

Love and Lumos: Allusions to God in Harry Potter and its Application to the Lenten Journey within an Anglican parish

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Abstract

One commentator by the name of Connie Neal has said that the Harry Potter series is the “greatest evangelistic opportunity the church has ever missed.”¹ While I think she’s overstating her point, she’s not that far off the mark, because the only other book that has outsold the Harry Potter series is the Bible, and frankly I don’t know of anyone who would line up at midnight at a bookstore, eager to devour the newest translation of the Bible. But Harry Potter does not have to be a missed opportunity because at a foundational level, the Harry Potter series explores the universal struggle between good and evil and the redemptive power of love which happens to mirror the Lenten journey that many traditional Anglican parishes engage in on an annual basis.

This paper will outline an approach in which the seven novels of the Harry Potter series can be used to form an underlying narrative for seven progressive sermons that will guide a congregation simultaneously through the spiritual trajectory of the Lenten season with the narrative trajectory of Harry Potter series. Recent results from two congregations will show that the approach is both respectful and rewarding for those who have never heard of Harry Potter, as well as those who have never heard the Christian metanarrative, and, in fact, has provided many additional opportunities for the church to connect with unchurched members of the community.

Introduction

In the entire Harry Potter series, there are only two biblical quotations. Both quotations occur in the seventh novel, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* when Harry Potter and Hermione Granger enter the cemetery in Godric’s Hollow on Christmas Eve. As they move through the cemetery, they come across the tombstone of Kendra and Ariana Dumbledore where they read, “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.”² Shortly afterwards they find the tombstone of Harry’s parents, James and Lily Potter, and on that tombstone is carved, “The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death.”³ When asked about these quotations in an interview at a press conference for the release of the final book, J. K. Rowling explains, “I think those two particular quotations he finds on the tombstones at

¹ Connie Neal, as cited by Nancy Gibbs, “J. K. Rowling, Person of the Year 2007 Runner-Up,” *Time Magazine*, Vol. 170, No. 27, December 31, 2007,

http://www.time.com/time/specials/2007/personoftheyear/article/0,28804,1690753_1695388_1695436,00.html

² J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, Bloomsbury: London, 2007, p. 266.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 268.

Godric's Hollow, they sum up—they almost epitomize the whole series.”⁴ Yet as it turns out, these two quotations also frame the Lenten journey.

For if we take these two quotations and consider their placement within the Revised Common Lectionary, we discover that they actually bookend the Christian experience of Lent. The first quotation, “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also,” is from Matthew 6:21, which is the final verse of the gospel reading on Ash Wednesday. The second quotation, “The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death,” (1 Corinthians 15:26) is from a passage describing the centrality of the resurrection, and is the last verse of the epistle reading for Easter Sunday.

While I do not believe J. K. Rowling selected these quotations with the Revised Common Lectionary in hand, I hope through this paper to point out a unique opportunity in which the seven novels of the Harry Potter series can be used to form an underlying narrative for a progressive sermon series that will guide a congregation simultaneously through the spiritual trajectory of the Lenten season with the narrative trajectory of the Harry Potter series. Recent results from two congregations will show that there is an approach in which this can be done that is both respectful and rewarding for those who have never heard of Harry Potter, as well as those who have never heard the Christian metanarrative, and, in fact, has provided additional opportunities for the congregations to connect with unchurched members of the community.

The Lenten Journey

One commentator by the name of Connie Neal has said that the Harry Potter series is the “greatest evangelistic opportunity the church has ever missed.”⁵ Though I think she's overstating her point, she's not that far off the mark, because the only other book that has outsold the Harry Potter series is the Bible, and frankly I don't know of anyone who would line up at midnight at a bookstore eager to devour the newest translation of the Bible. But the Harry Potter series does not have to be a missed opportunity because at a foundational level, the Harry Potter series explores the universal struggle between good and evil and the redemptive power of love which happens to mirror the Lenten journey that many traditional Anglican parishes engage in on an annual basis.

Yet even with the Revised Common Lectionary, it's rare to find any two Anglican churches doing the same thing for Lent. Each individual parish or congregation develops over time its own unique expression of the Lenten journey, perhaps because the origins of Lent are complex and confusing. The fifth-century Byzantine historian Socrates describes his understanding of the differing Lenten observances in this way:

“The fasts before Easter will be found to be differently observed among different people. Those at Rome fast three successive weeks before Easter,

⁴ Shawn Adler, “Harry Potter Author J. K. Rowling Opens Up About Books' Christian Imagery,” MTV.com, October 17, 2007, <http://www.mtv.com/news/articles/1572107/20071017/index.jhtml>.

