**Windows on Christmas – Harry Potter**

Greg Liston – Mt Albert Baptist Church

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Initial Quotes on Screen

“There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry: ‘Mine!’”

(Abraham Kuyper - Dutch prime minister, journalist, theologian - Inaugural address at the dedication of the Free University)

Every tragedy of higher order … will correspond more or less to the grand drama of the Bible.

(George MacDonald – Scottish author, poet, and Christian minister - The Broken Swords)

I was sitting down in my study this week, writing this sermon for today,  
 And trying to remember exactly the course events   
 that led up to this point where, two weeks before Christmas,  
 I’m doing a sermon on Harry Potter.

And you’ll be pleased to know, I have finally worked out who is to blame.

And it’s actually not a person who is responsible, but the layout of our offices.

Let me explain.

It was about 6 weeks ago, Steve and I were sitting there

Discussing different ideas for Christmas and what we could do

And Steve had come up with this idea of looking at Christmas

Through the lens of some different movies.

Using some modern movies as windows on the Christmas story.

And I thought this was brilliant, a really good idea.

A way of saying some old truths in new ways. Inspired, fantastic.

And so then we started to talk about what movies we would use as these windows,

And because we work in an open plan office, someone,

and I’m struggling to remember exactly who it was,

Said, hey, you should do Harry Potter!

Steve, let the record show, wasn’t very keen on this idea,

He didn’t think there was much you could do with Harry Potter,

But this person was very insistent,

And so after quite a lot of toing and fro-ing,

Steve looked across at me and said,

What do you think? Do you want to give it a go?

And in reply I said three words, three momentous words,

Sure, why not.

In the weeks since then, to be honest, I have kind of regretted those three words.

(I guess I’m not the first person to ever regret saying a three word sentence!)

Cause I really struggled to come up with an idea

for how to actually make this sermon work.

In fact, there was a night about three weeks ago,

And I woke up in about 2:30am thinking about this and I had a brilliant idea,

And so I reached across for my phone and tapped it out,

Then went back to bed.

In the morning, I got out my phone to check up on my brilliant idea,

And it was complete rubbish, it made absolutely no sense at all.

But then, about a week and a half ago, I had an idea during the daylight hours.

It was a bit risky, but that I thought it could potentially work,

I checked it with Steve and he thought it made sense,

I’m not sure if he was just being nice or not

And to be honest now that I’ve written it I’m actually pretty happy with it

Which surprises me more than anyone

But I kind of need you to trust me more than you normally do with this sermon

Because even though I take a while to get there today,

I do actually have a point,

And in my opinion at least, it’s a very important point

And so today, I’m going to ask you to stick with me,

And if you do, I think you’ll find it worthwhile.

Even though you might get a bit frustrated along the way.

Now, the other thing I should say before we get started is that

I know that some Christians get very stressed about Harry Potter,

They worry that all this talk about wizards and witchcraft,

Is opening people up to the occult and the demonic.

You might have seen that Brian Tamaki was in the paper just this week

Making exactly this point.

Now, of course, other people respond that

the magic in the Harry Potter books is no worse than Narnia,

Or Lord of the Rings, or the Wizard of Oz.

And so therefore there is nothing to worry about.

Now, I think people on both sides of this argument have a decent case,

But I just simply don’t want to deal with this issue today.

Partly because I’ve already done that.

I preached a sermon 10 years ago on Harry Potter,

when it was at the height of its popularity

That looked in detail at both sides of this argument,

And I’ve made some copies of that available out the back,

So please grab a copy of that if you want to explore that aspect.

But if you put all of that controversy to one side,

and just look at these books as literature,

Then I have to say up front that I love Harry Potter.

I devoured the books and I watched all the movies.

They are fantastic, in every sense of that word.

In fact, that’s what I’ve called today’s sermon.

3 reasons why I love the Harry Potter stories, and 1 reason I don’t.

**Section 1**

So, let’s just get straight into it, reason number 1 why I love the Harry Potter stories.

Because it shows me that character counts more than coolness

Just in case you’re not familiar with what the books and movies are about,

let me just quickly explain.

When we meet Harry Potter he’s basically normal everyday 10 year old kid,

just like you and me, except that he has grown up

being looked after by his aunt and uncle,

Well sort of looked after,

You see like Cinderella, he has to clean and cook and look after them

and they keep Harry locked up in a cupboard under the stairs

But then, on his 11th birthday, much to his surprise, this happens …

<< You’re a wizard Harry >>

And so Harry goes to this boarding school for wizards called Hogwarts

and he starts to learn how to become a Wizard.

