

August 24, 2008 15th After Pentecost
Sermon: Harry Potter's Choice

For those of you who somehow managed to miss the worldwide literary phenomenon, let me tell you about Harry Potter. Harry is a neglected orphan boy who one day finds out to his great surprise that he is a wizard – able to perform magic. He is sent off to Hogwarts, a boarding school for young wizards. When each new student arrives at Hogwarts they try on a magic hat to determine which house they will join: Gryffindor – known for its students' courage; Slytherin – famous for some of the most wily and powerful wizards; Hufflepuff – known for great patience and loyalty, or Ravenclaw – for the brightest. Slytherin is associated with warped wizards. When Harry puts on the Sorting hat he hears its voice telling him that if he goes into Slytherin he could become a powerful wizard. He is disturbed by the quest for raw power and chooses not to join that house, ending up in Gryffindor instead. In contrast, another boy, Tom Riddle, when he was at Hogwarts, became part of Slytherin, eagerly grasped the promise of power and grew into the most evil wizard that ever lived – Lord Voldemort, Harry's arch-enemy throughout the books. What do Harry Potter and the Sorting Hat have to do with our lessons today?

This story tells us something about what makes us who we are, as Christian people. It's not just our gifts: the ability, power or authority each of us has...it's about how we use them. Consider the Pharaoh who features in the story of Moses. This is a man who has everything going for him – he's the most powerful man in Egypt, and one of the most powerful in the world. We don't know very much about him from the biblical story, but scholars speculate he was one of the greater builders of ancient Egypt, possibly Ramses the II, who ordered the Great Pyramid built in his honour. He uses his power to build monuments to his life and death – so that he will never be forgotten. But with all that power, he feels threatened by a people that lives among the Egyptians – a people he forces into slavery...and not the pampered slavery of Pharaoh's court, but the killing slavery of punishing work in the hot sun, hauling blocks and making bricks for the Pharaoh's buildings. He uses his power to oppress others, and to preserve his own sense of well-being.

Then there are Shiprah and Puah, the midwives. They haven't got much going for them at all. They are slaves, living in a country where they are treated as foreigners and suspect, though their people have been there for generations. They have no rights and no freedom. But they, like all of us, have the ability to make choices. When ordered by Pharaoh to drown the Hebrew baby boys, they do not do it – and when challenged by Pharaoh, they tell him just the kind of story a genocidal racist would fall for – that Hebrew women drop their babies in the fields and go right back to work. They're just too quick for the midwives! By choosing to use what little influence they had, Shiprah and Puah made a difference – they allowed God's intention for the Hebrew people to be fulfilled, and preserved the life of Israel's greatest leader.

A few years ago I read an article about commemorations held for the anniversary of the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the discussion over why it happened and whether or not it was justified. I read this paragraph by an American woman in *Sojourner's Magazine*. Paulette Whitcomb writes from Westminster, Colorado:

The underlying lesson of the nuclear horror visited upon Hiroshima and Nagasaki is that a people, any people, that does not control its rulers faces the unthinkable ["Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and nuclear realism" SojoMail 8/9/2005]. Once a people abdicates its moral right to exert not only oversight, but ultimate authority, over its rulers, that people is doomed.

No, the Japanese did not deserve it, they did not ask for it, and their obeisance to their emperor did not justify what was done to them. Yes, the atrocity of Hiroshima and Nagasaki was the ultimate manifestation of ignoring one of the touchstone lessons of history: Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty. To which let's add, the price of our humanity. This lesson has been ignored by one people after another throughout history. It is a lesson apparently forgotten every other decade or so by the American electorate, which becomes lazy and gullible. We, Iraq, and other countries are paying the price of the latest manifestation of an allegedly civilized people sitting on its brains. Fortunately, so far that has not brought nuclear annihilation, but it has brought much tragedy along with a bone-deep corrosion of our humanity...

Pauline is saying much the same thing as the Harry Potter story does. We are responsible for our choices. When a gifted, intelligent people "sit on their brains" as she puts it, and do nothing to stop horror from happening, whether we are Japanese, American or Canadian, we are responsible. We do not live in an absolute monarchy or a dictatorship. We live in a democracy, and we are ultimately responsible for the choice of who rules us and the policies that govern us.

