

Katie Langston 00:16

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Carla Long 00:59

Hello, everyone, and welcome to the Project Zion Podcast. I'm your host, Carla Long. And today we're listening to the series holy grounds. And I'm with a wonderful and dear friend, Nancy Ross. Hi, Nancy, thanks so much for being here.

Nancy Ross 01:12

Hi, Carla. I'm so glad to be here.

Carla Long 01:14

Nancy is going to be discussing Harry Potter and the sacred text. And while that sounds a little bit crazy, I think if you think it sounds crazy, by the end of the podcast, you're not gonna think it sounds crazy at all. So Nancy, we're gonna jump into that. And I'm really, really excited about it. Because I'm a huge Harry Potter fan. In fact, I would be remiss if I didn't mention Harry Potter and I have the same birthday, July 31, which is very, very important in the story, of course. But before we jump into it too far, Nancy Lee, tell us a little bit about yourself.

Nancy Ross 01:45

Sure, I am the pastor of a tiny congregation, the Southern Utah Emerging Congregation, and I am a professor and I work in an interdisciplinary department. And, and I live here in St. George with my family.

Carla Long 02:06

Yes, Nancy, I'm so excited because you have such a wide variety of background, I love all you bring in, like all these little pieces from everything you've ever known in your life into what you do. So can you tell us about what what do you mean when you say Harry Potter and the sacred text?

Nancy Ross 02:22

So I think first off, it's probably important to say that this is a podcast. It's a podcast that's been running, I think, for five, four or five years. It's a very popular podcast that was started by two, I think at that time, they were divinity students at Harvard Divinity School, who were looking for ways outside of traditional sacred texts, to engage the literature that they loved, in ways, in similar ways to the ways in which people engage sacred texts. And so so where does this come from? This comes from a podcast

that I love. So, and the podcast started encouraging a few years ago, local groups to do similar kind of thing to kind of work their way through Harry Potter texts, slowly to read carefully, and to engage in sacred practices related to the text. A few years ago, and really, since the beginning, since the birth of my congregation, at the end of 2015, we've been around for about five years now. There was a lot of desire on the part of the parents to start some kind of children's program. But also, when you're in a faith transition, it's very difficult to know what you would want to teach your children about faith, especially if you're kind of transitioning from a more traditional faith to a more progressive faith, but you're not fully, you're not like fully formed or developed in a more progressive faith. And so it's like, well, what is the kid version of this look like? You know, like that, that's that that kind of proved to be a minefield for us? And so well, we tried little things or piece lessons at various times. It was really unclear what we would do for a kids program. Because it was like, well, where would we get the materials? And who's going to come up with the ideas? And it's like, you know, what, what was that? What was that even gonna look like? Until eventually, after having listened to the podcast for a long time and kind of was interested in starting a local group, I was like, Well, why don't we try doing an all ages Harry Potter in the sacred text, local group. And so that was started about 18 months ago, and we met in a room in the local library for awhile because we really, there are a lot of people in our community, who are never going to go who maybe have been to church, but they're never going to go back into church again. So coming up with a space to meet that was in an easy to access public place was really important for us. So we've met in the library. We, before the pandemic, we were meeting in a bookstore that had a cafe. And yeah, so we have just been meeting in a place and just before the pandemic, about the week before everything shut down, we had actually finished book one of Harry Potter, which we'd worked through, like chapter by chapter picking a theme doing various sacred, sacred reading practices, and spiritual practices with the text. And then we finished it, we had a big Harry Potter party in my backyard, where we looked, we made chocolate frogs, and we searched and we hit them. And so we searched for chocolate frogs, and we made wands and we made robes out of black trash bags. And one of the members of our congregation had made a sorting hat for a previous Harry Potter party. And with like a baby monitor. And like it's stuck inside the hat. And so we like sorted all the kids and we had so much fun. And we're actually next Sunday going to be finishing book two. So we've read book two on Zoom all the way through the pandemic. We meet twice a month, we're meeting on Zoom. And because we're meeting on Zoom at the moment, we have fewer children who are invested in our children's program at the moment, but we also have friends joining us from other places. And that is really great. So we have a couple of people from a family in Portland, Oregon, who join us. And that is really great to be able to read Harry Potter with them. Before I get in too much further, I also want to, you know, say that like reading Harry Potter is really complicated today. And it's really complicated, because of the author's (JK Rowling's) very explicit transphobia, which has kind of been ongoing, but kind of came to a head this summer with a particular essay that she wrote, and a number of people have stepped away from the Harry Potter fandom. And that is totally legitimate thing to do. And it's left those of us who have had some of these commitments, feeling a lot of ways about reading Harry Potter. And that has been a hard, it's been a hard thing, because there's so there's this text, and it's been really meaningful to me in my life, and kind of important. And at the same time the author has, has made a lot of public comments, which I