⁵ Connie Neal, as cited by Nancy Gibbs, “J. K. Rowling, Person of the Year 2007 Runner-Up,” *Time Magazine*, Vol. 170, No. 27, December 31, 2007, http://www.time.com/time/specials/2007/personoftheyear/article/0,28804,1690753_1695388_1695436,00.html

excepting Saturdays and Sundays. Those in Illyrica and all over Greece and Alexandria observe a fast of six weeks, which they term ‘the forty days’ fast.’ Others commencing their fast from the seventh week before Easter, and fast three to five days only, and that at intervals, yet call that time ‘the forty days’ fast.’ It is indeed surprising to me that thus differing in the number of days, they should both give it one common appellation; but some assign one reason for it, and others another, according to their several fancies.”⁶

While initially Lent was a time of fasting and self-examination for catechumens as they prepared themselves to receive the sacrament of baptism, by the mid-fifth century, as adult initiation gave way to infant baptism, the Lenten journey was broadened to include participation by entire congregations. As a result, the purpose and character of Lent began to change.

Through a series of sermons during this transitional period, Pope Leo outlines what he believes is the two-fold nature of Lent, which in principle, still shapes our Lenten practices today. First of all, Leo acknowledges that “we should remain in God’s sight always the same, as we ought to be found on the Easter feast itself.”⁷ However, considering human nature, “The Divine Providence has with great beneficence taken care that the discipline of the forty days should heal us and restore the purity of our minds, during which the faults of other times might be redeemed by pious acts and removed by chaste fasting.”⁸ Secondly, because no one “is so perfect and holy as not to be able to be more perfect and holy, let us all together without difference of rank, without distinction of desert, with pious eagerness pursue our race from what we have attained to what we yet aspire.”⁹ In other words, “the church announced a season of Lent, from the old English word *lenten*, meaning “spring”—not only a reference to the season before Easter, but also an invitation to a springtime for the soul. Forty days to cleanse the system and open the eyes to what remains when all comfort is gone. Forty days to remember what it is like to live by the grace of God alone and not by what we can supply for ourselves.”¹⁰

This “invitation to a springtime for the soul” places remarkable pressure on pastors, preachers, and congregations to make the Lenten journey both meaningful and transformational. This is why church leaders break into a cold sweat as soon as they put the crèche away because they know in a few short weeks they will enter into a season filled with pious and profound expectations. Often this results in the requisite launch of new programs, spiritual disciplines, Bible studies, and special worship services, which are all well and good. Yet if we do not recognize that Lent is a journey, that there is a progressive narrative that guides us from week to week, from desert to cross, from darkness to light, from dying to new

⁶ Socrates, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, 5.22

⁷ Sermon 39, 2, trans. Charles Lett Feltoe in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series*, 12, 152.

⁸ Sermon 42, 1, *Ibid.*, 12, 156.

⁹ Sermon 40, 1, *Ibid.*, 12, 154.

¹⁰ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home by Another Way*, Cowley: Cambridge, Mass., 1999, p. 66.

life, then our best efforts can appear disjointed, and we often lose the plot as to how this Lenten journey fits within the overall Christian metanarrative.

This means that preachers in particular need to lead their congregations on a Lenten journey. “Not just as sermon after sermon,” as David Schlafer says, “but from sermon to sermon—throughout the season.”¹¹ This allows each successive Sunday to build upon the unfolding narrative in a way that dramatically increases the opportunities to graft our shared stories within the Christian metanarrative. However, the Revised Common Lectionary simply does not follow the traditional stylistic elements of a narrative until we reach the Triduum. But the narrative from the Harry Potter series crosses back and forth over the trajectory of the Lenten journey so many times it easily lends itself to a progressive sermon series.

