Third Sunday of the year, B

OSP, 2024

Occasionally I find a writer

who not only pens a great novel or poem

but time after time delights me with wisdom

or shocks me with brutal honesty.

Maybe that happens to you sometimes as well.

Some of those writers I invoke here often

like a Barbara Brown Taylor

or the poet Mary Oliver.

Another whom I turn to with some frequency

may be less known than these

even though he was a Pulitzer prize finalist

as well as a finalist for the National Book Award

and his writings, translated into 27 languages,

have often been compared to the works

of C.S. Lewis and G.K. Chesterton.

Frederick Beuchner, who died in 2022,

was a Presbyterian minister, author and preacher.

As a theologian he is not all sunshine and buttercups

and prods us to be realistic about the dark

in our lives and particularly in religion

nudging us to consider the possibility of hope

from the most unexpected of quarters.

In his [*Telling the Truth*](https://www.frederickbuechner.com/telling-the-truth-the-gospel-as-tragedy-comedy-and-fairy-tale)*,* a slim volume of less than 100 pages

Buechner writes about the gospel alternately as

tragedy, comedy and fairy tale.

It is his conviction that each one of us must

* first perceive the tragedy of human failure
* then the comedy of God’s unwavering love
* and finally the fairy tale of God’s willingness to enter into our world and save us.

My musing on the work of Buechner

and his gift for speaking the unvarnished truth of God’s word

in all of its tragic and comedic dimensions

was prompted by today’s first reading.

The tale of Noah is alternately tragic and comedic

with so many fairy tale elements, it could have been crafted

by the biblical precursor of Walt Disney.

There is a quite amusing [animated video](https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/jonah/) on line entitled

“The subversive story of a rebellious prophet

Who hates God for loving his enemies”

That highlights some of the absurdities of this story:

* Like featuring a selfish prophet contrasted with humble and repentant pagans,
* A prophet so toxic that he even gives a behemoth from the deep uncontrollable indigestion
* Whose incredibly powerful 5 word sermon
  + - pushes not only the world’s most powerful king
    - but even his cows to repent.
* Which ignites new outrage in our toxic prophet who apparently has more care for some newly sprouted vine than a throng of humanity.
* And ultimately chews out God for being too compassionate.

As for tragic elements – certainly the prophet’s attitude ranks high’

* As for the Comedic – well, where else have you heard about cows repenting?
* And when it comes to fairy tales – maybe it’s self-defense, but I’m sticking with the 5 word sermon as the most effective in human history.

But there is something else going on here

that Buechner’s 3 categories don’t exactly cover

for from a literary perspective

more than tragedy, comedy or fairy tale

The Book of Jonah is unadulterated satire.

A distinctive genre in its own right

satire is particularly well suited

for critiquing social practices and hypocrisy.

Think about the tv shows *South Park* or*The Simpsons*,

novels like *Don Quixote* or *Animal Farm*

or movies *Dr. Strangelove* or *Monty Python’s Life of Brian*.

And what do these satirical works contribute to society?

In the case of *South Park,* which has generated

serious [scholarly studies](https://jcom.sissa.it/article/pubid/JCOM_1502_2016_C02/)

and even multiple [graduate theses](https://ir.library.oregonstate.edu/concern/graduate_thesis_or_dissertations/g158bn84v)

according to [one author](https://scholarworks.utep.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1244&context=open_etd) this highly irreverent show

targets far left and far right ideologies

and reveals the absurdity of extremist points of view.

While it may not be something we recognize very often

satire is similarly employed in the bible

to critique social, political and religious extremism

and especially hypocrisy.

Take for example the book of Job,

in which God satirizes Job’s lack of wisdom or power

musing about whether Job was around

when [God laid the foundations of the earth](https://biblehub.com/job/38-4.htm).

The Psalmist is no slouch when it comes to satire.

In one [blistering passage](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm%20115%3A4-7&version=NIV) mocking hand-made idols he writes

They have mouths, but cannot speak,

eyes, but they cannot see;

they have ears but cannot hear,

noses, but they cannot smell;

they have hands, but cannot feel,

feet, but they cannot walk;

nor can they utter a sound with their throats.

