

“Harry Potter’s Message for the Lost: A Reading of our Time”

Sermon by the Rev. Joe Summers Readings for Sept. 9th, 2007 (18C) Jeremiah 18:1-11 & Luke 14:25-33

“Heyi! Heyi! O, helee mamma. Lizobuya Lelizwe. O helele mamma.”

From South African song “Lizubya”

Lizubya. We will return. We will find our way back home to our great mother. What a joyous message for the lost. I want to talk today about the message I find in Harry Potter for the lost, but first I want to share eight short vignettes about lostness.

#1: Losing something, or someone, whose extremely precious to you, can leave you lost. When I was fourteen I learned my sister had died. Even though the next day I learned she had lived, just the thought of her having died so shattered me that it left me really afraid of life and a world where such things could happen.

#2: Many members of this congregation are working with the prison reentry program. Coming out of being in prison is a little like coming in from living in outer space, or under the sea, or a totally different world. The gap, between how you imagine your life will be when you get out versus the reality of the way it is, is so great that one man described it as walking around blind for the first six months you get out of prison. The worst part is that many people don’t realize they can’t see and thus walk right into disaster.

#3: My mother just published her book about her family getting lost during the Great Depression. Her parents were incredibly hard working, decent, kind, intelligent, loving, responsible people. They were the first members of their respective families to leave the farm and go to college. They had a map that said with a college education, intelligence, and hard work everything would work out. They had a map that said the worst thing in the world would be to go back to the farm. (My grandmother actually made my grandfather promise he would never take her back to live on the farm before she would agree to marry him.) They didn’t understand that in the midst of the Great Depression their maps were no longer helpful. All they would have had to do to survive was return to one of their parents’ farms until the depression was over. Their failure to do this cost my grandfather his life, my grandmother her husband, my mother and her siblings their father.

#4: This summer I read a book about the lives of the sharecropper community of Eastern North Carolina whose world and lives have been lost amidst so called “progress”. They didn’t understand that their world, as it had existed for hundreds of years, had been deemed irrelevant and would disappear in their life times. Their failure to understand that the rules that had governed their lives for generations no longer applied contributed to the disintegration of their communities and family structures. This is part of why you can now find things like the wide spread use of methamphetamines and gang culture in many rural areas in our country. This is why you can find so many people in such areas who retreated into magical thinking, magical religions, magi-

cal politics, hoping hoping hoping to find some way out of their lostness, hoping to live with some kind of dignity again.

#5: After hearing a number of people in our parish recommend it, this week I finished reading *Eat, Pray, Love*, a book that is the top selling non-fiction paperback in the country right now. It's the journal of a woman who found herself lost. If it is hard to realize you are lost when things are going badly, it is that much harder when things appear to be going well. Because she appeared to have it all: good health, good friends, a good husband, a good job-- it was only when the author found herself crying for days on end and up nights throwing up with grief and anxiety that she began to figure out that maybe something was fundamentally wrong. The book is about her journey of recovering the self she had lost.

#6: One of the things I love about art is how much I depend on it to help me better understand the past and the present, others and myself. This not only gives me a great excuse to watch T.V. shows and movies and read novels and listen to music I love--- but it also lets me feel like I'm doing something important in the process! I tend to only be able to watch TV shows through Netflix and one of the things I'm looking forward to is the next season of the TV series "Lost".

"Lost" is a show about a group of plane crash survivors who find themselves on an mysterious island. Things get stranger and stranger from there. Part of it's appeal is that it captures what it is like to find yourself confronted with a world you don't understand, where things are not as they appear, where things happen that don't make any sense, and where in the process of being up against strange realities you discover strange things about yourself-- and yet--if you want to survive --you have to deal with all this. Sound familiar? I'm sensing that's a world that a lot of us find ourselves in at this point in history.

#7: "The Matrix" is a film that seems to capture the feelings of Generation X much the way the film "Casablanca" seemed to capture many of the feelings of the G.I. generation. The summer after it came out some of my first year orientation groups in academic advising at the University of Michigan talked about it as describing the world they'd grown up in: a world where every promise proved to be false, a world where everyone, including your peers, lied to you, a world where you learned to lie to yourself, a world where even rebellion is contained within an overarching hegemony of domination. How could one not but feel totally isolated and lost within such a world?