First Sunday of Lent—Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone

In plotting this sermon series, it seems prudent to preach seven sermons, one for each novel in the series, starting on the First Sunday of Lent. Though the season of Lent officially begins on Ash Wednesday, I believe it is important to launch the series on the First Sunday of Lent for two reasons. First, attendance on Ash Wednesday, because it is a mid-week service, is often a fraction of Sunday’s attendance which is problematic considering the first sermon is foundational for establishing characters and context. Secondly, the gospel reading for the First Sunday of Lent, commonly referred to as the temptation of Jesus in the desert, fits very well with one of the major themes that can be developed from the start of the series.

J. K. Rowling’s first novel *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* begins with the following words, “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.”¹² The Dursleys have constructed their world so that anything out of the ordinary is wrong, freakish, and unwelcome; and even though they are aware that magic exists, they do their very best to ignore and pretend it doesn’t exist. Unfortunately, the Dursleys of this world are making it increasingly difficult to be a person of faith who believes that there is a spiritual reality beyond that which we can perceive with our senses.

Yet the world isn’t divided into just two camps—believers and those who are committed to crushing belief. There is a whole group of people in the world today who just don’t care one way or the other. In terms of the Harry Potter novels, they are like ‘muggles’ or non-magical folk. Their policy towards the spiritual is “don’t ask, don’t care, don’t bother me.” It’s not that they are for or against the spiritual life. It’s just that they don’t see it. Rowling addresses this when she describes a place called the Leaky Cauldron. “It was a tiny, grubby-looking pub. If Hagrid hadn’t pointed it out, Harry wouldn’t have noticed it was there. The people hurrying by didn’t glance at it. Their eyes slide from the big book shop on one side to the record store on the other as if they couldn’t see the Leaky Cauldron at all. In

¹¹ David J. Schlafer, “Plotting a Lenten Preaching Journey,” *The Living Pulpit*, January-March 2000, p. 39.

¹² J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*, Bloomsbury: London, 1997, p. 1.

fact, Harry had the most peculiar feeling that only he and Hagrid could see it.”¹³ This can remind us that many have eyes but do not see the spiritual realm around us, similar to the story of the prophet Elisha who prays that the Lord will open the eyes of his servant so that he will see the horses and chariots of fire surrounding them.¹⁴

Many people in our congregations struggle at times with the reality of the spiritual life, particularly when it comes to the gospel reading where Jesus is tempted by the devil. For in our modern enlightened society we’ve become unable to name evil because we’re afraid of appearing superstitious so we’ve reduced the devil to some sort of psychological condition. Fortunately, the first novel offers us a wide-open opportunity to start with the basics and establish that the spiritual realm is real whether we acknowledge it or not. We can try to keep it out like Mr. Dursley nailing up his mail box, but the results are going to be the same.

Second Sunday of Lent—Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets

The second sermon offers us an opportunity to discuss the choices that we make every single day. Our lectionary readings for the Second Sunday of Lent direct us to the story of Abraham and ask us to either consider the choice he had when the Lord asked him to “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you”¹⁵ or to consider Abraham’s response to the covenant that God establishes with him. Interestingly, book two in the Harry Potter series begins with Harry back at the Dursleys for summer holidays imprisoned in his own bedroom with bars on his window. That’s when Harry meets Dobby the house elf who magically appears one evening to warn Harry Potter not to return to Hogwarts because it’s too dangerous for him. So obviously Dobby does not understand teenage boys because if you give them a choice between staying locked up in their bedroom (in his kindred’s house), or going to live in a dangerous magical castle, they’re going to choose the castle; and so with the help of his friends, Harry breaks out of the Dursleys’ house and returns to Hogwarts.

But dangerous it is, and Harry ends up in the hospital wing where he is visited by Dobby again. During this visit Harry finds out quite a bit about house elves. He discovers that house elves are slaves without possessions and that they wear rags because under the terms of their enslavement, if anyone in the family they serve gives them a piece of clothing, then they will be set free. It is also during this visit that Harry accuses Dobby of trying to kill him. But here’s how Dobby responds: “If [Harry Potter] only knew what he means to us, to the lowly, the enslaved, we dregs of the magical world! We house elves were treated like vermin, sir! But mostly sir, life has improved for my kind since you triumphed over He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. Harry Potter survived, and the Dark Lord’s power was broken, and it was a new dawn, sir, and Harry Potter shone like a beacon of hope for those of us who

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

¹⁴ 2 Kings 6:16-17, All scripture references will be taken from *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version with Apocrypha*, 3rd ed., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

¹⁵ Genesis 12:1

thought the Dark days would never end.”¹⁶ The house elves saw Harry as a beacon of hope who in some way was able to break the power of the Dark Lord who ruled so cruelly. Likewise the prophecies of the coming Messiah were a beacon of hope not only to the Jewish people, but to all those who were oppressed and longed for freedom from cruel masters.