He takes classes in potions and transfiguration

And a whole lot of other magicky kinds of things

He plays odd games with odd names like quidditch,

and even odder rules,

and he even keeps an owl as a pet.

And so that’s one aspect of what’s going on in the Harry Potter books.

And one of the very best things about the books and the movies

are the friends that he makes.

You see, the friends Harry makes are not the super popular kids.

Because he’s famous, and I’ll explain why he’s famous in a minute,

But because he’s famous,

Harry gets asked to be in with the cool kids but he rejects them

and chooses other friends,

He has one friend, Hermione, who frankly is a bit of a nerd,

a goody two shoes and a bookworm.

And he has another friend, Ron, who comes from a very poor family,

And to be honest doesn’t seem to be much good at anything.

But, the one thing they have going for them is that they are full of courage,

They are full of character.

Now, it would be fair to say that they are not always courageous,

But they learn, and by the end of the story

their endurance in the face of extreme danger is extraodinary

And J.K. Rowling, the author of the Harry Potter stories,

she goes out of her way to emphasise over and over again,

the fact that courage and character count more than coolness

Probably the best example of this is one of the other friends Harry makes,

this guy called Neville Longbottom.

Now, the books aren’t subtle, so you’re supposed to tell from the name

That Neville isn’t the sharpest chisel in the toolbox,

And yet it is his character and his courage,

despite his complete incompetence

that ends up making him a hero.

Have a look at this – this is near the end of the first movie,

There’s two short clips – one just before Harry and his friends save the day,

And one from just after that.

<< Awarding house points clip >>

The fact that courage is more important than coolness,

The fact that character counts more than anything else

That is so incredibly important,

and something that I think gets completely forgotten these days.

Not just by kids but by adults as well.

If there is something that I want my kids to know,

It’s that it doesn’t really matter whether you’re the best musician,

Whether or not you make it into the hockey team or not,

Or whether you win the academic awards at the end of the year.

At the end of the day that stuff is all fluff.

What matters is that you keep your word, that you’re humble and loving,

that you own up to your mistakes, that you stand up for what is right,

What matters is not that your friends are the most popular, the coolest, What matters is that you choose friends who have your back,

And it matters that you have their back as well.

In my experience, to be honest, coolness and character don’t often go together,

Cool people are more interested in being cool than they are in being good.

So, that is one thing I love about Harry Potter.

It reminds me that courage counts more than coolness

It shows me that success comes through sacrifice.

Another thing that I love about Harry Potter is that it reminds me

that success comes through sacrifice.

Now the plot I told you before, about Harry going to Hogwarts,

A boarding school to learn about how to be a wizard.

That’s only part of the story.

There’s this other part of the plot which becomes clear as you go along,

Which is that Harry finds out that the reason he’s an orphan

The reason that he’s been living with his aunt and uncle

is that his Mum and Dad were murdered when Harry was a baby.

They were murdered while they were trying to protect Harry

From an evil Wizard whose name is Voldemort.

Now Voldemort was greatly weakened by his attempt to attack Harry

But not completely destroyed

and he’s trying to get strong again and he’s coming after Harry.

And the whole of the seven books or 8 movies

Centre on this conflict between Harry Potter and Voldemort.

But how does Harry and his friends go about defeating the evil wizard Voldemort.

Well, what becomes clear, particularly in the last book,

is that there are two ways that they can do it.

One way is simply to become stronger than Voldemort is.

To get weapons and tools that he can’t compete with.

What are known in the wizarding world

as the deathly hallows.

Like one of these tools is a great wand, called the elder wand,

Which is the strongest wand ever.

If Harry could get that and some other tools,

then he will become the master of death itself,

and then he will be able to defeat Voldemort.

But there’s another way.

The other way that Harry can defeat Voldemort is through sacrifice.

Because of the way things work in the wizarding world,

if Harry voluntarily gives up his life for his friends

if Harry lets Voldemort kill him, and doesn’t fight back,

then that protects Harry’s friends from Voldemort for ever.

Now, the central point of the last book,

And to be honest the overall theme of all of the books,

is the contrast between one character, Voldemort,

who is constantly seeking more and more power

he tries to even overpower death

and another character, Harry,

who accept his weaknesses, his frailty, his humanity

and eventually Harry accepts even his own death

Let me give you an example. This happens right near the end of the last movie.

<< Clip about the elder wand >>

We have this idea in our heads that the way that you succeed in this life

is by being strong, and by getting stronger.

