

My sermon series for these next few weeks is “Faith & Film.” I’m inviting us to use secular film as a medium to study our faith...to watch for places where our own stories are echoed in the stories of the characters; to see where there is a moral or social lesson to be learned; and –most importantly—to find those places where we see glimpses of God’s story—the greatest story ever told—reflected in the experiences and actions of the characters.

As a lover of fiction, fantasy, and especially film, I’ve come to realize there is always a lesson to be learned in every story, no matter how mundane or strange the plot. Today we’re going to explore the wizarding world of Harry Potter and see how this seemingly anti-faith film is anything but!

I’m sure that everyone here has heard about Harry Potter. Unless you’ve somehow avoided TV, books, magazines, radio, and trips anywhere, then you have are familiar with to the phenomenon that began in 2000 and since has exploded into 7 books, 8 films, 200 million copies sold worldwide in 55 different languages. It’s a story that appeals to children and adults and now spans a generation of Potterheads.

Of course, some Christians have vocally opposed Harry Potter, quoting Bible verses condemning sorcery and magic. After all, Deuteronomy 18:10-11 says “Let no one be found among you who sacrifices their son or daughter in the fire, who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead.”

Yet the author, JK Rowling, has often told her fans that she does not believe in magic. Rather, magic is a literary device for exploring themes like family drama, friendship, loyalty, selfishness and self-sacrifice, and the overwhelming power of love.

In explaining the Chronicles of Narnia, C. S. Lewis differentiates between two kinds of magic. Invocational magic is the dangerous kind that’s warned about in the Bible, calling upon dark forces and ancient spirits to serve our selfish desires. Incantational magic, by contrast, is about harmonizing with the will of our creator—and that’s the sort of spells we find in the works of Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkein, two of Rowling’s favorite authors.

The magic within the Harry Potter story is not accessible. No one learns to be a witch by engaging the stories. What *is* accessible are universal experiences of what it means to be flawed human beings who are so capable of love and wonder despite their weaknesses. Thus, we fall in love with Harry and his best friends Hermione and Ron because they connect with the humanness in us, not because we are drawn to their powers. In fact, magic is simply something we take for granted in the story. Some people are born with the ability. Some are not.

So magic is simply the framework Rowling uses to build her epic story about the most power literary theme of all: the epic struggle between good and evil. In Harry Potter we encounter a tale about how evil is conquered by the power of unconditional sacrificial love; and how the force of friendship helps us face fears and accomplish daring feats of courage.

In the end, it will not be Harry’s magical powers that defeat evil—it will be his willingness to sacrifice, to lay down his life for those that he loves, to understand that there is the power to do good and evil in everyone and that one must choose the light or the darkness will be consuming. In the end, Harry will choose the good of the whole over the selfish desires of one, and salvation will come through sacrifice, not through power or wisdom.

This story of the war between good and evil is a story that has been told since time began. It is the dominant theme that informs and illuminates our own personal stories. It is why we love westerns and crime dramas and Star Trek and Star Wars and all those Disney movies. And it is why we connect so resonantly to the stories of our faith—stories of struggle and choice, of promises made and broken, of how evil is conquered and we are saved through love, love that comes by way of sacrifice and death.

Our gospel Lesson today from Luke 9:18-27 is a scene from the life of the one who embodied such conquering love, whose sacrificial death gave us hope, and who has called each of us to a future marked by grace and service.

With our incredible gift of hindsight, we often forget that Jesus' ultimate purpose was not always clear—to the crowds, the disciples, and maybe 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.

Our text shows us a turning point in that unfolding revelation: Peter's confession of Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah.

Jesus' reaction in Luke 9 is not what we expect. We think it should be a moment of celebration, a moment to tell the world that he is the ONE who will save them, the one for whom they have been waiting. But instead, Jesus commands silence, because Jesus knows that its truth will result in suffering and death, for him and for those who follow.

Even Easter 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 and building a place where justice rains down like water, love is dominant and all have enough.

Peter recognizes that there is greatness in Jesus, even if he doesn't know yet what that means, for him, or for the world.

Similarly, Harry Potter is surrounded by people who recognize the power he has within him for good or evil, and they either celebrate or lament this revelation depending on their relationship or proximity to him.

So let's start with Mr. and Mrs. Dursley, Harry's Uncle and Aunt who lived at number four, Privet Drive, who were proud to say that they were perfectly normal. 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.

Life was only what you could see, and own, and taste. The Dursley's had everything they wanted, but they also had a secret, and their greatest fear was that somebody would discover it. That secret is they had a witch in the family, and if that wasn't abnormal enough, they now were saddled with raising her orphan child who had magically appeared one day on their doorstep.

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. One day, an owl messenger 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.

Harry's adventures 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 the evil 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.

Harry 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. Over and over again, Harry looks within himself at the potential for darkness, revenge, and hunger for power and wonders if he is good enough to stand for truth and to conquer the evil that is brewing.

This scene in the first book and film, when Harry is initially presented with opportunity to study at Hogwarts, resonates with the doubts of biblical prophets and leaders and apostles and potential pastors and anyone who has ever doubted that God could use her to build the kingdom and transform the world.

Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, was sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could that be possible? He'd spent his life being outshined by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why had they been able to terrorize him?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I'm not a wizard. I'm just Harry." I remember thinking similar things when I began feeling called to ministry. What? I'm not a pastor. I'm just a girl who loves Jesus and wants to leave a mark on this world....

Yet, to Harry's surprise, Hagrid chuckled. "Not a wizard, eh? Harry Potter, not a wizard—just you wait...."

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. 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 selfishness--the idea that one's powers should be concentrated solely on the self, for personal glory and individual gain.

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.

Vital to the story is the friendship that develops between Harry and his schoolmates, and particularly is best buds Hermione and Ron. The series takes them from age 11 through 18, and despite their growing magical skills, they navigate the rocky waters of adolescence in ways that are familiar to all of us. They deal with jealousy and affection, loyalty and love, tests and homework and sports and big decisions, the things all of us encounter in our growing-up years.

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 one another's strengths and accept one another's weaknesses. Through the years they move from classmates, to friends, to a sort of family, something that is powerful to Harry, the orphan boy who lived who hated his only remaining blood family.

Through thick and thin, they remain loyal, and their friendship makes Harry's heroism possible. Harry learns much also from Hogwarts' headmaster, Albus Dumbledore, and teachers who become heroes to him so he can become the hero of the story. Harry could not carry out his mission alone. He learns, through testing and trial, pain and heartbreak, that 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*, the third movie, Harry summons help when the malevolent Dementors try to suck out his godfather's soul. He summons one of his happier memories and proclaims, "Expecto Patronum!" The Latin words mean, "I look for a guardian" or "I wait for a savior."

A silver-white stag appears, and defeats the evil creatures. The use of the white stag was surely not accidental. Since Medieval times the stag has been a symbol of Christ the Savior.

And there's more! Rowling used many other symbols that reflect deeper spiritual meaning. Dumbledore, for example, means "Bumblebee," a symbol for doing the impossible (since scientists still have no idea how this completely non-aerodynamic insect is able to fly!)

When Hogwarts students arrive at school their first year, they are sorted into Houses, which serve as families of a sort. Harry's house was "Gryffindor," not accidentally. The Griffin is another ancient Christ symbol. Voldemort was once a part of the Slytherin house whose symbol was a serpent. All witches and wizards who ever chose evil over good were known to come from this house whose symbol means evil, death, and deceit, as any casual reader of scripture can confirm.

The appeal of fantasy stories like Harry Potter reflects a spiritual hunger in our world which is so marked by materialism and rationalism. Human beings long for mystery, for supernatural power, for something bigger and greater than ourselves. We want to trust that there is more to life than what we can see with our eyes or rationalize with our minds.

Without making explicit mention of God, Rowling has made spiritual 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 journey that winds through challenges and joys and relationships. Along the journey we discover our own gifts and powers, learn, grow, gain experience, have adventures, and discover our purpose. Sometimes we wander the road alone, learning to appreciate ourselves and be comfortable in our own skins, but the richer parts of the journey include the company of companions—which means literally, the ones we share bread with. Friends. Family. Fellow sojourners.

The journey of life is one of questions and faith, hopes and doubts, suffering and blessing, of serendipity and providence and the God who loves us through it all. Always, at every turn, we have choices. We can live for ourselves, or we can live for others. We can trust worldly power or we can trust love.

In the end, Harry Potter chooses love. In a conversation with Dumbledore Harry is confronted with a very difficult choice—to remain safe, content, and happy, or return and face Voldemort. As he considers the choices and consequences, Harry realizes his role in the outcome: "I've got to go back, haven't I?"

"That is up to you," Dumbledore says. "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."

At the very end of the book, we encounter this final scene between the hero and the antagonist:

"Is it love again?" said Voldemort, 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.”

The last secret is that sacrificial love really is the answer. Through the series many beloved characters die in an act of sacrificial love.

Harry’s parents die before the story begins, leaving a mark of love on their baby son that will carry him through adulthood, willing to give their lives to save his.

Harry’s godfather Sirius dies to protect Harry and continue the mission to defeat Voldemort. Hedwig, Harry’s beloved Owl, flies between Harry and Voldemort to save Harry’s life. In the end, many of the friends and those on the good side of the fight give their lives to defeat evil.

And Harry himself symbolically gives his life in the final fight, only to experience miraculous rebirth and overcome death. Rowling demonstrates that sacrifice, when motivated by love, is the only thing that really conquers evil.

If you haven’t experienced Harry Potter, I encourage you to rent the DVD, pop some popcorn, and settle in to one of the best stories about good overcoming evil that has ever been created.

As you watch, be reminded that in our own faith story, God conquered evil through the death of Jesus on the cross, and Jesus overcame death when God raised him from the dead Easter morning. What changed the world? Tipped the scales? Saved us from the evil consequences of our sin? Sacrificial love. It changed—and continues to change—everything, if we let it. Amen.