



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE VERY REV. STEVEN L. THOMASON, DEAN AND RECTOR
FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT, DECEMBER 3, 2017
ISAIAH 64:1-9; PSALM 80; 1 CORINTHIANS 1:1-9; MARK 13: 24-37

THE ADVENT OF HARRY POTTER



It's been twenty years since Harry Potter burst on the scene and became an instant phenom. In the two decades since, the seven-volume series has sold more than 500 million copies, and the film adaptations are second only to the Star Wars trilogy and prequels in gross sales for a film series.

In the first book, Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone, tender young Harry discovers a full-length mirror in an attic at Hogwart's by which he is mesmerized. Instead of his own reflection, he sees that which he most loves—his parents who died when he was an infant—and he sits there with

gaze fixed on their image in the mirror for a long while.

Only when a sage comes and whispers to him to be alert does he turn aside—enabling him to confront Voldemort—the prince of darkness, the evil one. Voldemort tempts Harry, saying he can have all the things he ever desired (and loved) if he will only join him on the dark side. Harry is tempted, and in the pause Voldemort makes his best pitch:

“There is no Good and Evil, there is only power and those too weak to seek it.”

For a split second Harry appears ready to succumb, but then turns and renounces Voldemort. He names the enemy and screams in his face that he is a liar. And with that Harry senses the power he possesses to work for good, even when it comes at great cost.

I suspect many of you grew up with Harry and Hermione and Ron, and I am the first to admit that JK Rowling has a creative imagination that puts her in rarified air with the likes of CS Lewis and Tolkien.

But then I get to thinking about the plot—here is a boy with a mark on his forehead—a sign that he has special gifts and special work to do. Someone loved him enough to die for him. Cosmic good and evil, a cloud of witnesses helping Harry plot his course in these dangerous times. He gets messages from a white bird—an owl rather than a dove, but I’m thinking—this is our story—the Christ-figure’s story we share here every week, and JK Rowling has made gazillions,

and she has a following that will line up at midnight just to get their hands on the latest word from the master storyteller.

If you haven’t read the books or seen the films, I’d recommend them, if not for their high literary quality, then for the theological pearls offered for our consideration and enjoyment. The truth is Harry Potter is an Advent character worthy of our reflection today.

Oddly enough, with this season of Advent, we begin by ending. Here we are on the first day of the church year—the first Sunday, preparing for some fresh coming of Christ, but curiously, the reading from Mark’s gospel catapults us to the end times, when Christ will come again. But read from our position now—the present—the gospel serves as a sage whispering in our ear, “Be alert.” Darkness looms...

Advent is a season of paradox in so many ways. We find ourselves in the darkest time of year. We are chilled with winter winds and a fair bit of rain these days. We find ourselves in a world torn by the forces of evil, a world in which we all struggle to make sense of the things that haunt us in the “dark night of our souls.”

But Advent is also the season of light and life, an expectant season in which we feel things stirring. This is the time of quickening when we can sense that something is moving in our midst. It is a season of fecund hope—the hope of the incarnation, the birth of Jesus into this world. And we make our song O Come,

Emmanuel in the fervent hope that God present even in the darkest of times. We can surely rejoice in that.

Can we see ourselves by the light of candles that flicker against the dark shadows in our midst? Is the commercialization and chaos of Christmas a diversion—a mirror of sorts, to show us something that makes us feel better? Despite all the lights and noise of Christmas commerce, the world is cold, dark, and in need. Be watchful, Jesus says.

Advent is certainly a season of preparation for Christmas, but it is intended to be much more.

To be honest, there is much “make-believing” to our story. We are supposedly waiting for Jesus to be born in Bethlehem, with wise men and shepherds lingering about. But if we heed the scriptures appointed for today, then we are really waiting for the heavens to open and reveal the anointed one “coming in clouds with great power and glory.” After all this time, centuries of ritualized longing year after year, I suppose existential resignation or cynicism could be a natural trajectory? But I want to resist that inclination with all my might, because I think to go there is just another way of numbing out to the needs of the world here and now.

We enact this Advent longing at this time every year because it helps us be alert. In the delay of gratification comes a more intense hunger for the feast, and it is a feast for which we wait, expectantly, buoyed by hope, make-

believing even, in our pageantry of preparation, so that our senses are acutely honed, our souls hum with the music of angels, our hearts yearn for the gift of Christmas given and received, all while asking ourselves, What is the hurt I need Christ to heal? Where is the light of Christ most desperately needed in our time, and am I willing to make my way there, to see the Christ-child born anew, in the dark stable of the world’s suffering.

Perhaps we bear a mark on our foreheads to remind us of the wonderful mysteries of God and how we fit into God’s grand design of goodness. Not because we have any special powers necessarily, but that seal on our forehead burns when the dark forces lurk about. Be alert, we are told, because we have taken a vow to renounce evil—to name the enemy for what it is and resist it with all our might.

But in our story, the mark on our forehead burns in a different way too, in a good way, brightly, when God is stirring about. And our hearts yearn because we know that while the sky still appears opaque and silent, something magnificent is about to happen.

Resources:

Image on front page at <https://pixabay.com/en/harry-potter-track-nine-nine-1640525/>

Some thematic content here draws on an article by John Stendahl entitled “Advent Alchemy—Living by the Word,” published in *Christian Century*, Nov. 6, 2002.

Mark 13:24-37 [*Jesus said, “In those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven. “From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. “But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”]*



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