

# Harry Potter and the Kingdom of God

A sermon preached by Rob Lee at First Baptist Church, West Jefferson

November 24<sup>th</sup>, 2013, Christ the King Sunday

Will you pray with me?

Great God of Light,

Let this King's cross become the shape of our lives; let this Lord's compassion form our hearts; let this Shepherd's embrace welcome us to Paradise. We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God for ever and ever. Amen.

September 1<sup>st</sup>, 1998 changed American culture forever. A little known British author's book was published in the United States and the Harry Potter craze began. The Harry Potter series chronicle the story of Harry, the orphaned boy wizard whose glasses and lightening bolt scar captivated a generation. The author who wrote the first book on napkins now has more money than the Queen of England, and we are all eternally grateful for a series that told us the story of the boy who harnessed not only magic, but life itself.

In the first book, Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone, Harry has arrived at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry and is hearing stories about the elusive sorcerer's stone, this elixir of life is the key to eternity, and Harry must find it before the dark Lord Voldemort does. The dark Lord Voldemort and Harry already have a history as Voldemort had killed Harry's parents. As Harry searches for this stone, this key to eternity, Harry wants to use it for good by

keeping it out of the hands of evil. Throughout the course of the book he has to traverse various adventures and eventually does find the sorcerer's stone. As Harry destroys the stone he realizes that Voldemort cannot touch him for some reason and cause him harm. As professor Dumbledore explains, "Your mother died to save you when Voldemort tried to kill you. If there is one thing evil cannot understand, it is love. Love as powerful as your mother's for you leaves it's own mark. To have been loved so deeply, even though the person who loved us is gone, will give us some protection forever." But we'll get back to that.

Let's clear the air; we shouldn't be hearing this text today, should we? We come this Sunday on the cusp of the liturgical New Year, with Advent a stone's throw away and we hear words of crucifixion. I'm not exactly sure why the lectionary decides this year to veer off and take us down the road towards Golgotha but part of me is glad that we do. We need to hear these words, 'Jesus remember me, when you come into your kingdom.' These desperate words come from a criminal. Now this criminal was not any ordinary crook, the Greek words used here for criminal and context clues as to how this man was being killed meant that this man had like Jesus, incited trouble for the Roman Empire. This man got what he was asking for and standing on the abyss of the afterlife he begs Jesus to remember him.

One of the things I love about Jesus is he often ends up doing way more than any of us could ever imagine or hope for. Jesus looks lovingly at his companion opposite him on a stage set for all time and space to see and says, 'Truly I tell you, you will be with me in Paradise.' Friends I think we need to take Jesus at his word.

We don't take Jesus at his word anymore do we? As progressive Christians we have an answer for everything. If we trust what Jesus actually said then truly we too can be with him in Paradise. Deeper than that if we take Jesus for what Jesus said in the text today then we can see

that truly anyone can be with God in Paradise. You see today Christians often use heaven and hell as cosmic bargaining chips by which we ignore the hells around us. We use the afterlife as a proverbial game in which someone might attain that if they vote the right way, look like they deserve it and are card carrying members of the rotary club.

You see this is precisely the mentality Christ the king comes to combat on the cross. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female for we all one in Christ Jesus. What might that look like for us today? In Christ there is neither Republican nor Democrat, there is neither gay nor straight, there is neither immigrant nor legal citizen for we are all one in Christ Jesus. Perhaps this is best summed up in the story of St. Lawrence. After the death of Pope Sixtus II, the prefect of Rome demanded that Lawrence gather all the wealth of the church and present it to the emperor. Lawrence asked for three days to gather the wealth and on the third day he came back with the poor, the lame, and the diseased and looked the prefect in the eye and said, "These are the church's riches. The Church is truly rich, far richer than your emperor." Lawrence was martyred for his actions but in his death and his presentation of the church we see exactly where God calls us to be. We see the plight of the crook on the cross begging Jesus to remember him and we see Jesus doing so much more.

Friends we come here to this Christ the King Sunday, this Sunday when we enthrone Christ in the throne of our hearts and minds and as Lord of all Creation and we are on the brink of Advent, the expectation that Christ came, Christ rose, and Christ will come again. What if we as a church started treating each other like the Messiah was in our midst. Because let me fill you in on something, the Messiah is already here. For we are called to be like Christ to people and experience Christ in people, that ultimately, is what the kingdom of God looks like.