This opens up a secondary theme of freedom in Christ versus enslavement to sin which is present in the epistle readings. For in a meeting with the Pharisees, Jesus responds to them by saying, “Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin,”¹⁷ and like that pillowcase that Dobby wears, while we are enslaved to sin, “our righteous acts are like filthy rags.”¹⁸ Yet what we need and what Jesus offers are the “garments of salvation” and the “robes of righteousness.”¹⁹

This theme is beautifully played out towards the end of the novel when Harry tricks Lucius Malfoy into giving Dobby a sock which becomes the mechanism for redemption that sets Dobby free from enslavement. Similarly, the robes of righteousness have been purchased for us by Christ unwittingly passed to us by those who put Jesus to death. We just have to take hold of it for ourselves, much like Dobby taking hold of the sock.

Third Sunday of Lent—Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban

The narrative trajectory of Rowling’s third novel provides several opportunities for the preacher to address the theme of depression and darkness in our lives and how that can be overcome by the presence and light of God. For as the story opens, Harry learns that Sirius Black, an alleged supporter of the Dark Lord has escaped from the magical prison of Azkaban. In order to recapture Sirius Black, the authorities send the wraith-like guards of Azkaban known as Dementors to search for him. However, these Dementors have a particularly strong effect upon Harry, causing him to pass out when he is in their presence. When Harry asks the Defense Against the Dark Arts professor why Dementors affect him in that way, Professor Lupin responds, “The Dementors affect you worse than the others because there are horrors in your past that the others don’t have... Dementors are among the foulest creatures that walk this earth. They infest the darkest, filthiest places, they glory in decay and despair, they drain peace, hope and happiness out of the air around them. Even Muggles feel their presence, though they can’t see them.”²⁰

There will be several people in the congregation who will know exactly what this feels like, because for those who struggle with depression and mental illness, this image of a Dementor resonates very deeply with them. J. K. Rowling has admitted that the idea for the Dementors came from her own struggles with depression,²¹ but even those who have never

¹⁶ J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, Bloomsbury: London, 1998, p. 133-34.

¹⁷ John 8:34

¹⁸ Isaiah 64:6

¹⁹ Isaiah 61:10

²⁰ J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, Bloomsbury: London, 1999, p. 140.

²¹ Ann Treneman, “J. K. Rowling, the interview,” *The Times* (UK), 30 June 2000, <http://www.accio-quote.org/articles/2000/0600-times-treneman.html>

been diagnosed with depression know that there are times when it feels like Dementors are bearing down on them and all happiness has been drained from their world.

Since Harry was particularly susceptible to Dementors, Professor Lupin teaches him the Patronus charm, which is the only known defense against Dementors. To activate the Patronus charm, one concentrates on their happiest memory and then says, “Expecto Patronum.” These are powerful and significant words. ‘Expecto’ from the Latin simply means, ‘I look towards,’ or ‘I expect.’ Patronum or patronus from the Latin means advocate, counselor, patron or protector, which recalls Jesus saying, “I will ask the Father and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever... You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.”²² However, the root of the word ‘patronum’ in the Latin is ‘pater,’ which means father, and so ‘Expecto Patronum’ can be understood as ‘I look towards or I expect the Father.’ When these words are spoken, a dazzling, brilliant light bursts forth, which takes on the form of a creature that charges the Dementors causing them to flee from its presence, or as John says, “God is light and in him there is no darkness at all.”²³

Towards the end of the novel there is a crucial moment when Harry and his godfather are about to be destroyed by a swarm of Dementors, and Harry is waiting for his earthly father to somehow appear and cast the Patronus charm to repel the Dementors. However, when his earthly father doesn’t appear, Harry realizes that the source of the Patronus actually originates from within him, that the source of the Patronus is the light of the Father that ‘abides with you and is in you.’ After this explanation we watched the scene in the movie, and several members of the congregation, young and old, started to weep. In many conversations afterwards, congregants expressed that they finally felt free, not only to talk about their inner struggles, but that they also saw healing in the abiding presence of God.