do not agree with, at all, and are really hurtful to a very vulnerable community. And like, I am totally against that. But then what do you do with the text? And the can? Right? What do you what do you do with the text? I think that this reminds me of the way in which of my history with my personal history with the Book of Mormon, or my personal history with the Bible, and the way in which, especially through faith transition, these texts, which I had loved, became suddenly really difficult, because they promote racism, or they are not at all challenging of violence or violence against women, and in places that matter to me. And so, and and this issue of like, Well, how do we read the Book of Mormon after a faith transition? Or how do we read the Bible, when in less literal ways? You know, these are not questions just in and around Harry Potter. But these are bigger questions about how do we grow with the text, once we've come to understand that, that there are some real problems. And I do think that if people want to continue reading their beloved text, whether that is a traditionally acknowledged sacred text, or it's, it's something that's rooted in a fandom like Harry Potter that there are ways to continue reading it and learn to read it critically, and acknowledge its problems, while still trying to use it to create and make meaning and that is not going to make sense to some people. And it is going to make sense to other people. And it's, there are times in our lives where we just want to say well, anything that is tainted with bad things, we're just gonna say no more. But sometimes it's just not that easy to do that. And maybe there are also ways in which, new ways in which we can learn to read which account for some of those problems and where we acknowledge those problems up front and, and we continue to read so this is difficult. I just, I need to say that.

Carla Long 09:41

No, I think that's super important. There's a couple things I want to say what that what you just said First of all, sorting hat baby monitor. Brilliant.

Nancy Ross 09:48

Fantastic. Best kids game ever.

Carla Long 09:51

Oh my gosh, that was brilliant. It was. Uh, second of all I actually have, I haven't stepped away from the Harry Potter fandom necessarily, I'm not a super large fan, although I have been to London to see Harry Potter and the Cursed Child. I, I do love the series, right. But I do feel like JK Rowling has put a pall over the entire thing. And it's Yes, really just fallen so far out of favor, it makes me really, really sad. Because there, those books are so deep and have so many jewels and treasures in them that just to throw that away is a waste, it is a complete waste. And so I, I'm really, really glad that you acknowledged that and said those words because people need to know that, while we understand that JK Rowling is not saying things that we agree with, she still has written books that can really, that can be, provide meaning and be very meaningful to a lot of people. So that's really important. And as long as I think the readers understand that, then I think that's a okay to head on down that path.

Nancy Ross 11:02

And I think, too, that, like an important thing to acknowledge within the fandom of Harry Potter is that a lot of LGBT readers have really been drawn to the series because of the ways in which Hogwarts represents for many people a space for some where nothing is really expected. And it's, it's a space where people feel like at least in their minds, they can live out their identities in a variety of, in a variety of ways. And that the, the kind of structure of the books in the world that's created, although it has a very heteronormative veneer, is a place where many LGBT fans have imagined themselves in that space and found that to be a comforting thing, right. So this is, so this kind, of course of events of JK Rowling's comments is really, alienates a huge part of her fan base. And that's, you know, really not, it's really terrible. So, anyway, so there we are. Um, it is what it is, I do think that there are ways in which we can continue to participate and acknowledge that, that she is problematic. So for myself, I don't, as much as I love Harry Potter and Harry Potter things, I'm not spending money on Harry Potter merchandise, we didn't get any Harry Potter things for Christmas this year. And and I'm happy with that commitment. And that if I do buy further books, like it'll only be used so that I'm not going to be supporting that franchise financially. So that's kind of where I am.

Carla Long 12:34

Yes, I understand that as well.