Our culture tells us, and our kids get taught both explicitly and implicitly

that strong is good, stronger is better, and strongest is best

That is why all these superhero movies are so common these days,

Because according to this world,

to conquer evil you have to be stronger than it,

But the Harry Potter book is different, and I think it’s spot on.

Success in life, real success,

comes not through increasing strength,

You don’t conquer evil through strength but through humility.

Success, real success, comes through embracing your weaknesses.

Having the courage to accept who you are.

In other words, success in life comes through sacrifice.

That is a rare message these days,

And I love the fact that Harry Potter is all about that.

It shows me that love wins in the end.

So I love the Harry Potter story because it shows me

that courage counts more than coolness

And because it shows me

That success comes through sacrifice.

But finally, and most importantly I love Harry Potter because it shows me  
 that love wins in the end.

I said before that in the wizarding world,

if Harry voluntarily gives up his life for his friends

if Harry lets Voldemort kill him, and doesn’t fight back,

then that protects Harry’s friends from Voldemort for ever

Now, the big question is why, why is that the case.

And the reason is that in the world of magic,

There is one thing that is more powerful

than even the darkest and most horrible magic there is.

Have a look at this.

<< Clip >>

Here’s the basic plot of the first of the first book,

The rest of the books basically follow along the same lines.

You have this bad wizard.

He came into the wizard world and he has the curse of death.

He is wielding this curse of death and everyone is in terror

because no one is safe.

He uses this curse of death to kill Harry's dad.

He throws the curse of death at Harry,

but Harry's mother jumps in front of this curse.

She takes the curse of death, and she dies in Harry's place.

The evil wizard then throws the curse of death at Harry,

but something has happened.

The curse rebounds on the evil wizard;

it breaks his power, and Harry lives.

How did he live?

Well, his mother loved him so much that she laid down her life for him.

She took the curse that was meant for him.

And so now he’s the boy who lived.

Love! That’s the whole point of the Harry Potter story.

Sacrificial, painful, practical acts of love,

Are the highest, the strongest,

the most powerful things in the wizarding universe

This is not love like in the saccharine rom com’s,

This is not love that is some giddy emotion that you can’t deny or refuse

This is love that is intentional, clear headed, and action oriented.

I like the fact that in the Harry Potter books,

Courage counts more than coolness

I really like the fact that it shows how success comes through sacrifice.

But I absolutely adore the fact that it is love,

real love, sacrificial love that wins in the end.

That’s a message that I can buy into,

And that’s a message that I want my kids to hear as well.

One thing I don’t like about the Harry Potter Story

So there is an awful lot that I really like about these books and these movies,

But in the middle of all of that love and affection I have for the Harry Potter story,

there’s one thing I don’t like about it as well

And the one thing I don’t like about it is this.

It’s not real. It’s not real.

There is no such place as Hogwarts, and I really want to go there.

There is no such thing as Quidditch, and I really want to catch a golden snitch.

And there is no such people as Hagrid and Hermione and Professor Dumbledore,

and I really want to share a butterbeer with them.

Basically I have pretty much the same reaction to Harry Potter

that I do with every book I love.

Whenever I read a grand myth, an epic book about treasures and adventures

Whenever I spend wonderful hours immersing myself in these alternative worlds,

Mythical worlds full of magic and courage and love,

Whenever I do that, and then the book finishes, I have to go back to my world,

Which seems, well, rather humdrum, colourless and unimaginative in comparison.

Here’s the truth,

I want to roam the streets of Minis Tirith,

I want to breath the enchanted air of Rivendell

I want to blow smoke rings with Bilbo and Gandalf on the porch of Bag End

As we talk about the inane minutiae of hobbits and hobbit lore.

And that’s not all, I want to jump aboard a spaceship

and hitchhike my way around the galaxy,

I want to share a towel with Zaphod Beeblebrox

And find out what a Pan Galactic Gargle Blaster really tastes like

And more than anything, I want to walk through the back of a wardrobe

and bump into a faun rushing through snow carrying presents piled too high

I want to go on an adventure to the end of the world

with Prince Caspian and Reepicheep,

And even more than that I want to see Aslan face to face

and give him the biggest bear-hug I can

But I can’t do any of those things, because they’re all just stories, they’re just myths,

They’re wonderful almost beyond words, but they’re not real.

And if I’m bluntly honest, there are times when that really cheeses me off.

It is not fair that something so wonderful exists only in our imagination.

**Section 2.**

Now, what I want to do before I go on is just to hit pause here for a second,

because right now I’m probably about 80% of the way through this sermon,

and so far, I’m sure you realise this,

so far I haven’t mentioned God or Jesus, I haven’t opened a bible

I haven’t talked about faith, or Christmas or anything like that.

