

You Asked for It: The Gospel According to Harry Potter
A Sermon by Louise Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Cleveland Heights, Ohio
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Text: Luke 9:18-27

Strictly speaking, the topic for today's sermon was not requested. But when a young member of our congregation threw down a gauntlet by challenging, "Bet you can't preach a sermon on Harry Potter," I knew I had to do it. And why not? Well over 200 million copies of the seven books – translated into 55 languages-- have been purchased. Librarians, teachers, and parents have given thanks for material that is accessible yet compelling enough to get kids to read. But adults too find themselves pulled into this story and eagerly await the next installment. What accounts for the runaway popularity of the magical world of wizardry as practiced by Harry Potter and his friends Hermione and Ron?

A few voices have raised objections, quoting Bible verses condemning sorcery and magic. But most understand that Rowling's books are not advocating witchcraft or the dark arts as they are practiced even today. Instead, she is telling a story—and a fascinating, imaginative one at that—set in this context. Though she invokes fantasy, magic, and wizardry, they are mere storytelling aids. And the story she tells is the classic one: of the struggle between good and evil; of how evil is conquered by the power of unconditional sacrificial love; and how the force of friendship helps us face fears and accomplish feats of courage. It's a story that has been told since time began; a story that informs and illumines our own individual stories. It's not unlike the story of our faith—similarly a story of struggle and choice, of community and covenant, of how evil is conquered and creation saved through love, though it comes by way of sacrifice and death.

Perhaps it won't surprise you, then, that the text I chose for this sermon is a scene from the life the one who embodied divine love, whose sacrificial death restored life to the world, and who has called each of us to a destiny marked by grace and service. From the perspective of the Church founded in his name, some two millennia later, it's easy to forget that Jesus' ultimate purpose was not always clear—to the crowds, to his disciples, perhaps not even to him. It seems to have unfolded as he taught and preached and healed, and through prayer and conversation; even through argument with the established religious authorities. The morning text describes a pivotal turning point in that unfolding revelation: Peter's confession of Jesus as the Christ, the promised Redeemer. Jesus' reaction tempers any excitement that bold affirmation might have provoked. He commands silence, because he knows that its truth will result in suffering and death. Even his resurrection will not magically set everything right, at least not immediately. His followers will be called to daily sacrifice and focused commitment to the Kingdom of God. Listen for God's Word to the Church in the reading from the gospel according to Luke, in the ninth chapter, at the 18th verse.

[LUKE 9:18-27]

Mr. and Mrs. Dursley, of number four, Privet Drive, were proud to say that they were perfectly normal, thank you very much. They were the last people you'd expect to be involved in anything strange or mysterious, because they just didn't hold with such nonsense. . . the Dursley's had everything they wanted, but they also had a secret, and their greatest fear was that somebody would discover it. [Sorcerer's Stone, p. 1]

The Harry Potter epic begins quietly enough, on a normal day, on a normal street, among perfectly normal people—or Muggles, as the non-magical humans are called. Someone has famously noted that every story has one of only two plot lines: someone leaves home, or a stranger comes to town. In Harry Potter, the stranger is an owl messenger who delivers an invitation to attend Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry; and Harry's life really begins as he leaves home to

meet his destiny. The adventures he has would fill a book, or seven! His years at Hogwarts are chronicled, but it's clear right from the start that Harry has been literally marked (by the jagged scar on his forehead, a reminder of evil Lord Voldemort's murder of his parents, which he miraculously survived) for some mission far beyond being a stellar student and quidditch player. Harry makes friends, learns the lessons of wizardry, and grows in awareness of the rising power of Voldemort, and what is at stake in resisting him. Gradually, he discovers who he is and to what purpose he has been called. He takes each step as it comes, faces various challenges and challengers, and hones his knowledge and skills. But he doesn't really understand what he will have to do until the final show-down with Voldemort.

Over and over again, Harry questions his fitness for wizardry, and wonders if he will be strong enough or brave enough or clever enough to prevail against the dark powers. This scene in the first book, when Harry is initially presented with opportunity to study at Hogwarts, resonates with the doubts of biblical prophets and leaders and apostles and anyone who has ever doubted that God could tap him or her for special service. *Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football? "Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard." To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled. "Not a wizard, eh? Harry Potter, not a wizard—just you wait...." [Sorcerer's Stone, pp. 57-8]*

Even though Harry is clearly gifted and special, he has to work hard to develop those gifts. He gets into trouble when he tries to cut corners (or use a charm he's not yet mastered). Rowling seems to make the point that each of us has the power to choose how we will use the gifts we have; whether for good or evil. Evil is portrayed as consummate selfishness; the idea that one's powers should be concentrated solely on the self. The battle between evil and good is depicted as the struggle between self-glorification and seeking the common good; between narrow self-interest and redemptive purpose.