On a smaller scale, our choices matter as well. Take this story, for example, from the New York Times:

Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church sits on the northwest corner of 5th Avenue and 55th St, New York City. It's a part of the city where the wealthy congregate. The exclusive St Regis hotel is on the southeast corner, with a Godiva chocolatier and Louis Vuitton showroom on the ground floor. On the Southwest corner is the Peninsula motel where you can get a room for the night for just \$US1390.00.

The only problem is the people over at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian aren't cooperating. They have a policy of allowing the homeless to sleep on the church grounds. Each morning they make their showers available to the homeless and allow them to come in and warm up each morning.

The sight of 20 or 30 people in makeshift cardboard homes in the plain view of wealthy shoppers, businesspeople and VIP's doesn't sit well with a lot of those in power. In late November and early December [2001] church officials were asked to keep the homeless off their premises due to the presence of important

dignitaries in nearby hotels. The church obliged for those few occasions, but when the homeless returned a campaign of police harassment began. First they arrived with vans and transported many of the homeless away. Then they returned hourly throughout the night, banging on the cardboard shelters of the homeless, waking them and inquiring about their health. Police officers were clearly uncomfortable about this, but reported that the orders "came from on high".

Well Fifth Avenue Presbyterian church went higher. They took the authorities to court, and in late December 2001 the judge ruled in their favour. The police were not to remove or harass the homeless anymore. As at Christmas 2001 the ruling is [was] only temporary.. [Source: reported in New York Times, December 20, 2001].

You'll be glad to know that Fifth Avenue Presbyterian won their legal battle, and not only do they allow folks to continue to shelter in the church yard, but they have included a homeless shelter within their building. I have to admire the choice that congregation made. They didn't allow themselves to be intimidated by the misuse of authority – they stood up for what was right, and went to a higher authority to ensure the well-being of those under their care. I think Jesus would be proud.

The legend of Moses in the bulrushes being adopted by Pharaoh's daughter may well be an amalgam of assorted similar legends from that time and era. Whatever its connection to history (or lack of it) it is a powerful story of a despot's genocide and the difference a few ordinary people can make, without ever knowing that they're reshaping the future of the human race.

Sometimes we don't choose the path our lives take. We find ourselves living lives we never anticipated and never planned for and we shake our heads and wonder "How did I get here from there?" Harry Potter, the boy whose fame came from the fact that Voldemort killed his mother and father but somehow was unable to kill him, has those thoughts all the time in the series. Who would want to be famous because his parents were murdered?

I'm sure Shiprah and Puah wished they had not found themselves standing between Pharaoh and those baby boys. But however we get into a situation, we have choices as to how to react to that situation. We aren't always in control, but when we are, we need to make good and responsible choices. The women in the Biblical story didn't know that their choices would shape the fate of a nation. All they knew was that they were doing what they believed was right, and refusing to do what they knew was wrong.

Watching the TV news and reading the paper you might wonder sometimes whether you are called to have more of a role in those big and small events. And maybe you are. But also maybe you can look to those women without whom Moses could not have lived - women who had no idea who this child would grow

up to be. They did not have a lot of power, a lot of influence, a lot of anything. But they did what they could, where they could. That may not seem like much sometimes. But then again, maybe it's everything.

For Harry Potter fans, I'll tell you what the wise Professor Dumbledore had to say to Harry: "You have many qualities Salazar Slytherin [the original head of Slytherin House] prized in his hand-picked students. [His own very rare gift. Parseltongue [the ability to speak with snakes]....resourcefulness... determination....a certain disregard for rules....]Yet the Sorting Hat placed you in Gryffindor. You know why that was. Think."

"It only put me in Gryffindor," said Harry in a defeated voice, "because I asked not to go into Slytherin..."

Exactly, said Dumbledore..."Which makes you very different from Tom Riddle. It is our choices Harry, that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities."

It is our choices that make us who we are. Do we choose the way that best fits the values we have learned at the feet of Jesus? Or do we choose a different road, a road determined by self-interest, a road that is forgetful of the well-being of others. Choices are rarely black and white – this is the right way, this is the wrong way. Most choices are made up of shades of grey. But if you choose with the will of God in mind; if you choose with the intention of being faithful to the teachings of Christ – I believe you will not go too far wrong. And a poor choice made for the right reasons is more easily forgiven than a choice made with only your own self-interest in mind. As you walk the walk of faith this week, hold Shiprah and Puah in mind – and if you find yourselves in a place where a choice must be made, may you choose as they chose, faithful to what you discern of God's will for your life and the lives of others. Amen.