#8: This summer I got to orient students for the first time since 9/11. The two best known generational historians are calling those born between 1982 and 2003 the "Millennialist generation". Our identities are significantly formed in the first twenty years of our lives and they describe this generation as the equivalent of the G.I. generation in terms of growing up amidst one disaster after another. They also have great hopes for this generation as a generation who having faced such darkness will help make the world anew. Orientation seemed like a good time to check out some of these theories so I asked most of my orientation groups what were the formative public events of their lives to date. The list went something like this: 9/11, the war

on Terrorism and Guantamo, The Iraq wars I and 2, the war with Afghanistan, the genocides in Rwanda, Sarajevo and Darfur, the massacres at places like Columbine and Virginia Tech, the Clinton and Bush Scandals, global warming and the evidence of our contribution to it, Hurricane Katrina and the failure of the government to prepare for it or rebuild New Orleans afterwards. The only two positive things I heard all summer were developments with the internet and technology andHarry Potter.

And this has got me thinking about what Harry Potter means to our time: what collective feelings its author JK Rowling is expressing, what hopes she's pointing towards. I think part of Harry Potter's appeal is that it is a message for the lost.

When we first meet Harry Potter -- he is one of the lost.

He's one living in the midst of a world that makes no sense, a world wedded to illusion, appearances over reality, a world where people have put life in a box and labeled and now value their labels more than they do reality.

He's one living estranged from himself, having been told a false story about who he is, where he came from, and what he's capable of.

He's one living in a world that is headed towards disaster, a new era in history, in a world that for the most part is utterly blind to the darkness that is about to descend on it.

Harry Potter then seems to me a kind of guide for those who find themselves lost in such a world. Here I would highlight five things: courage, humility and truth, and passion and joy.

Harry above all points to the importance of having courage in such a world. Harry is wonderfully courageous and this seems a prerequisite for everything he is able to do. Except for Dumbledore, no one but Harry will say the Dark Lord's name. It is symbolic of his willingness to face what is dark and how little he values denial.

The list of the dark things Harry has to face -- go on and on: Lord Voldemort and his death eaters, foolish and arrogant adults and political leaders, giant snakes that turn people into stone, dementors that try to eat your soul while you are still alive by sucking the life force right out of you, Giant spiders that like to eat people for breakfast, dragons, giants, corpses that can be controlled through magic to attack people, curses, giants, horcruxes. I think its a list that stacks up pretty well against the list of evils this generation has had to deal with.

Harry is a great example of how courage is not about the absence of fear, but the overcoming of fear. Sometimes Harry is literally paralyzed by fear. But what is so great about Harry is though something may scare him to death--he doesn't hide underneath his blankets--as so many of us do, rather his courage leads him to confront what he fears, to be open to them, even to be curious about them, and if necessary, to do battle with them.

This brings me to Harry's humility. One of the worst things you can do when confronted with the unknown is to pretend you know what's going on. As long as you pretend you know what's going on you won't be able to figure out what is, in fact, happening. When confronted with the unknown most of us seem tempted to become arrogant, to act as if life were some poker game in which we can bluff our way through it. This usually only gets us into deeper and deeper trouble.

If you are lost, the first thing you need to do is to admit it. This may also help you to not depend on guides that are maybe totally irrelevant like trying to use a map of the Northern Peninsula to help you navigate in South Eastern Michigan, or my grandparents holding onto the American dream in the midst of the depression.

In contrast, Harry is continually willing to own what he doesn't know and admit how vulnerable he is. That's part of what makes his courage seem so impressive. It's not based on his being smarter than everyone else, or thinking he is, it's not based on his knowing more magic, or thinking he does, no -- most of the time he seems pretty aware of his limitations, most of the time he seems to go into battle thinking "this is ridiculous, there's no way I'm going to be successful." Yet he perseveres and is willing to simply try to do the best he can.