So before I go on, I’m going to ask you a question, and what I want you to do

is to tell the person next to you what you think the answer is

And the question is this.

What am I going to say next?

I have done about 80% of this sermon, and I have about 20% left.

What do you think is going to happen in that last 5 minutes or so.

What am I going to say?

And even better, what would you say if you were me?

Talk about that for a couple of minutes, and then we’ll keep going.

<< Invite congregation to talk >>

Note: If you are reading along, don’t be tempted to look at the next page!

Alright, so now let’s continue.

And I wonder whether what I’m going to say next

is what you think I’m going to say.

So let me start this next section by telling you three things I love about the Jesus story.

First, I love the friends that Jesus makes.

You see, Jesus doesn’t surround himself with the popular, the cool, the elite.

Jesus has every opportunity to be in with the privileged people,

but he rejects them and chooses other friends,

He has one friend, Peter, who is a fisherman.

And not just a stinky fisherman, but a brash, over the top, stinky fisherman

Who normally only opens his mouth to change feet.

And he has another friend, Matthew,

Matthew is a tax collector, probably about as hated a profession

As you could imagine back then.

So these friends of Jesus, there is nothing that special about them

but the one thing they have going for them is that they are full of character,

They are full of courage.

Now, it would be fair to say that they are not always courageous,

And their character is not always upright and righteous

But they learn, and by the end of the story

their endurance in the face of extreme danger is just extraodinary

People these days seem to think that the very best thing you can be is cool,

But the story of Jesus says different.

The story of Jesus demonstrates that character counts more than coolness

I love that about the Jesus story.

But that’s not all,

I love the fact that the Jesus story shows me that success comes through sacrifice.

You see, Jesus is destined to be king.

Every knee will bow before Jesus, that much is not in doubt.

But what becomes particularly clear as the story goes along,

Is that there are two ways that he can go about becoming king.

One way is simply to use his innate, God-given power and strength,

Don’t you realise he said to one of his disciples who was taking this route

Don’t you realise that I can call on my Father

and he will at once put at my disposal

more than twelve legions of angels? (Matt 26:53)

Jesus could do that. Just one click of his divine fingers,

And we’d all be bowing down to him, whether we liked it or not.

But there’s another way Jesus can become king.

Because of the way things work in the spiritual world,

if Jesus voluntarily gives up his life for his friends

if Jesus lets his enemies kill him, and doesn’t fight back,

then that protects Jesus’s friends from evil forever

and when people realise what he’s done for them,

well then they will voluntarily bow on their knees to him.

Do you see?

The whole point of the Jesus story, is that finally, for the first time ever,

there is a person doesn’t fear weakness but willingly embraces it,

Even though Jesus is incredibly strong he gives up his strength, his power

He accepts his weakness, he embraces his humanity,

And eventually Jesus even chooses his own death.

And it is precisely through this embracing of his weakness,

It is precisely through his sacrifice that Jesus overcomes evil

It is precisely through his sacrifice that Jesus succeeds.

We have this idea in our heads that the way that you get ahead in this life

is by being strong, and by getting stronger.

But the Jesus story says something quite different.

You don’t conquer evil through strength but through humility.

Success, real success, comes through embracing your suckiness.

By hitting the wall and learning to give up power and control and

In other words, success in life comes through sacrifice.

That’s what the Jesus story shows me, and I really like that.

So, I like the fact the story of Jesus shows me that character counts more than coolness

And I really like the way the Jesus story shows me that

real success comes through sacrifice

But even more than these,

I absolutely adore the fact that the Jesus story

shows me how love wins in the end.

You might remember that I said before that the way it works in the spiritual world,

Is that if Jesus voluntarily gives up his life for his friends

if Jesus lets his enemies kill him, and doesn’t fight back,

then for some reason that protects Jesus’s friends from evil for ever

Now, the big question is why, why is that the case.

And the reason is that in this world

There is one thing that is more powerful

than even the darkest and most horrible evil there is.

And that thing is God’s love.

See, let me tell you the story.

This story is not new to you, in fact we’ve just finished working our way through it. But I’m not going to tell you the story of the Bible in 4 weeks,

I’m going to tell you the story of the Bible in less than 40 seconds.

Here it is.

You have this angel who went bad

He came into the world and he has the curse of death.

He is wielding this curse of death and everyone is in terror

because no one is safe.

And through the curse he kills and destroys everything he can.

Now, everyone lives in fear of the curse of death,

But when this fallen angel hurls this curse at humanity

In what he hopes will be one final decisive time,

God jumps in front of the curse,

By becoming human and dying on the cross for us.

