

What I learned from watching *The Hobbit*

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As the band of weary travelers leapt, ran, and tumbled away in dazzling fashion from a caveful of goblins in *The Hobbit*, I was convicted. I'm a late Gen-Xer, and I've seen plenty of impressive cinematic special effects in his life, from *Forrest Gump* to *Independence Day* to *The Matrix*. But *The Hobbit's* multilayered motion of monster-laden ladders crisscrossing over a dark abyss, its wildly imaginative fight scenes and the depth lent by my 3D glasses convinced me that we humans have crossed a significant line: we now have the creative capacity to fashion new worlds.

I was certainly entertained. And it cost a lot to entertain me. Warner Brothers budgeted \$530 million to produce the new trilogy. New Zealand granted the studio \$25 million in tax rebates and changed the nation's labor laws to secure the magnificent setting. And the first film has already raked in more than \$800 million across the globe.

We humans love this kind of immersive entertainment. We love to enter into Middle-earth, the center of the earth or the far reaches of the galaxy. Why? And what do we forget back home while our imaginations take us elsewhere? Our too-long unemployed neighbors? Our shot-through set of gun regulations? Our swiftly heating planet?

I've often assumed that humanity just can't solve problems like poverty, gun violence and climate change. It seems reasonable to conclude that we just don't have the money, intelligence or creativity. Watching that goblin chase scene troubled this assumption. Humans made *The Hobbit*! Maybe we just lack the *will* to apply our considerable resources and ingenuity to toward social problems instead of entertainment.

I'm no pop-culture-hater. My partner and I recently switched our allegiance from *Glee* to *Downton Abbey*, and our two-year old is already falling in love with Elmo. There's a place for a good thriller or tear jerker when we need a break.

But what does it mean when we use our wildly capable imaginations to entertain (or protect!) ourselves rather than take care of those in need?

It means our politics suffers. Not the name-calling and sound-byte jousting we see on the news, which is its own form of entertainment. I mean the politics that forms the moral backbone of our society: our will to work together to ensure that all lives thrive. Churches have a role to play here. As Christians we are called to a clear-eyed view of the world and its daily suffering so that we may, with God's help, serve the least and lost among us.

We need church to be a place of respite from our media-saturated lives, a place to recenter and reground ourselves in the astonishing Christian story, to relish its implications and allow them to move us to action. Through our worship we develop the eyes to see our entertainment for what it often is: distraction from the work we have been given to do. For where our stories take us, there our hearts will be also.

Of course, as creatures with limits we need our rest as well. But as we settle in to enjoy the next big blockbuster, may our special effects-produced awe be cause for not only fascination but inspiration. If we humans can craft a Gollum, we can figure out how to feed the world's hungry, teach our young and care for the sick, too.