatio* states that,

St. Brendan and his whole community prostrated themselves, glorifying God and saying, “The Lord is righteous in all His ways: and holy in all His works.” When they had finished praying, Brendan said: “Let us take some refreshment and carry out the Lord's ‘new commandment.’” The following morning St. Barinthus thus received the brethren's blessing and set off for his own cell. St. Brendan chose out fourteen monks from

²⁸ Farmer, “The Voyage of St. Brendan,” in *The Age of Bede*, 233-34.

the community, shut himself up with them in an oratory, and addressed them thus: "Most beloved co-warriors of spiritual conflict, I beg you to help me with your advice, for I am consumed with a desire so ardent that it casts every other thought and desire out of my heart. I have resolved, if it be God's will, to seek out that Land of Promise of the Saints which our father Barinthus described. What do you think of my plan? Have you any advice to offer?"

As soon as their father in God had made known his intentions, they all replied, as with one voice, "Father, your will is ours too. Have we not left our parents and set aside our earthly inheritance in order to put ourselves completely in your hands? We are prepared to come with you, no matter what the consequences may be. We seek to do one thing alone – the will of God."²⁹

Both Bilbo Baggins, as well as St. Brendan the Navigator and his monks, were fueled by a vision of beauty beyond the mundane: for Bilbo, it was in hearing the song of the dwarves, and for St. Brendan, it was hearing about an island of promise and wonder from Abbot Barthinus. Yet, in the calculus of adventure, death could not be ruled out of either endeavor.

Desiring assurances from Thorin Oakenshield on his potential role as burglar, Bilbo was not given any. To Thorin, Bilbo asked,

²⁹ Farmer, "The Voyage of St. Brendan," in *The Age of Bede*, 235.

Also, I should like to know about risks, out-of-pocket expenses, time required and remuneration and so forth" – by which he meant: "What am I going to get out of it? and am I going to come back alive."³⁰

No direct answer was given to him, only stories of fire-breathing dragons and goblins who dwelt deep in underground caverns. Bilbo had the vision, but he needed *courage* to actually go.

PRIVATION & COURAGE

The age in which St. Brendan lived was a world inhabited by demons, evil spirits, and spiritual warfare. Although St. Brendan is mostly associated with the sea, his spiritual heritage in monasticism originates in the desert. Monasticism itself began in the deserts of the Sinai, in Egypt in the 4th century with St. Anthony, of whom St. Athanasius records epic battles with demons of temptation and lust.³¹ Theologian Peter H. Görg explains the connections between the desert & spiritual warfare in his excellent book on St. Anthony.

From time immemorial the desert was considered a place of demons which was uninhabited by human beings and so hostile to life that it seemed to be abandoned even by God. Yet did not the Divine Redeemer visit the desert before beginning his public ministry, so as to arm himself with fasting and prayer,

³⁰ Tolkien, *The Hobbit*, 22.

³¹ Tim Vivian and Apostolos Athanassakis, trans., *The Life of St. Anthony: The Coptic Life* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2003).

and did not Israel also have to cross the desert before it could reach the Promised Land? What could be more obvious, therefore, than for our ascetic also to take that final step in his life of renunciation and voluntary privations to go into the desert? . . . The example that he [St. Anthony] kept in mind was the Old Testament prophet Elijah, whose goal was to make himself the man that he was supposed to be when he appeared before God: pure of heart and ready to obey the will of God alone.³²

Following in this same vein, the monks with whom St. Brendan confided after proposing to set sail to the blessed island responded, "Father, your will is ours too. Have we not left our parents and set aside our earthly inheritance in order to put ourselves completely in your hands? We are prepared to come with you, no matter what the consequences may be. We seek to do one thing alone – the will of God."³³

To enjoin an inward and outward journey of adventure and to do the will of God takes moral fiber as well as courage, the virtue which anchors all other virtues. In C.S. Lewis's, *The Screwtape Letters*, a fictional correspondence between a senior devil named Screwtape to his subordinate nephew, Wormwood, he explains.

This, indeed, is probably one of the Enemy's motives for creating a dangerous world — a world in which moral issues really come to the

³² Peter H. Görg, *The Desert Fathers: Saint Anthony and the Beginnings of Monasticism* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011), 16, 21.