Those who make them will be like them …

The prophets even use [vulgarity](https://www.biblestudytools.com/nlt/1-kings/18-27.html) when satirizing pagan gods

wondering why they don’t answer

musing that they must be asleep, or traveling

or taking a bathroom break.

Jesus as well was pretty good with a satirical quip

Consider that he named unstable and double-crossing

Peter as “Rocky”

Suggests that its easier for a

[camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for the rich to enter heaven](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+19%3A24&version=NIV).

Or chides pharisees as blind guides for

[straining out gnats but swallowing camels](https://www.bible.com/bible/111/MAT.23.24.NIV).

Now I know you are very excited

To learn that the bible is filled,

not only with comedies, tragedies and fairytails

But also satire, sarcasm, and mockery

Some of it from the lips of the Son of God

So maybe today we have discovered the scriptural basis

For the Gospel according to Bart Simpson

Or The Epistle from Dr. Strangelove

Giving us permission to share in this biblical gift

Of caustic and disparaging language.

That certainly would be a theological comfort

To many a politician and public figure today

Who seem to accel in belittlement and ridicule.

On the other hand, as a rhetorical device

Satire is not first and foremost about diminishment

But about change.

God mocking Jonah, because he is an inept prophet

The Psalmist chastising idol makers

because they shattered a primary commandment

to have no other god’s but the one

who delivered them from slavery.

And Jesus rebuffs certain Pharisees

Because they are so OCD about observing legal minituae

That they miss the law of love.

Augustine wisely notes that Hope has two beautiful daughters

Their names are Anger and Courage.

Anger at the way things are

And Courage to see that they do not remain that way.

Courageous anger against extremism

Whether it is a prophet chastising God

For being too compassionate

A Catholic prelate chastising the Pope

For undermining the deposit of faith

Or some wreckless politician

undermining the voice and dignity of the people.

In some ways, even though we read the story of Jonah first

It is the ending … a DISAPPOINTING ending

Whereas the gospel story of fresh discipleship is the beginning

Today’s Gospel is the beginning of a story of discipleship

Jonah is the end of one …

And like a long past Advent

This community today lives between the two

Between a fresh call to discipleship

And an ending that individually and collectively

We have not yet reached.

So will our discipleship blunder towards tragedy

Embrace the comedy of human existence,

Or immerse itself in God’s mythic entry into our world

Into our community, into our lives.

While it might not seem a pressing question

And you and I have a lot on our agendas this week

I’m getting ready to leave the country for a month

Impertinent Paul reminds us that time is running out

Running out to care for a planet

Running out to … migrants

Running out to stop the starvation

Running out to stop the violence

While it was not reported in the Chicago Catholic this past week

There was a clandestine meeting of local demons

Summoned by Satan himself, as there seems to be a local crisis

As enough community members from OSP

Are not making it to hell.

The Head Demon asked for suggestions to remedy the situation

One demon suggested telling the people

That there was no hell

But he was quickly refuted,

Pointing out the 49-76 season of the Whitesox

The Cubs missing the playoffs a 2nd year in a row

Black hawks … bulls … bears

Another demon suggested telling the OSP folk

That there was no heaven

That was quickly shot down as well

For they’re weekly nourished by great worship

And they have an Irish Pastor …

Finally, one little devil in the back reasoned:

Since we can’t convince them there is no hell

Nor convince them there is no heaven

Maybe we can convince them there is no hurry.

We may not be in a hurry

* + But St. Paul is
  + A warming globe is
  + Every child brutalized on our streets is
  + And each innocent dying in a neighborhood that has become a warzone is

John Green is an unusually poetic and honest author.

You might know his touching 2014 novel

The Fault in our Stars.

In his succinct and sometimes blunt rhetoric he reminds us

That the world is not a wish-granting factory

That the world may be broken but hope is not crazy

And that the marks humans leave are too often scars.

It is his reflections on “someday” however

That grabs my attention today. He writes:

One day, you’re 17 and you’re planning for someday. And then quietly, without you ever really noticing, someday is today. And then someday is Yesterday. And this is your life.

Today we accept the seashore summons of the Christ

That the time for discipleship is now

That the time for standing up against prejudice

And warmongering is at hand

That Someday is today …

Let it be so, through Christ our Lord.