Central to the story is the friendship that develops among Harry and his Hogwarts schoolmates, Hermione and Ron. The series takes them from age 11 through 18, and despite their burgeoning magical skills, navigate the rocky shoals of adolescence in familiar ways. The three young people are by no means perfect, and their interactions bear all the characteristics of friends who know each other so well they can draw on each others' strengths as well as accept each others' vulnerabilities (though not without some teasing and testing). Through thick and thin, they remain loyal, and their friendship makes Harry's heroism possible. Harry learns much from Hogwarts' headmaster, Albus Dumbledore, and teachers of all kinds. He could not carry out his mission alone; he has to rely on others—his friends and mentors, as well as a spiritual charm known as a "patronus." In a scene from *The Prisoner of Azkaban*, Harry summons help when the hellish Dementors try to suck out his godfather's soul. He summons a joyful memory and shouts, "Expecto Patronum!" The Latin words may be translated, "I look for a guardian" or even "I await a savior" and a silver-white stag appears, and defeats the ghouls. Some have commented on the reference (surely not accidental) to a white stag, since Medieval times a symbol of Christ the Savior.

I wonder if some of the appeal of Harry Potter—and the fantasy genre in general—reflects a spiritual hunger in a world in which materialism and rationalism rule. We yearn for mystery, for supernatural power, for what theologian Marcus Borg and others have called "the more"—transcendent reality. Without

making explicit mention of God, Rowling has made religious themes and questions accessible and engaging to many who might otherwise ignore them or remain resistant to more conventional religious expression.

Like Harry Potter, the story of our lives is a traveling tale; a journey that takes us through many changes and transitions. We have to leave home—whether that home is a place of comfort and security or of conflict—in order to learn, to gain experience, have adventures, and discover our purpose. Some of that journey is one we make alone; but much of it will be far richer if taken in the company of companions—literally meaning “the ones we share bread with.” Our friends. Our family. We will know headlong joy and heartbreak, times when fear seems to have the upper hand, and times of light and profound clarity; times when God seems almost tangibly present, and times when God seems to have retreated into the background, if there at all. The journey of life is one of questions and faith, hopes and doubts, suffering and blessing, of chance and providence and the God who loves us through it all. Always, always, we have choices. We can live for ourselves, or we can live for others. We can trust power or we can trust love.

In the end, Harry Potter chooses love. In a conversation with Dumbledore (and if you know that Dumbledore dies in book six, I won't tell you how he comes to be speaking with him), Harry is confronted with a very difficult choice—to remain safe, or return and face Voldemort.

The realization of what would happen next settled gradually over Harry in the long minutes, like softly falling snow. “I’ve got to go back, haven’t I?” “That is up to you. . . I think if you choose to return, there is a chance that Voldemort may be finished for good. I cannot promise it. But I know this, Harry, that you have less to fear from returning than he does. Do not pity the dead, Harry. Pity the living, and above all those who live without love. By returning, you may ensure that fewer souls are maimed, fewer families are torn apart. If that seems to you a worthy goal, then we say good-bye for the present.”

Harry nodded and sighed. . . .it was warm and light and peaceful here, and he knew that he was heading back to pain and the fear of more loss. [Deathly Hallows, p.722]

But return he does, to do battle with evil. Only one of them can survive. As they face off, their final conversation reveals their essence.

“Is it love again?” said Voldemorte, his snake’s face jeering. “Dumbledore’s favorite solution, love, which he claimed conquered death, though love did not stop him falling from the tower and breaking like an old waxwork? Love, which did not prevent me stamping out your mother like a cockroach, Potter—and nobody seems to love you enough to run forward this time and take my curse. So what will stop you dying now when I strike?”

“Just one thing,” said Harry, and still they circled each other wrapped in each other, held apart by nothing but the last secret.” [Deathly Hallows, p.739]

The last secret is the same one we celebrate at this Table. Here we remember a sacrificial death that has brought us new life. Here we approach in anticipation of the Kingdom of light and love that *will* come. Here we gather with beloved companions to be nourished and encouraged for the journey ahead.

All is well. That is the last word of Harry Potter’s journey. By the grace of God, it will be the last word of ours as well.

GRACIOUS GOD, YOU CALL US TO VENTURES OF WHICH WE CANNOT SEE THE ENDING, BY PATHS AS YET UNTRODDEN, THROUGH PERILS UNKNOWN. GIVE US FAITH TO GO OUT WITH COURAGE, NOT KNOWING WHERE WE GO, BUT ONLY THAT YOUR HAND IS LEADING US AND YOUR LOVE SUPPORTING US; THROUGH JESUS CHRIST OUR LORD. AMEN.

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