³³ Farmer, *The Age of Bede*, 235.

point. He sees as well as you do that courage is not simply one of the virtues, but the form of every virtue at the testing point, which means at the point of highest reality. A chastity or honesty, or mercy, which yields to danger will be chaste or honest or merciful only on conditions. Pilate was merciful till it became risky.³⁴

St. Brendan's journey across the open ocean was not a journey for the faint of heart. It required courage and a willingness to leave everything behind. History is replete with true stories of ships lost at sea, blown off course, or sunk by pack ice, such as the case of the ill-fated Franklin Expedition to find a route through the Northwest Passage or the sinking of the HMS Endurance, the ship of polar explorer, Sir Ernest Shackleton.³⁵

All adventures, whether planned or accidental, spiritual or physical, require courage.

RESTLESS HEARTS FOR ADVENTURE AND THE ETERNAL CITY

Both St. Brendan and Bilbo Baggins highlight something about the deep nature of ourselves – namely that we are creatures designed for adventure and faith. As the writer of Ecclesiastes has observed, “*He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end.*”³⁶ Ironically, for the

³⁴ C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (London: Fontana Books, 1955), 148-49.

³⁵ Bertrand Imbert, *North Pole, South Pole: Journeys to the Ends of the Earth* (New York: Abrams, 1992).

³⁶ Ecclesiastes 3:11, NIV.

Christian believer, the life of faith as it is lived through the liturgy plunges us into the deepest mysteries and adventures which can be experienced. In his excellent devotional work on St. Brendan titled, *A Desert in the Ocean: The Spiritual Journey of St. Brendan the Navigator*, Vicar David Adam brilliantly observes that:

Life is meant to be an adventure. When we cease to reach out and stretch ourselves something in us dies or we feel frustrated; for life to be lived to the full it has to be adventurous. I believe that God calls us to adventure, to extend ourselves, and to seek new horizons . . . In all our lives there are mystery and depths that are unfathomable; if we lose our sight of this life becomes more of a problem or we become dull and bored. Liturgy calls us into the depths, to mystery and to create our own desert in the ocean . . . [daily] Prayer is an entering fully into the Eternal that is all about us. The events that we look forward to in liturgical seasons are always a part of us and can come to be realized as our heritage at any time. Our lives and the great mysteries of the universe, the mystery of God himself are all interwoven like some great Celtic carpet pattern, with each thing touching and being part of another.³⁷

In considering, and more importantly, in *embarking* on adventures of faith, one is not only following in the footsteps of great figures of history, literature, or the Church but the very father of faith itself, Abraham, whom the writer of Hebrews says,

³⁷ Adam, *A Desert in the Ocean*, 1, 32-33.

By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.³⁸

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the presence of adventure and faith is a sign of true spiritual *life* - a life open to unrealized possibility and potential. To risk adventure and to tread the narrow path of faith is dangerous but also life-giving. It is, as the writer of Hebrews writes, *What the ancients were commended for*.³⁹ To those who went before us, (the great "cloud of witnesses"), by daring to walk the adventure of their faith: a sea was parted, impregnable fortresses fell down, giants were slain, flaming furnaces were escaped, kingdoms subdued, mothers received their dead raised to life again, and yet others suffered great loss, were tortured, or even lost their lives.⁴⁰

There is a great risk of loss in both adventure and faith, but the benefits are both immediate as well as eternal. In the end, knowledge of oneself and one's God is gained through adventure, and one begins to see the familiar in new ways. As T.S. Eliot observes in "The Little Gidding,"

³⁸ Hebrews 11:8-10, NIV

³⁹ Hebrews 11:2, NIV.

⁴⁰ Hebrews 11:30-40, NIV.

Every phrase and every sentence is an end and a beginning,

*Every poem an epitaph. And any action
Is a step to the block, to the fire, down the sea's throat
Or an intelligible stone: and that is where we start.*

*We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.⁴¹*

An adventurous faith is not only an appropriate description of the life of Saint Brendan, who left the comforts of his native land for the roaring sea waves; it is also the heritage of every saint, for every single believer is on a perilous journey. The only questions which remain are, "When will they realize it, and when will they embrace it?"

"There and back again" not only describes Bilbo Baggins's journey but everyone who dares to walk out their front door to attempt something great. Many years after Bilbo happened upon the One ring after Gollum had lost it, it was passed on to his nephew, Frodo. As the two were reunited in the Hall of Fire in Rivendell, and Bilbo asked to gaze upon it just one more time, he asked Frodo, *Don't adventures ever have an end? I suppose not. Someone else always has to carry on the story.*⁴² Indeed.

⁴¹ T.S. Eliot, "The Little Gidding," in *The Four Quartets* (New York: Harcourt Books, 1971), 58-59.

⁴² J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*, 260.

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