Nancy Ross 12:36

Sorry. So I realized that that's a very long preamble to this conversation. But I have to say that Harry Potter and the Sacred Text, and that reading has been one of my favorite things, especially during the pandemic, that learning to read the texts we have loved, especially when we read them at a different stage of life. And we try to reimagine and revisit those spaces has been tremendously valuable. And there's just so much good conversation. So for us, a typical Harry Potter and the sacred text conversation looks like, you know, we we get together. And we know that we're reading a particular chapter, we read chapter by chapter, and we only discuss one chapter, what we discuss one chapter at a time, in our gatherings, we have the theme. So, let's see, our most recent theme, this was chapter 17, of book two, was trust. And it was one of the members of our group, kind of, you know, kind of decided that that would be our theme. And so we usually, we we talk about who we are and how we're doing something that went well, something that didn't go well, for since we last met. You know, we've we've heard a lot about what's going on in different people's households during the pandemic. Then we talk, we identify our theme, and we talk about what our theme means, and allow people to define that in their own words. Then we talk about where that theme showed up in our text. And you know, we kind of do a little in the in the podcast, they do like a 32 second recap, which is always kind of a silly, silly chunk of time in the podcast. And, and we don't necessarily do a 32 second recap, but we'll do a recap of what happened in that chapter, where the theme, like for instance, the theme of trust came up in the chapter. And then we begin to kind of move our way into a Lectio Divina process where we ask ourselves four questions. What is what literally happened in the text? What alleg, what does this remind us of then what is the more distant or allegorical reading of the text? So not? So not a close literal reading but a more distant reading. Then what is the text mean to us personally? And then where do we sense an invitation or call

in the text and working our way through those four questions can take, you know, 20 minutes to 40 minutes, can take a while. And then we, until we'll focus on a particular passage and doing that Lectio Divina process. So, like a couple of sentences or a sentence from from that chapter, and then we close by allowing everyone the opportunity to offer a character from from that chapter a blessing. So so we kind of bless the characters. And yeah.

Carla Long 15:32

That sounds super, super fun, like really fun. It really is.

15:38

I mean, it really is.

Carla Long 15:40

Reading, there's so many 1000s of ways you can read a book. You can read a book and speed through it. You can read a book just for fun. You can read a book and try and get something out of it, so on and so forth. And I love that you're taking something that many people just like sped through, because I wanted to see what happened. And looking at it through a different lens, like that changes everything. When I read with a different lens, I, I learn so much more. So, I love that you are taking it for the adults and kids, and just moving the lens over just slightly and saying, What if we looked at it through this angle? And I just, I just think that is so cool. And that really does sound like fun.

Nancy Ross 16:17

It really is. It is, it is so much fun. And one of the, one of the things like if we were to be doing this, like a regular traditional Sunday school, and I have nothing against regular traditional Sunday school, but if, we would have to like teach the kids the story, and then hope that they found a way into it. But the beauty, the beauty of Harry Potter is that so many people already connect to the story. When we started, we had a bunch of, several five and six year old girls who, they don't really know the story, but they know they love her Hermione. So, who will like always bless Hermione at the end. And that allowed them to be able to participate. You know, sometimes we would have when we were meeting in person, we would sometimes have coloring sheets or something for like for the little kids because you know, it's hard to, it's hard to sit for an hour. But the, like the blessing of the characters is something that everybody can participate in. When after, when we were reading our first book, one of our families who was participating, the mom told me that her I forget if her daughter was five or six at the time, but that they had been watching Stranger Things. And they were, they were then taking the opportunity to bless the characters as a family like at dinner in Stranger Things. And one of the things with the blessings of the characters is that we often do plus the like, it's usually the case that we that everybody who appeared in the chapter gets a blessing by the time we've gone around. You know, people who've done good things, and people who are villains, and in the book, because as we try, trying to empathize not with the doing of bad things, but often when we do bad things that comes from a place of being wounded and hurt. And so, you know, we're trying to grow empathy in this process. We are trying to grow better

understanding. Anyway, but this kid had had responded, this little little girl had responded by wanting to bless the villain of the second or third season of Stranger Things because she felt like you know, he'd had, he'd had a rough background. Anyway, so, like we're trying to grow our empathy. And blessing a character is a really easy spiritual practice that asks us to consider somebody's bigger story when we are thinking about them. And if it's often hard for us to empathize with the people who maybe hurt us or offend us in our lives. And I'm not saying that, you know, this is not a you know, you should always forgive easily. That's not what I'm saying. But rather that in trying to understand people and and grow empathy, that this growing empathy for characters that are totally fictional that we can easily acknowledge or fictional is a good way to practice empathy. And, and that's been that's been good one. So I have never been a big fan of the Weasley boys like of Fred or George or of Ron. These are characters in the Harry Potter story. They definitely not my, I've definitely a Hermione identified person. And one thing that I, as we have gone through both in book one and book two of the Harry Potter series, I am coming to appreciate the ways in which the gifts that the Weasley boys hold are not gifts that I hold. But there is often some wisdom in some of those other gifts and what can I learn from some of these other qualities. So there isn't in book one, a moment when Harry and Ron are out and about when they're not supposed to be, and they walk into a bathroom. And there's a giant troll who is threatening this girl who they do not like who is Hermione, but Ron immediately acts. He immediately jumps on the back of the troll. And that ends up being a really good move to try and like distract the troll from hurting Hermione. And I am not an impulsive person. I am like anti impulsive. And in the conversation that we had, you know, and Mike and my kids are involved in this process. You know, my oldest was like, You know, Mom, I think sometimes you need to be a little more impulsive. You know, and, and thought about, you know, like, there's a, there's a wisdom in come, in coming into a situation and seeing that it really requires immediate action, and just doing and just going with it. And that I don't think, you know, I need to abandon, you know, caution entirely, to embrace impulsivity. But I think that there is a sense in which I have tried to better understand the gifts of people who are not like me, and that has value in my life. In book two, I've been focusing that on Fred and George, who I've decided are very good at assessing risk. And I am very cautious in my assessment of risk. But I can see that they're really good at assessing risk, and, and knowing and understanding the boundaries and limits of that. And those are not my skills. That's not my skill set. But I'm appreciating by reflecting deeply, and engaging in spiritual practice, that by considering the actions of characters who I do not identify with, and don't especially like, most of the time, that they're that they have talents and skills that I don't have, and because I don't have them, I don't value them. But and being trying to, like, name them, that there is value for me in that, if that makes sense. And I think that there's a lot in here about like, considering difference, and trying to value difference, that's been good.