Fourth Sunday of Lent—Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire

The lectionary readings for the fourth Sunday of Lent, especially the epistle readings, provide an opportunity for us to explore the theme grace and reconciliation. For example, we hear in Ephesians that, “You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air ... But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were death through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved.”²⁴ This theme easily connects with several characters in the fourth novel as we learn more about their background.

In fact, one of the most enigmatic characters in the entire series is Professor Snape who we learn used to be a follower of the Dark Lord. While one might think that being a follower of the Dark Lord would automatically disqualify you from teaching children, we find out that Snape renounced his involvement with the Dark Lord before his initial downfall and somehow gained Headmaster Dumbledore’s trust. But not only does Snape gain

²² John 14:16-17.

²³ 1 John 1:5.

²⁴ Ephesians 2:1-2, 4.

Dumbledore's trust, Dumbledore appoints him as a trusted teacher at Hogwarts, absolves him of his past, and gives him another chance. Now this doesn't mean that Dumbledore approves of everything Snape does. Snape is a very complicated character and he does have a transparent dislike for Harry and his friends, but Dumbledore quietly corrects him, calls him to make peace with old enemies, and reminds him of whom he now serves. Similarly with us, we may stumble and fall, but as our lectionary reading from 2 Corinthians observes, "If anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation."²⁵ God continues to give us another chance, calling us to make peace with our old ways, and reminding us of whom we serve, so that we can help create a better future.

Dumbledore's extension of grace and reconciliation is further emphasized near the end of the novel when he calls an assembly in the banquet hall for all of the Hogwarts students, as well as those from the schools of Durmstrang and Beauxbatons. "Every guest in this Hall," said Dumbledore, and his eyes lingered upon the Durmstrang students, "will be welcomed back here, at any time, should they wish to come."²⁶ Throughout the series, Dumbledore distinguishes himself as one who extends open arms, even to those that others reject. He excludes no one because of what they were, what they were believed to be, or what they had done. He hired Snape even though he had once been a follower of the Dark Lord, as well as welcoming the Durmstrang headmaster Karkaroff into his banquet hall, knowing that he had also been a supporter of the Dark Lord. Dumbledore's offer to the students that they are welcome back anytime they wish to come, reflects God's open arms and warm embrace to all of us who accept his invitation to join with him.

Fifth Sunday of Lent—Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix

The fifth sermon in this series provides an opportunity to explore the practice of spiritual disciplines which are one of the hallmarks of the Lenten season. For as the fifth novel opens, the Ministry of Magic sets out to increase their influence at Hogwarts by appointing one of their own senior officials as the new Defense Against the Dark Arts professor: one Delores Umbridge who is the epitome of the really scary teacher that we all had growing up. Yet right from the first class, Umbridge refuses to teach the students how to perform defensive spells, saying that they have no need for anything more than a theoretical knowledge. It's not that she disbelieves in the power of defensive magic; it's just that she is determined to squash its development amongst the next generation of students.

This sentiment allows for an easy contrast with Jesus' words at the end of the Sermon on the Mount when he says, "Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock ... But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash."²⁷ Essentially what Jesus is saying is that we are all

²⁵ 2 Corinthians 5:17

²⁶ J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, Bloomsbury: London, 2000, p. 627.

²⁷ Matthew 7:24-27.

building in one of two ways: the wise are building on the rock and the foolish are building on the sand; and the difference between the two has to do with whether we take these teachings that Jesus offers us and put them into practice.

So Harry and his friends Ron and Hermione realize that it is vitally important for them and the other students to practice defensive spells in order to defend themselves. Initially they meet off school grounds but what they really needed was a place for the group to meet secretly at Hogwarts. They find their ideal location in a place referred to as the Room of Requirement, but this room has some very peculiar characteristics—characteristics that would allow a preacher to explore the discipline of prayer. For example, when Harry first finds out about the special nature of the Room of Requirement from Dobby, Dobby tells him, “‘It’s a most amazing room, sir,’ said Dobby. ‘How many people know about it?’ said Harry, sitting up straighter in his chair. ‘Very few, sir. Mostly people stumbles across it when they needs it, sir, but often they never finds it again, for they do not know that it is always there waiting to be called into service, sir.’”²⁸

What is striking about Dobby’s description of the room is that even though people stumble upon it when they are in dire need, they did not realize that it was always there for them, nor did they realize how to utilize it fully. This description in many ways fits our prayer lives as well. Almost everyone will pray when the rains come, the streams rise and the winds blow because we feel like we have nothing to lose. But I think in general, our attitude towards prayer is often like the Room of Requirement. We stumble across it when our need is great, but at other times, we don’t utilize it, even though it is always there, waiting to be called into service.