It's Harry's humility and openness that that again and again mean that somehow the answers come to meet him, some tip or some tool that helps him find a way through where there appeared to be no way. Harry's able to overcome because he's not deluded himself into thinking he already knows how to do what needs to be done. Paradoxically, one of the lessons from this series, that on the surface appears to be all about magic, is how, again and again in life, what's ultimately important is not magic.

Harry's courage and its consequential humility make him a striking contrast to Tom Riddle (who becomes the dark lord) whose answer to what's scary and painful and humiliating in life is to strive for domination, to become invulnerable by fracturing himself, disassociating himself from parts of himself, as a way to be invulnerable and gain power over others. It's a striking portrayal of evil.

I remember one man I talked with about being in prison saying to me: the only thing the devil asks of you is not to trust anyone. If you are willing to do that you can have all kinds of power over other people. But that simple step, that may seem so utterly warranted given what can happen to us in life, means the loss of our souls, our complete estrangement from ourselves. And the only way you can only begin to recover yourself, if you become estranged from yourself in that way, is through a rebirth of trust.

Lastly, Harry Potter has a vital message about the importance of passion for the lost. Harry is not a cool kid, he is passionate about what he likes and what he doesn't. He likes things and people to the point where other can make fun of him. He stands up for nerdy poor friends like Ron Weasley, mixed bloods like Hermione Granger. He gives himself over to being com-

pletely passionate about Quidditch, the pure joy of flying, and especially those he loves which includes all sorts of people including adults.

All this is the opposite of the survival mentality, which we can fall into when threatened, that leads us to think we should cut our losses, by limiting the scope of who or what we love, or how much we love them, where we try to limit our risk of losing by not giving ourselves fully to what and who we love.

Harry Potter shows us that it is possible not to lose, or even to regain, your humanity in the midst of being lost. It also suggests that your humanity is one of the most important keys to finding your way out of being lost. It's a message that stands in striking contrast to most action movies which suggest that the best way to survive is through cutting yourself off from your feelings and becoming invulnerable. Part of the hope I think J.K. Rowling has given our world, but particularly the Millennialist generation, is that it is not only possible to retain your humanity, it's possible to have a good life, good friendships, real community, great joy--even in the midst of being lost.

Finally, on its surface our gospel lesson today appears to have little to do with this message but I think Jesus' message is also a message about how the lost can find their way home, back to life, back to being human.

Jesus' message today comes in the form of hyperbole, which was a Middle Eastern rhetorical tradition in which you so exaggerate something that it's clear to everyone that it's a ridiculous exaggeration -----except for those who come along two thousand years later and hear it in a totally different cultural context!

Jesus says that those who would find their way home paradoxically need to be willing to risk their relationships to those they are closest to. He goes on to say this battle of recovering heaven on earth is going to be an all out struggle, one for which we need to be prepared to risk our lives. Yet, paradoxically, it's those who are willing to lose their lives who will gain them, those who avoid such risks who will lose them.

Unfortunately, Jesus' message has been twisted into some kind of anti-body, anti-sexuality, anti-love of the things of this world ---kind of message.

In contrast, this is where I think Harry Potter gives us a marvelous re-envisioning of what Jesus was pointing towards:

How in this time and this place, if we are going to save those we love and what we love (including ourselves), we're going to need to find the courage to be willing to give our all--possibly even our lives.

How in this time and this place, we must be willing to face what needs to be faced,

beginning with owning the degree to which we feel lost or estranged from ourselves, so we can figure out how to do what needs to be done.

How in this time and this place, if we are going to become the greater selves we are capable of being, for the sake of all, like a pot that is spoiled and needs a potter to re-make it, we need to let go of our lesser selves and the parts of our selves that are no longer working for us --- and be open to being reborn---re-created.

How in this time and this place, we need to find the passion that allows us to give ourselves utterly and wholly (not just a toe or a finger) to those and what we love for, ultimately, it will be our love that will lead us back home to the place we've had intimations of ---but never been before. And if we are willing God is able and if we are ready God has already gone ahead to prepare a way for us.