Carla Long 22:13

I just, I just love hearing you explain that. I, I think that what you're offering the children and the adults in this is such a different way of looking at life, and to really take yourself and place yourself into the

story is something that is just invaluable. Also, I'm very curious how you're going to handle Dolores Umbridge.

Nancy Ross 22:38

You know, right, right. She's the worst, she's like the worst. No, she's totally the worst. And it isn't, I think that we need to learn to see bad people as good, like and right, like, that's not that's not the goal, but empathizing with people can be the goal. So we have just dealt with, so we've just read like the second the last chapter of book two, where Jenny has been with the diary, we don't really know about Jenny's relationship with the diary, but we're like, in the Chamber of Secrets, and it's like a giant, you know, a giant snake, you know, trying to kill everything. But the, but the villain of the of the series, Voldemort, manifests as a 16-year-old boy in a way that we could, we get to see Harry interact with him over over, like the course of this chapter, and how the assumptions that Harry makes the assumptions that Voldemort makes, and how they interact with each other and begin to kind of okay, like, what's, what's happening here in this conversation? What are the assumptions that Voldemort is making? You know, and how does the story unfold? You know, and ultimately, we do see a 16-year-old boy who is very deeply wounded. And that is not a choice that kids make, right? Like, the choice to be wounded is not a choice that kids make. And the repercussions of this are tremendous, you know, and result and result in murder in this story, and tremendous violence. But that these are things we can sit with not as a sense that like Voldemort, or all these characters are models that we should follow. But rather, that we understand what is happening in a given situation, in a story and take the opportunity to reflect on that and say, and ask ourselves, is this like anything in my life? You know, and does understanding this the story which we all acknowledge is fiction, and can engage with this fiction pretty easily, because we all know it's a story. But does it does our discussion of that shed anything on our lives? And I think that often it does, and that is the beauty of fiction, right? The beauty of fiction is that it helps us grow into full and empathetic and caring people. And we can also do that in very casual ways. And we can also do that in intentional ways. And our Harry Potter and the sac, and the sacred texts group is a very intentional way of reading, and, and trying to create meaning and reflection on a story that is very easily accessible to children and adults.

Carla Long 25:24

You know, as you were speaking, I was, I went back to a memory I had about, I was speaking with a friend of mine, and we had very different, we have very different political views. And when we were chatting about those different political views, we finally boiled down to this one place, and I was shocked about where we came out. And this is what you reminded me of. I believe that people are good, with a few not so good tendencies. And he believed that people were basically bad with a few good tendencies. And so, of course, I think I'm right. But what I feel like you're, you're teaching here and like, a lot of different ways, is that people are good. Like, I believe God called us good. I believe that we're good people and yet we act out of what we know. And we act out of our experience, and maybe not so good ways. And I think it's really important to recognize that that is what you're teaching here. That, that people are good and that people want to be good. Just sometimes we just aren't. And I don't really love

the words good and bad. I don't really use those very often. But I'm just trying to make it a little bit more simple for this, for this discussion. But I just think it's beautiful that's what you're talking about.