Truly I tell you today you will be with me in Paradise. All of us here are still waiting for

the fulfillment of that promise. We wait with expectancy and with fervor as Christ stands above time and space bringing the hope that we can take God for what God has spoken to us through the prophets, the martyrs, the saints and Christ himself. Perhaps we need this text this week because it shows God's way of ruling is far superior to our way of ruling things. It's almost comical that we threw the worst we had at Jesus, a cross, and Jesus laughs in the face of death with a holy laughter that echoes through our own lives and our own deaths as well.

There are things in life that we will never of and eternity is one of them. But perhaps not only what happens after death is Paradise, maybe dying with Jesus, knowing the Savior of the nations stands with us to face what he has already faced is as close to Paradise as we will get this side of the Jordan.

What is Paradise for you? If I could have my paradise it would be at my grandmother's house on Christmas Eve. You see Nana has one of those artificial trees that is older than I am, it must be at least 30 years old and the lights flicker but the warmth of the room is full and bright. I remember the first year after my uncle had died and many of us wondered how we could celebrate such a holiday in Paradise without my uncle there. God has mended, God has restored, nothing is ever the same, there will always be a place missing at the table but we must hold our past in Paradise on earth in tension with God's future Paradise prepared for us since before our pasts occurred. God reminds us in this text that at the fruition of our lives God will keep God's word. If that is the case then we need to be so bold as to proclaim it for ourselves, we must actually believe these words, we must commit them to memory and recite them in our last moments, 'Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom.'

Fifty years ago this past Friday John Kennedy was shot and killed by a gunman's bullet. I'm sure some of you remember where you were that fateful day. John Kennedy, the king of

what became known as an American Camelot famously said, “And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you — ask what you can do for your country.”

Friends we come to this place asking too many times what the kingdom of God can do for us, sure it promises us eternity and bliss, which is good, but what else does the Kingdom of God demand of us? It demands we become the very Christ for others, we must live incarnate the kingship of faith. This kingship is not wealth or fame or crowns. No this kingship involves a cross, and a crown of a very different kind.

Have you ever wanted a second chance? This text offers precisely that. It offers Paradise, what the Jewish faith knows as the second Eden. How are we preparing to be with Jesus in Paradise? How will we be when we are faced with our cross?

Church do you see where I’m going with this? God’s love for us was so strong on the cross that even in our own deaths love will come out triumphant. As in Harry Potter when Voldemort could not touch Harry because of his mother’s love, God loves us so much that it leaves a mark on us so that we can laugh at death and know that it has been swallowed up in victory. Therein lies our hope on this Christ the King Sunday. Our hope should not be in elixirs of life or sorcerer’s stones that promise eternity from anything other than Jesus. When we ask Jesus to remember us that is a love that death and hate and evil cannot overcome.

There was a 2012 movie released that struck a particular chord with me. *Silver Linings Playbook* tells the story of Pat, a man with bipolar disorder who is released from a psychiatric hospital and moves back in with his parents. Determined to win back his estranged wife, Pat meets recently widowed Tiffany Maxwell. She tells Pat that she will help him get his wife back if he enters a dance competition with her. The two become closer as they train and Pat, and a romantic comedy ensues in the process. In one of the most pivotal scenes in the movie Pat’s

father declares, "Let me tell you, I know you don't want to listen to your father, I didn't listen to mine, and I am telling you you gotta pay attention this time. When life reaches out at a moment like this it's a sin if you don't reach back, I'm telling you it's a sin if you don't reach back!"

Holy People of God whether you are coping with disease, with loss, with mental illness, with struggles far too deep to name in words, may you be ready to experience the coming kingdom of God. For God is reaching out to you and when God reaches out to you at a moment like this, it's a sin not to reach back. You have to listen to your father for you have been given a mark, a mark of love that no one, not even the powers of hell and death could hope to tarnish. For God's love is too strong and those powers too weak. You are the face of God's beloved. You are marked as Christ's own forever. Jesus remember us, when you come into your kingdom.