Sixth Sunday of Lent—Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince

The sixth Sunday of Lent is more commonly referred to as Palm Sunday in which we celebrate the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, often with the versicle and response: “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest.” While we often think the word ‘hosanna’ means something like halleluiah, it actually comes from the Hebrew word *hosha-na* which is more accurately translated as “save us please.” *Hosha-na* is a cry of jubilation and hope as the people of Jerusalem welcomed their long awaited messiah. This theme actually fits in easily with Rowling’s sixth novel.

With the return of the Dark Lord, people begin to speculate that perhaps Harry would be able to defeat the Dark Lord once again. In fact, they even start to call Harry ‘the chosen one.’ When the new Minister of Magic tries to recruit Harry for a few high-profile photo ops, he says to Harry:

“People believe you are ‘the Chosen One,’ you see,” said Scrimgeour. “They think you’re quite the hero—which, of course, you are, Harry, chosen or not! How many times have you faced He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named now?” “Well anyway,” he pressed on, without waiting for a reply, “the point is, you are a symbol of hope for many, Harry. The idea that there is somebody out

²⁸ J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, Bloomsbury: London, 2003, p. 343.

there who might be able, who might even be destined, to destroy He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named—well, naturally, it gives people a lift.”²⁹

However, Harry refuses to go along with the Ministry of Magic, partly because he doesn't want to be manipulated by them, but he also struggles with being identified as 'the Chosen One.' After all, to be 'the chosen one,' is an alternate translation for the term, 'anointed one,' which from the Hebrew is the word 'messiah', and in Greek is the word 'Christ'. This plays out throughout the sixth novel as Harry wrestles with other people's expectations of him as 'the chosen one,' and whether or not he actually is the chosen one, and if so, what it means to be chosen.

This struggle of identity opens up a secondary theme that can be explored in connection to a similar story in the Hebrew Scriptures where Jacob wrestles with an angel by the side of a river. At daybreak the angel says to Jacob, "Let me go, for the day is breaking," but Jacob replies, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." And then the angel says, "What's your name?"³⁰ But at a deeper level, the real question that is being asked of Jacob is 'who are you?' Unfortunately, so many people in our congregations experience great pain from not knowing how to answer that question. Yet as Paul writes, we are "God's chosen ones, holy and beloved."³¹ When someone is able to accept this, I believe they can be freed from their old self. Similarly, when Harry finally comes to accept that he is in fact 'the chosen one,' he is able to move forward and discover what he needs to know to defeat the Dark Lord.

Maundy Thursday—Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows

I decided to close out this seven part series on Maundy Thursday rather than Easter Sunday for several reasons. There are many Anglicans who only attend on Christmas and Easter and these two services have their own unique gravitas. Additionally, it would be difficult for them to enter the narrative at this point. However, the main reason is that the theme of sacrificial love, which is so predominant in the seventh novel, is precisely the kind of love that we hold up on Maundy Thursday - Maundy being a contraction of the Latin 'mandatum.' For on the night before Jesus ended up on the cross, he gave his disciples the 'mandatum novum,' the new commandment, "that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."³² But this not just any kind of love, because the word that Jesus uses over and over for love is 'agape,' which is a sacrificial love—a love that doesn't expect or require anything in return.

This kind of sacrificial love has been present throughout the series. For on the night that Harry's parents were murdered by the Dark Lord, it was Lily Potter's sacrificial love for

²⁹ J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, Bloomsbury: London, 2005, p. 323.

³⁰ Genesis 32:24-27.

³¹ Colossians 3:12.

³² John 13:34-35.

her son Harry that actually defeated the Dark Lord and gave Harry life. But I think it's important to note that this love is a power that exists beyond magic. Lily connected with an ancient love. There was no spell uttered to seal its power. Lily didn't even have her wand. It was just a mother's arms thrown wide to protect her son—a mother giving her life so that her son might live. Throughout scripture God's love is described in a number of ways, among them being, "As a mother comforts her son, so I will comfort you."³³ For "God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them."³⁴

However, one character alone cannot reflect the entirety of God's agape or sacrificial love in this series. Like Lily, Dumbledore also shows such agape love on the night the Death Eaters infiltrate Hogwarts. He immobilizes Harry from atop the astronomy tower in order to stop him from getting involved in fighting the Death Eaters. But the second that Dumbledore takes to perform this spell costs him any chance of defending himself.