Nancy Ross 26:34

Yeah. And I feel like so much of what we're trying to do is hold complexity, right? We're trying to explore and hold complexity of people's choices and decisions, right, and most of the characters are in childhood. And this is something we have to keep reminding ourselves that in the, in the beginning, the kids we're dealing with are 11, which is younger than my children now. And right now in the second series, they're 12. I have a 12-year-old. You know, I don't really want my 12-year-old to be encountering, like monsters in a dungeon. And do I think that that would work out? Well, no, like, That's terrible. That's terrible. But, but I do think that it gives us the opportunity to sit with the complexity people experience, right? Like, I love Hermione. I am like Hermione. Hermione is not always great all the time. Right? And there are times when she makes judgments that are overly harsh, or when she makes wrong call or misunderstands or tries to act in ways that aren't good. And it's also good for me, just as I'm reflecting on this character who I identify with not to be like, Oh, well, she's just great all the time. But like, but to say, Okay, well, this character who I love and who I identify with, and we share many of the same tendencies, that when I reflect on Hermione's limitations, I can also be reflecting on my limitations and naming them. And that doesn't hurt me to do that. But it helps me to hold myself in a more morally complex way. And I have realized that the more that I can do that for myself, the less I have to be right about everything. And that's, and that's hard, because we often all want to be right about things.

Carla Long 28:22

That's incredibly freeing, actually, it is. I mean, you don't have to be perfect all the time. I think the perfection, trying to be perfect all the time is one of the most damaging things we can do, actually. So, I, that is incredibly freeing that we can, sometimes we have to live with some consequences of our choices. But that we also learn responsibility from that, too. So I, gosh, I just think you're doing such a great thing, Nancy, and I'm super, super excited about hearing about this. So before I forget to ask, How can people join if they want to join you? Can they join you? Is that possible?

Nancy Ross 28:59

Yeah, it is. I mean, you could send me a message on Facebook, which would be a really easy way to, to join. Because of the difficulty of the, I used to do a lot of ad, more advertising of our Harry Potter and sacred text book, through our congregations page, but because that's become trickier, it feels in the last six months, I'm doing less of that. But if you want to send me a message, I'm happy to hook you up. There are also a number of local groups around the country. So, I think if you go to a Harry Potter and the sacred text, or Not Sorry Productions and click on the sacred Harry, the Harry Potter and the sacred text podcast, you'll see that there's a tab somewhere that says local groups and there are actually local

groups around the world who are also meeting online so you could join ours and that's awesome. But there are also other local groups all around the country and a number of other locations in the world where people in non-pandemic times meet up in person to discuss such things and find a lot of meaning and value in creating community around how we find meaning in the world. And, and I think that, right, just that that's good, too. So yeah,

Carla Long 30:12

That's very helpful. And you know, you're moving into book three, which is my second least favorite, but maybe if I join your group, I could find more to love in the third book too.

Nancy Ross 30:25

You know, book two has been my least favorite. And we're just about to finish it now. And I am surprised at how much the experience has taught me, especially as I was heart I, you know, it was fun to go back and reread book one because I hadn't reread it in such a long time. But with book two was just like, oh, can't we get to book four, like, sooner, you know? Because that's, that's more interesting and complex in ways that I can readily identify. But reading this book, which I've been like, this isn't my favorite. And it's, it has been surprisingly rewarding. And I think that that's one of the beautiful things about engaging sacred reading practices, is that we come to something or that we can come to something familiar with new tools, and new skills, and we can get new things out of it. And there's a lot of value in learning to do that.

Carla Long 31:25

I'm so glad you said that, because I, I was hoping that's what you're gonna say, because I agree. I think that anytime we come to any, any text, well, maybe not any text, but a lot of texts, with a different lens, we always grow and we all, it always changes who we are. So, Nancy, I'm just so thrilled by this. This makes me really happy. And I haven't actually thought about Harry Potter in a long time. But it makes me want to get books for my kiddos when they get a little bit older so they can enjoy them the way I did. And there's so many other great series out there. That's exciting for me, too. Nancy, is there anything else that you wanted to say about Harry Potter and the sacred text before we sign off?

Nancy Ross 32:02

No. But if you, well maybe, like if you are curious about what we might do, send me a message on Facebook, or go ahead and listen to the podcast. And if those sound like conversations that you would like to participate in, you know, find a local group or let me know.

Carla Long 32:19

That's very kind. I hope that people really get behind this because I think it's a really cool idea and really, really fun for adults and kids alike, it sounds like. Yeah. Well, thank you so much, Nancy, for

talking with me today. I really appreciate what you have to say. And I appreciate how much work goes into, I'm sure, leading up a group like this. So, I appreciate that very much.

Nancy Ross 32:40

Thank you. Thank you for having me.

Josh Mangelson 32:50

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