

## Reading:

*Our reading today comes from the fourth Harry Potter book, Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire. This reading is an excerpt from a speech given by Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, after a student, Cedric Diggory, was killed by the most evil wizard in the Wizarding world, Lord Voldemort. He is speaking not only to his students, but also students from international wizarding schools, about the ways that they must move forward in dark and difficult times.*

When everyone had once again returned to their seats, Dumbledore continued, “The Triwizard Tournament’s aim was to further and promote magical understanding. In the light of what has happened—of Lord Voldemort’s return—such ties are more important than ever before.

Every guest in this Hall will be welcomed back here at any time, should they wish to come. I say to you all, once again – in the light of Lord Voldemort’s return, we are only as strong as we are united, as weak as we are divided. Lord Voldemort’s gift for spreading discord and enmity is very great. We can fight it only by showing an equally strong bond of friendship and trust. Differences of habit and language are nothing at all if our aims are identical and our hearts are open.

It is my belief—and never have I so hoped that I am mistaken—that we are facing dark and difficult times. Some of you in this Hall have already suffered directly at the hands of Lord Voldemort. Many of your families have been torn asunder. A week ago, a student was taken from our midst.

Remember Cedric. Remember, if the time should come when you have to make a choice between what is right and what is easy, remember what happened to a boy who was good, and kind, and brave, because he strayed across the path of Lord Voldemort. Remember Cedric Diggory.”

## **The Gospel According to Harry Potter**

*A Sermon by Rev. Heather Concannon*

*March 20<sup>th</sup>, 2016*

For anyone who ever had turned to the pages of a book  
Or a good story  
For comfort  
Or inspiration  
For escape  
Or perspective  
Or for challenge:  
This sermon is for you.

And I'd venture a guess that that is all of us.  
Whether or not this *particular* story has a place in your heart.

Because we are a story-telling and a story-loving people  
Stories being a central tool in meaning making  
And there's a reason the Moth, or Serial, or This American Life podcasts are all so popular  
Not to mention that old classic—the Bible  
In seminary we learned again and again  
That a sermon without a story was liable to be a lecture.  
Stories make us human  
They capture our experience  
They give context to who we are and where we've been and how we've come to believe what we believe.  
Stories give us a chance to look at our world through new eyes, by entering into another world,  
To see the world as it might be—for better or for worse.

Well today I'd like to invite you in to one of the stories  
that has most shaped and influenced me  
One of my favorite stories  
And before I begin I want to tell you a little bit about what this story has meant to me over the years.

I got my first Harry Potter book when I was eleven  
(Before it was cool, I always feel the need to lay claim to that—  
like some sort of Harry Potter hipster—  
I was teased in elementary school for my love of Harry Potter  
By someone who took just about every chance she could to make fun of me).  
But my sister and I—who is here today,  
And who was my expert consultant for this sermon,  
My sister and I would spend hours—days, really—reading Harry Potter together  
We even had a secret code at dinner, making plans—“Amy, wanna RHP?”

As though we were sneaking around, which really just meant “Amy, want to go Read Harry Potter after dinner”?

We were so influenced and absorbed by these stories,  
We took the beautiful paper covers of our first edition hardcover books off,  
And placed them reverently, carefully, on the shelf where they wouldn’t get crushed  
Treating them like sacred objects.

I learned recently about this year-long course running at Harvard right now,  
By the Humanist group, called “Harry Potter as Sacred Text”.

Which Nathan laughed about when I told him

But when I saw it I said “oh, that makes so much sense”.

Me, who grew up without a central text of my people

The Bible being a hotly debated text in Unitarian Universalism

And certainly not a shared text

My peers, my sister and I, a generation,

adults, too,

we found our way into a story that made us ask deep questions as the stories unfolded:

“Why do Petunia and Vernon take Harry in when they hate magic so much?”

“Why wasn’t Harry killed by Voldemort in the first place?”

“How did Voldemort become *so evil*?”

“Why do even the good wizards refer to him as “Lord” Voldemort, with an honorific?”

“What did the prophecy really mean? Was it fate or choice?”

“Should Harry have kept and used the Deathly Hallows himself, to triumph over death?”

I joked with my sister that if this was the first place I learned to exegete—

A fancy seminary word that just means to critically interpret a text—

And if we treated those books as sacred texts

Then preaching one sermon on the Harry Potter series felt like asking a Christian minister to preach just one sermon on the Bible.

And so, before anyone writes this series off as a “kids book”,

let me assure you that I still love these books,

and that the fact that they were written primarily for young people,

at least at first,

that does not mean it does not wrestle with hard or dark subjects.

In fact—stories are a way for all of us, children and adults,

to process the world

And to learn about scary topics in a contained way:

These books are filled with themes of death, and courage, and friendship,

Themes of love as protection

and justice for house elves

and the line between prophecies and choices

and whether magical blood is more valuable than non-magical muggle borns

and magic and good and evil  
and what it means to have a soul.

Scary and real and hard and complex topics  
Stories that help us to make sense of the world around us.

Because it's a scary and complex and real and hard world out there my friends,  
is it not?

We may not live in a world with literal dementors, that will suck our souls out of us  
Or Death Eaters following the evil wizard Voldemort  
But we have other evils and terrors lurking in our world  
Soul-sucking parts of our world  
And people who would perpetuate evil ideals.  
Unexpected or untimely deaths—  
We had two memorials for unexpected, heartbreaking deaths here this weekend  
Friends, you are familiar with the ways in which we live in a scary and complex and  
hard world sometimes,  
And also a world balanced by friendship, and love, and courage.