This is also the agape love that we see reflected in the character of Professor Snape. Now Snape is the most complicated character in the series, but he loves with a purity that is unrivalled, even though the object of his love is Lily Potter. Snape loved Lily his entire life, though that love was unrequited; and when he finds out that the Dark Lord was after the Potters, he becomes a double-agent. He pleads with Dumbledore to protect them, but that protection was not enough, and when the Dark Lord returns, Snape continually risks death by double-crossing the Dark Lord; and though his cover is never blown, he falls a sacrificial victim while all the time remaining true to his love and protecting her son Harry.

As Snape lies dying, he gives his memories to Harry in the form of tears. Harry then takes these memories to the Pensieve where he realizes that part of the Dark Lord lives within him, and so to completely destroy the Dark Lord, he must be willing to sacrifice his own life. So with great courage and great love, Harry decides to go to the Dark Lord and lay down his life; a decision that conforms his life to the sacrifice of Christ. Harry understands that he is not supposed to survive, but in dying, he will help free the world from the evil of the Dark Lord.

Yet after he lays down his life, Harry regains consciousness in a place like King's Cross Station, but interestingly he doesn't need his glasses because his vision is perfect. Then he meets Dumbledore who died at the end of the previous novel. After a brief conversation, Dumbledore explains to Harry that he can go on from here or choose to go back. Harry chooses to return from this heavenly way-station, being assured by Dumbledore that their goodbye is only for the present. Harry then regains consciousness, but plays dead as he's carried back to Hogwarts where the Dark Lord displays him as a trophy. But suddenly Harry reveals himself, squares off against the Dark Lord, the final spells are cast, the Dark Lord is destroyed once and for all, love has conquered death as dawn breaks on the horizon, and all of creation celebrates. So in a variety of thematic ways, the narrative trajectory of this seventh novel takes us through the Triduum and places us right in front of the empty tomb on Easter morning.

³³ Isaiah 66:13

³⁴ 1 John 3:16

Results and Additional Opportunities

I have struggled over the past ten years with the way in which we continue to pay ‘lip-service’ to the children and youth of the church. We will tell them every chance we have how essential they are to the continuation of the church and sometimes we will even prioritize children and youth ministries in our budgets. But on Sunday morning, after the children’s focus, we send them to the basement or to a special room where they can be loud while we do the “serious business” of being church.

One of the goals that I had through this sermon series was to demonstrate that not only are we interested in what our children and youth are interested in, but it’s important enough to for us as a community to explore it together during ‘prime-time’ on Sunday morning during the most important church season of the year, and to do it with integrity. The look of sheer awe and amazement on the faces of our youth when they entered the sanctuary on the First Sunday of Lent and realized we were serious is something that I’ll never forget. Of course the look of sheer awe and amazement on the faces of the elderly was also memorable, but the power of narrative, if developed with care, can bring anyone regardless of their age into a good story. In fact, I was surprised that there was no negative feedback.

Overall during this sermon series, our attendance rose by twenty-five percent, and on Maundy Thursday it more than doubled. People started apologizing if they were going to miss a Sunday and asked to receive a copy of the sermon. We did not run any Lenten programs, Bible studies or special worship services, yet people talked about this being the most meaningful Lenten experience they have had in years.

During the series a number of unchurched youth joined with us and heard the Christian metanarrative for the first time. The youth then requested an additional opportunity when we could have a marathon of movies and sermons so that they could hear the sermons again and invite their friends to hear them as well. In addition, the sermons have formed the basis of a new course on Harry Potter and Theology being offered at Renison College, University of Waterloo in 2013.

In the epilogue at the end of the series, we see the children of Harry and Ginny, as well as Ron and Hermione board the Hogwarts Express to begin a new school year. In a way, we are reminded that for each generation, spiritual values, disciplines and traditions have to be passed along. For these children, they have Harry’s story to guide them. Fortunately, for us and our children, we do as well.

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