

(Mark 10:35-40 NRSV)

³⁵ James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." ³⁶ And he said to them, "What is it you want me to do for you?" ³⁷ And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." ³⁸ But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" ³⁹ They replied, "We are able." Then Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; ⁴⁰ but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared."

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Snared by the Mirror of Erised

A sermon preached at North-Prospect United Church of Christ, Cambridge, Massachusetts

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Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Text: Mark 10:35-40

I want to ask all of you the same question asked the staff at this week's staff meeting. Who knows the meaning of the last word in this week's sermon title? Does anyone?

That's right it comes from the first of the Harry Potter books, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. If anyone asks you if your minister is hip or just an outdated anachronism, you can tell them that he preached on Harry Potter even before the movie came out.

Now, in the time since I decided to preach on Harry Potter, I learned that I may be in trouble again with some of the Christian right. Seems the fantasy and magic in Harry Potter create a world they worry children will be spellbound by. But isn't that the point? And why worry about that? From Camelot in the story of King Arthur to Narnia in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, it seems to me that the best of a certain kind of literature over the ages has created unreal worlds which we may enter, and in which we may find very real truth. And I want to take up one of the truths found in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, and it turns out that it was a truth Jesus himself was interested in.

Harry Potter, some of you may know, was an orphaned boy. He was brought up by an awful aunt and uncle, who had an awful child named Dudley, if you can believe there ever was an awful child named Dudley. Harry lived for ten years or so with this family, in which he was treated like dirt while his nasty cousin Dudley was treated like a prince.

Unbeknownst to himself, Harry was actually very special. His aunt, uncle and cousin were but humans, or muggles, as they are called by Harry's kind. But Harry is a wizard. Indeed, he is a very special wizard, heralded far and wide in the wizard world. Seems that when Harry's parents were killed by the evil one, the evil one tried to kill him, too. But Harry's power, even as an infant, was so strong that not only did he not die, but the evil one was pretty much defeated, at least for the time being.

So all the while that Harry was growing up and being treated miserably and not knowing who he was, in the wizard world he was a legend. Finally, at the right age, Harry is retrieved by the wizards to begin his schooling at the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

Harry is introduced to a world beyond his imagining. And during that first year at Hogwarts he has adventure upon adventure. In one, Harry was breaking the rules. He was wandering around the campus at night hidden by an invisibility cloak. Even so, he almost got caught by two faculty members. He slipped into an unused classroom and hid. After the teachers left the area and Harry was safe, he noticed a mirror, the mirror of Erised.

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Harry looked into the mirror, and to his shock saw not just himself, but a whole bunch of other people standing behind him. His heart stopped. He whirled around to see who was there. But there was no one. And yet, when he turned back to the mirror, there they were again. Harry looked more closely, and then he realized that the people in the mirror bore a striking resemblance to himself. The mirrors in the magic world also had an added feature. They moved; they were alive. So Harry finally realized that he “was looking at his family for the first time in his life.

“The Potters smiled and waved at Harry and he stared hungrily back at them, his hands pressed flat against the glass as though he was hoping to fall right through it and reach them. He had a powerful kind of ache inside him, half joy, half terrible sadness.”

Harry left that night, but he vowed to return. The ache that he had for his family whom he had never seen before was palpable. He would return time after time to see them, thought Harry. He could hardly help himself.

But on the third evening at the mirror of Erised, Harry was surprised by the head of the school, Dumbledore.

“So,” said Dumbledore, slipping off the desk to sit on the floor with Harry, “you, like hundreds before you, have discovered the delights of the Mirror of Erised.”

“I didn’t know it was called that, sir.”

“But I expect you’ve realized by now what it does?”

“It — well — it shows me my family”

...

“Now, can you think what the Mirror of Erised shows us all?”

Harry shook his head.

“Let me explain. The happiest man on earth would be able to use the Mirror of Erised like a normal mirror, that is, he would look into it and see himself exactly as he is. Does that help?”

Harry thought. Then he said slowly, “It shows us what we want. . . whatever we want...”

“Yes and no,” said Dumbledore quietly. “It shows us nothing more or less than the deepest, most desperate desire of our hearts. You, who have never known your family, see them standing around you. Ronald Weasley, who has always been overshadowed by his brothers, sees himself standing alone, the best of all of them. However, this mirror will give us neither knowledge or truth. Men have wasted away before it, entranced by what they have seen, or been driven mad, not knowing if what it shows is real or even possible.

The Mirror will be moved to a new home tomorrow, Harry, and I ask you not to go looking for it again. If you *do* ever run across it, you will now be prepared. It does not do to dwell on dreams and forget to live. Remember that.”

“James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, ‘Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.’”

James and John followed Jesus day after day. They followed him when the dust blew in their nostrils and filled their mouths with grit. They followed him when the sun beat down at

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noonday and the chill went to their bones a midnight. They followed him when there too many people to feed, even too many people to walk. They followed him when the authorities harassed and threatened him. James and John went through so much to follow Jesus. What did they see in him?

“And they said to him, ‘Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.’”

James and John looked like they were looking at Jesus, they looked like they were seeing the real thing, but in the end they were looking into the mirror of Erised. They were seeing what was their heart’s deepest, most desperate craving. They looked at Jesus, and they saw themselves sitting at his right and left in glory.