So are you ready for my self-admittedly somewhat nerdy interpretation of the  
Gospel According to Harry Potter? *(wait for answer)*

This is a little bit of a “you sing my hymn I’ll sing yours” sermon situation, friends:  
So if you are a Harry Potter lover, bear with me as I explain a little of the plot  
And if you’ve never read the series, bear with me as I move a little more quickly and  
jump around a little more than you might be able to fully follow.

And, I said it in emails,

But I’ll say it again just to cover myself: SPOILER ALERT: I will talk about the ending  
of the books.

I won’t be offended if you sneak out the back for the next 10 minutes.

In our reading we heard Professor Dumbledore, the Headmaster of Hogwarts School  
of Witchcraft and Wizardry

At the end of Harry Potter’s fourth year at Hogwarts

Share with the gathered community that Lord Voldemort

The most evil, ruthless, powerful, and terrifying wizard the wizarding world has  
ever seen

Has returned from his weakened state of hiding, his power diminished after he had  
tried to kill baby Harry thirteen years earlier,

And Dumbledore shares that Voldemort is back in the flesh, stronger, beginning to  
gather his followers once again.

Voldemort has just killed Cedric Diggory, the first person to die as Voldemort  
returns to power,

And Dumbledore’s speech to the students at the end of the school year

Which we read as our reading,

Foreshadows the years and the long battle that is to come.

Dumbledore knows the strength of Lord Voldemort's power perhaps more than anyone.

And he knows what fighting his evil will take

As he tells the students "in the light of Lord Voldemort's return, we are only as strong as we are united, as weak as we are divided. Lord Voldemort's gift for spreading discord and enmity is very great. We can fight it only by showing an equally strong bond of friendship and trust."

And courage, which is the lens through which I want to look at this story

Since it is our monthly theme here at church

And since courage is a theme woven throughout the series.

And since facing the evils that Voldemort represents takes an enormous amount of courage.

Now, Harry and his best friends, Ron and Hermione,

Are all part of the Gryffindor house, one of four dormitory houses at Hogwarts.

Gryffindor, whose mascot is the lion,

Has a reputation for attracting the most brave students

"where dwell the brave at heart"

They hear from the magical hat that sorts them into Gryffindor their first year.

What bravery looks like is a common, yet understated question in these stories.

Harry, often finding himself in situations of great danger

Since he has been targeted by Lord Voldemort as Voldemort's only potential downfall from ultimate, evil power

Which has been prophesied since before Harry's birth,

Harry regularly finds himself the target of powerful dark magic

And great things are required of him.

Yet Harry's bravery often looks a lot like stupidity.

In fact, in the first book, as Harry launches himself onto the back of a giant mountain troll, the author writes that "Harry then did something that was both very brave and very stupid"

a line which is used only once in the series but which could be applied to many, many countless moments.

He's frequently courageous, but he's often not practical or strategic,

and sometimes is a little rash and dumb,

and not very focused on self-preservation.

And that was only when he was fighting a troll at age 11.

Harry only blurs that line between bravery and stupidity more as time goes on.

So fast forward six years from the troll incident

When Voldemort has returned to his full power

And Harry has decided that it is too dangerous for him to go back to Hogwarts School

Where he knows that Voldemort and his followers will be looking for him

And that instead he must go out on his own and find Voldemort

And one of them must die  
As was foretold in the prophecy.  
So at the beginning of the final book,  
Harry has told his friends that he is leaving them.  
And in fact, he tries to leave Ron and Hermione, now like family, many times.  
Hermione (arguably the best character in the books), finally says to him:  
“Harry, you said it once before, that there was time to turn back if we wanted to.  
We've had time, haven't we? We're with you whatever happens.”

Harry, who is so insistent on doing this alone  
On not putting anyone else in danger  
Fails to concede that he can't do it all on his own.  
But Hermione, ever the practical Type A, had had a bag packed for weeks  
For the exact moment that all three of them would have to flee.  
Harry fails to realize that this isn't only his fight  
He thinks this is between him and Voldemort  
But it's really a much larger fight, a cosmic battle between all that is good and holy,  
and all that would desecrate it  
That he is small but significant part of.

So at the end of the series,  
Harry has discovered that the reason he and Voldemort are so closely bound  
The reason that he has visions of Voldemort  
And can see and feel what he is thinking and doing,  
Is that a piece of Voldemort's soul,  
When Voldemort tried to kill Harry as a baby  
A piece of Voldemort's soul entered in to Harry  
And in order for Voldemort to die, once and for all  
All pieces of his soul must die  
Which means that Harry, too, must die.

And so Harry makes a this-time calculated and courageous choice:  
To walk in to the forest where Voldemort is hiding  
And walk to his death.  
But in order for Harry to do that  
He must trust that someone else will finally defeat Voldemort  
That someone else will finish the mission.  
This transformation—from believing that he had to do it all by himself  
To trusting his community and his friends  
And to seeing that he was a part of something much larger than his personal fight  
with evil  
This transformation took great courage.

Because, it was only when Harry finally relied on the courage of the whole  
community around him  
That something transformative was able to happen.

That evil was finally able to be faced in a way that disarmed it  
That love was able to win  
And love does win, in the end, in this story.  
The same love and courage and self-sacrifice that protected Harry as a baby  
In the end protected Harry's friends  
And ultimately Harry himself.

And the courage of the community  
Helping Harry to hold it together  
Bags packed  
Meals made  
Wands ready  
Ready to pick up the fight and carry on  
Knowing that they were part of something greater than themselves  
That allowed love to win.

Friends, it is love and community and a magic beyond our understanding  
that give us the courage to face the  
hardest and the scariest things in this world.

That offer us presence, but not protection  
But help us have courage  
To know that we do not walk alone  
But that others walk with us  
And sing our spirits home.

May it be so, and amen.