

19 October 2014

**Stories and THE Story:
The Gospel According to Harry Potter**
Ephesians 6:10-12; Psalm 56:1-4; John 15:12-13

Ephesians 6:10-12. *Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.*

Here's what we teach: our God, the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ, made all the world and all the people in it. God loves all people and wants them to return that love. What that means, I think, is that God is always whispering to people, inviting them into relationship. Even people who aren't in church. The author of Ecclesiastes says, "God has placed eternity in the human heart." So, wherever people are, in the best things that they do and say – especially in the art that they make – the story of God's love can be heard murmuring in the background. The gospel of a loving and forgiving God is whispered in the stories every culture and literature. Not in every story, of course. But, to be fair, we don't always hear the gospel of love in churches either. For the next few weeks, we're going to be looking at the gospel as it appears in unusual places – places you might not have thought to look – where we not only see the story of God's love, but because it comes from a different perspective may even see it with renewed freshness.

Has anyone here heard of Harry Potter? Well, for the sake of those who have lived for the past fifteen years under a rock, or who have just entered human civilization after being raised by wolves – you know who you are – let me summarize that series of books. Harry Potter is an orphan who is being raised by unpleasant relatives who treat him miserably when he discovers that he is actually a wizard, with magical powers ready to be trained. In fact, Harry finds that there is a whole parallel world of wizards and witches that exists alongside our own world but is resolutely ignored by most humans. Harry goes off to study at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, and there he learns that the magical world is threatened by an evil wizard named Voldemort, whose lust for power has led him to sacrifice every vestige of his own humanity and to brutally kill everyone who stands in his way. The series of books is really all about Harry and his friends' struggle to defeat the evil that is plotted by Voldemort.

I find this fascinating. J.K. Rowling, the author of the series, bluntly presents the depth and reality of this evil and the horror of its effects. In fact, the reality of evil is presented far more openly in this series of children's books than it usually is in the Church today. *We* tend to avoid the whole subject as distasteful. Oh, I know. There are those Christians who are always talking about sin and evil – but they're usually talking about how *other* people are evil and going to hell. Maybe that's why the rest of us pussyfoot around the reality of evil, because we don't want to sound like Fred Phelps or some angry, judgmental street preacher. But for whatever reason, we generally try to make nice and avoid the subject of evil altogether.

By the way, that avoidance of the subject also appears in the Harry Potter books. Most people refuse to say the name Voldemort, calling him only “He Who Must Not Be Named,” as if not talking about him would make him go away. Even as Voldemort grows in power, the government of the magical world – the Ministry of Magic – tries desperately to silence all talk of Voldemort. And how does that work out? At least in the books, refusing to acknowledge the power of evil only grants that evil more power.

Paul would agree with that. Look again at Ephesians 6:12. *Our struggle is . . . against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil.* Paul takes evil seriously. And, to be clear, I’m not warning us against evil spirits and demons and occultism. You don’t have to look under a ouija board to find evil. We produce plenty on our own. Look at the brutal campaign of the so-called Islamic State, and then remember that every horror that they commit was committed first by Christians during the crusades. Evil is real and can break out again in force at any moment. Evil is powerful, and pretending otherwise only grants it greater power. And shame on us, that children’s fantasy literature is more honest about that than we usually are.

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Psalm 56:1-4.

*Be gracious to me, O God, for people trample on me;
all day long foes oppress me;
2 my enemies trample on me all day long,
for many fight against me.
O Most High, 3when I am afraid,
I put my trust in you.
4 In God, whose word I praise,
in God I trust; I am not afraid;
what can flesh do to me?*

The Harry Potter books are filled with imaginative treasures. One of my favorite scenes during Harry’s studies at Hogwarts is a class on “Defense against the Dark Arts,” in which he and his classmates are being taught how to defeat a “boggart.” Boggarts, it turns out, are shape-shifting spirits who can sense whatever it is that scares us most and who then take that shape in order to frighten us. That by itself contains deep wisdom. Fear usually comes not from genuine danger but rather from our own insecurities. Fear arises when we focus exclusively on ourselves, turning inward, dwelling on our own doubts, losing perspective.

So, the way to defeat a boggart is to restore perspective: all you have to do is imagine your fear, then laugh at it. One student, whose greatest fear is his Potions class professor, is taught to imagine that professor in housecoat and ruffled apron. The boggart appears in that outfit and, as soon as it realizes it is ridiculous, runs away. Few things can restore perspective better than a sense of the ridiculous – especially if we can laugh at ourselves. It’s hard to be afraid while you’re giggling.

There is another way to restore perspective, though: by remembering that the thing that frightens us today is nothing at all before Almighty God who loves us. A sense of humor allows us to see ourselves and our situation through fresh eyes, and a sense of God's presence reminds us that no matter what our fear is, God is stronger. In the words of Psalm 56, *What time I am afraid, I will trust in you.*

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John 15:12-13. *This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.*

I need to go back and give some more background to Harry Potter's story. He was actually a very special child. You see, Voldemort had been powerful once before and had waged a campaign of terror throughout the magical world, killing all who stood in his way, and two of those he killed were Harry's parents. But when Voldemort came to kill them, Harry's mother stood between the Dark Lord and baby Harry's cradle and sacrificed her own life to save his. That self-sacrificing love, it turns out, laid a spell on Harry that was stronger than anything Voldemort had, and when he turned to kill the baby, his own spell turned against him, broke his power, and drove him into exile. The one thing that had the power to defeat pure evil was a willing sacrifice made in love.

But Voldemort came back. He had been exiled, but not utterly defeated. It is not until the last book in the series that evil is destroyed for good. Want to guess how that happened? Harry sacrificed himself. He went to face Voldemort on his own, willingly embracing certain death because it was the only way to save his friends. Jesus said, *No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.* And before Harry's love Voldemort is destroyed. But that's not quite the end of the story. Because you see, love is not only stronger than evil. Love is stronger than death itself. Harry dies, but not for long. He returns, to live and love again. No, I can't explain exactly how that worked for Harry – any more than I can explain how the process worked when Jesus of Nazareth did the same thing. All I can say is that it is true. One part of the eternity that God has planted in the human heart is the conviction, the certainty, that nothing is stronger than love, and no love is stronger than the love of God, expressed through his Son, Jesus Christ, who loved us and willingly gave himself for us.

That's the gospel. That's the good news. That good news is found throughout the Bible. And sometimes in other places, too.