Jesus tried to explain to James and John that they were not seeing clearly. He tried to warn them. For Jesus knew that Dumbledore was right. When you look into the mirror of Erised or into the face of Jesus and what you see is the fulfillment of your most desperate want, you risk addiction to the illusion; you risk wasting away; you risk grasping after a mirage. There may be nothing quite so sad as a person who insists on a reality sculpted wholly out of a desperate fantasy.

This scene in which James and John ask Jesus about good seats in heaven falls just after Jesus has explained to them for third time about how things are going to end. In the two verses immediately preceding their request, for the third time Jesus says to them, “See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again.” But because they are looking into the mirror of Erised, they see none of it. So when Jesus his arrested and crucified, they are utterly shocked. In Luke the two disciples headed to Emmaus speak for all the disciples. They say, “We had hoped he would be the one to redeem Israel.” What they meant was that they thought Jesus would deliver to them the fantasy they saw in the mirror. And so, when he delivered them Easter morning, when he delivered them a more subtle but more profound victory, they utterly missed it. They missed it, for they had been snared by the mirror of Erised.

Now, I think it is important to say that one can be snared by the mirror or Erised with all the best intentions. Harry Potter is the hero of *Harry potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*. And in many ways Jesus’ disciples are heroes in the Gospels. And yet they fall prey. The power of the mirror, seeing the things one wants to see is a power that seduces even the best.

And so, it is fair enough to conclude that if the best are very often snared by the mirror of Erised, then any of us are susceptible to its wiles.

I think of a man in a cave in Afghanistan who looks in the mirror and believes that inflicting unspeakable terror on those who do not share his beliefs is the will of God. He is looking deeply into an illusion. But what about us? When I look at the man in the cave and see simply the embodiment of evil, with no other comprehension of his motivations, am I seeing the truth or am I seeing what I want to see? I love my country more than I can say, but when I think

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of America as 100% on the side of God and think of those who say that she has done harmful and hurtful things in the world as 100% on the side of Satan, am I seeing the truth, or am I looking into the mirror of Erised?

When I am addicted to alcohol or drugs and tell myself and those I love that I have no problem, when I am married and have an affair and have a hundred rationalizations to excuse it, when I abuse my wife but say I really love her, or when I cheat my competitors in business and I shrug and say that morals and business don't mix, am I seeing clearly, or am I seeing what I want to see?

In the end, the stakes are high.

Dumbledore moved the mirror of Erised, and it was seen no more in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, until the very end of the book. At the end of the book, Harry finds himself face to face with the evil one, Lord Voldemort, who had tried to kill him when he was an infant. Lord Voldemort has spent the last ten years in weakened form, but if he can possess the Sorcerer's Stone, he will be restored to strength and cause evil to inhabit the land. Harry's job, of course, is to prevent Lord Voldemort from getting the stone.

They are in a room deep in the bowels of the earth. And in the room is the mirror of Erised. Harry realizes that the thing he most desires in all the world is to find the stone. He realizes that if he looks in the mirror it will show him where to find it, since that is his deepest desire. But he is afraid that Voldemort can do the same.

Harry looks into the mirror, and suddenly the stone falls into his pocket. Voldemort, however, does not see the stone when he looks in the mirror. Voldemort sees the fantasy of himself restored to power. He sees the illusion of what the stone can get him. He sees what he most dreams of, but he does not see the stone. He does not see the truth.

Harry Potter was trying to save the day. He did not care about the wonders that possessing the Sorcerer's Stone could get him. Harry was not snared by fantasy and illusion, so he saw clearly, and the stone came to him. Voldemort, on the other hand, could only see the delicious things he thought the stone would give to him, and he, therefore, could not see the very thing he most needed. Voldemort once again fell to defeat.

"James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, 'Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.'"

"And they said to him, 'Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.'"

James and John were so consumed by their seats in glory that they could not see the very thing they most needed. They could not see the truth. The road for them was long and brutal. With their fantasy reflected in the mirror, everything around them crumbled. Jesus, who was to be their ticket to glory, was, as he told them he would be, handed over to the chief priests and the scribes. He was condemned to death; mocked, and spit upon, and flogged, and killed.

Finally the illusion they had held so tightly onto, finally the mirror itself shattered into a million pieces, and they experienced the full force of their defeat. Both Jesus and their fantasy were gone. They hid themselves behind locked doors, and they left town utterly beaten.

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And then something quite unexpected happened. When they were no longer captivated by an illusion, when they no longer dreamed of seats in heaven and glorious victories, when they no longer could live in denial, when they were no longer consumed by selfish desires, they began to glimpse the truth, the truth that Jesus had been all along. When they were no longer snared by illusions built on greed and self-importance, the world and beyond the world was open to them.

This is our lesson. Some, like Voldermort never learn it, I suppose. Others like James and John have a teacher who tries to teach it to them, but who do not see it until they learn it on their own, only after following their fantasies for a long time. Still others, like Harry Potter, learn it early. My guess is that the Gospels are meant to help us learn sooner rather than later. May it be so. Amen.

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