

What Are You Looking For?

John 1:35-51

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This Epiphany Season we are exploring what it means to believe. And what we believe in is intimately tied to our search for meaning. Father Richard Rohr writes, “Basic religious belief is a vote for some coherence, purpose, benevolence, and direction in the universe.”

[Note: Scott preached without manuscript on this Sunday, so you’ll have to listen to or watch the video to hear about the search for meaning and something to believe in. However, there is this section which I Scott did write out, which is from the middle section of the sermon.]

One of the best novels I read last year was the bestseller *The Magicians* by Lev Grossman. The main character is a young man named Quentin who has grown up in Brooklyn reading about a magical land called Fillory. Now, pretty quickly, you, as a reader, realize that Fillory is a stand-in for Narnia from C. S. Lewis’ *The Chronicles of Narnia*. I deeply loved those stories as a child, even still do as an adult, so I immediately had some connection with Quentin. Though I did not despair about my own childhood the way he did.

Quentin describes his childhood as “empty and meaningless,” or more evocatively: “mundanity was epidemic. It was like a coral reef with the living vital meaning bleached out of it, leaving nothing but an empty colored rock behind.” Yuck.

But, suddenly, as an adolescent, Quentin stumbles into a new reality. The world around him *is* infused with magic, and he soon discovers that he has the skills to become a great magician. Quentin is whisked away to Brakebills, a school for the training of magicians. This is, obviously, the point in which the novel parallels the *Harry Potter* stories, beloved of now two generations of children and the many of us adults who delighted in them as well.

At first Quentin is excited and happy to have discovered that there is more to the world than mundane Brooklyn. He thinks, “Brakebills was different. It mattered. Meaning--is that what magic was?--was everywhere here.” He spends those first months and years becoming acquainted with this new world and his powers. But, slowly over time, the excitement and meaning drain from these activities. Eventually he graduates from Brakebills and must find his way in the world as an adult.

This resonated with my experience, and I’ve heard plenty of other young adults share something similar. Even normal college experiences, without the magical powers, are filled with adventure and excitement and friends who care about the same things you do and then suddenly school comes to an end and the friends scatter around the country and one isn’t sure what to do with one’s self.

For Quentin, this young adult despair and confusion ultimately leads him to an existential crisis in which he concludes, “nothing mean[s] anything, . . . what [is] meaning anyway but a burden that [weighs us] down?” He goes on, “they were all dying, . . . everything

was futile, . . . the only thing to do was to live and drink and [have sex] . . . while you still could?”

In the midst of this existential crisis, when the search for meaning seems futile, his friends learn that the fictional world of Fillory, that stand-in for Narnia, is an actual place and they have acquired the power to go there. They are all thrilled. They will have grand adventures, meet interesting creatures, save the day, and be crowned and kings and queens. Except, things don't quite turn out that way. In the very moment when they think that their childhood dreams are coming true, they don't fully. The reality, even of this fantasy world, is far more complicated and messy. It is adventurous, but it doesn't provide the meaning, the answers, and the joy that they expected. This outcome leads Quentin to despair.