He takes the curse of death, and he dies in our place.

And the curse rebounds on the evil angel;

it breaks his power,

and because of that we are now all free

from the curse of death.

You see, God loved us so much that he laid down his life for us.

He took the curse that was meant for us,

And now, because of that, nothing evil will ever stain us again.

And now, because of that, we get to live in peace and freedom.

If that story sounds familiar, well there’s a reason for that.

It’s not because the story of the Bible is a little bit like Harry Potter,

It’s because Harry Potter is a little bit like the Bible.

And that’s not just true of Harry Potter, it’s true of every decent story.

George MacDonald, a 19th Century author and theologian

says that every tragedy of higher order … will correspond more or less

to the grand drama of the Bible.

Now he is probably exaggerating a bit,

But much less than you might think.

Because at the heart of every great story in this world is love.

And love is at the centre of Jesus’ story too.

God’s sacrificial, painful, practical act of love,

is the highest, the best, the most powerful thing in this universe

Now, if that were it, and I stopped there, that would surely be enough.

But I have one more point. One more reason that I love the Jesus story.

And this is the point where the Jesus Story outshines the Harry Potter stories

Like the midday sun outshines a flickering candle.

Because you see, it’s real. It’s really true and its truly real!

This really, truly is an invaded planet.

God really did set foot on earth.

He really did wake to life there in that manger.

Wrapped up in those swaddling clothes

There really was a gift sent from heaven to earth

A gift of character, a gift of sacrifice, a gift of love.

This is why the Christmas season we are celebrating right now

is so incredibly important. This is what we celebrate.

Christmas is not just the centre point of an incredible story,

Christmas is the centre point of an incredibly true story.

A true story filled with every kind of colour and grandeur and beauty.

A true story that started many years ago and is still going on today.

A true story that we truly get to be a part of.

Do you see?

Every longing that grows in you or me through reading these fantastic stories,

Every longing for colour, and life and creativity,

Every longing for that finds its fulfilment in Christ.

Do you long for the adventure of Hogwarts?

The novelty of quidditch.

The comradery of friends like Hagrid and Hermione and Dumbledore?

Well, every longing you have for that is going to be more than fulfilled in Christ.

In fact the only reason you long for all that stuff

is because at the deepest part of you God has put a longing for him.

You see, here’s the truth. Every story that has ever been written,

from the ancient myths and legends of Babylon, Greece and Rome,

through to the masterpieces of Shakespeare, Chaucer and Dickens

right up to the more recent imaginations of Lewis, Tolkein and J.K. Rowlings

and even the modern epics of people like James Cameron and Steven Spielberg,

every one of these are stories that at their best,

point to the true story at the centre of all reality

In all those other stories,

God expressed himself through the minds of poets,

Revealing fragments of the eternal truth of who he is

But in Christ,

God expresses himself through himself.

God is the ultimate story teller, the ultimate poet, the true myth,

And all the other poems and stories only move us,

Because they point us to him.

Do you, like me, long to walk through the streets of Minis Tirith and Rivendell

Breathing in the rich sights and sounds of life and vitality

Well, one day, not long now,

you will walk the streets of a city that is so extraordinary,

So incredible, that you will think back to that longing and realise

That the reason you wanted to go to Minis Tirith and Rivindell

is because it awoke in you an inkling for another city

something that is not pretend,

but a real true city of God that is your forever home.

Do you, like me, want to soar through space with the carefree attitude of hitchhiker

Doing things you never dreamed about,

Experiencing a life of extraordinary adventure and outrageous humour

Well, one day, not long now,

your life will be so exciting, so filled with outrageous fun,

That you will look back to reading the Hitchhiker’s guide

And realise that the reason you loved it,

Is because it awoke in you an inkling

of the unrestrained joy that life should be full of,

The kind of joy that your life is now full to overflowing with.

Do you, like me, want to walk through the back of a wardrobe door into a magical world

Do you want to fall on Aslan’s neck

and hug him with every ounce of strength you have.

Well, one day, not long now,

You will see the one that Aslan was pointing to

You will see him face to face.

And you will realise that the only reason you loved Aslan,

Was because Aslan reminded you a little bit of him.

This is it! This is the gift of Christmas. This is what we celebrate.

That in him, in Jesus, the very best bits of all the stories

that we read and love have finally come true.

It’s like the song says, in a line which, in my opinion,

is probably the most profound and important line in any Christmas Carol,

and perhaps in any song anywhere

The hopes and fears of all the years are met in him tonight.