

I Saw God at the Movies
O Brother, Where Art Thou?
Matthew 21:28-32

One of the first things I learned in seminary that is that the definition of ‘myth’ that I’d using my whole life was wrong. I thought that a ‘myth’ was a story that is untrue. A story that lots of people know, but that has been clearly demonstrated to be false. I suppose if that’s what most people understand when we use the word ‘myth,’ that can become the meaning of the word. But in academic circles, I learned, a myth is something different. It’s a ‘foundational story’: a story that might or might not be factual, but it explains something about the values we live by. A story that gives meaning to our actions. For example: We have an American *myth* that says that anyone who is willing to work hard in this country can get ahead. Is that always true? Maybe not, but it explains a lot about how we live, and what we teach our children.

One of the oldest myths in western culture comes from a long poem written by a Greek writer named Homer, who lived 800 years before Jesus. The poem is called *The Odyssey*, and it tells the story of a man who went off to fight a great battle for the empire. When the war was over, Odysseus (called Ulysses in Roman mythology) began to travel toward home. It took him ten years to get home, and his journey was full of adventures and mishaps, dangers, temptations, some real suffering. That story—of a hero who will face any obstacle to get home *and who is transformed in the process*—has become one of our foundational human myths. The factual truth of Homer’s poem—whether one person ever actually made that journey or not—doesn’t really matter. This story is true. The longing for home and the drive to get back there captures a universal experience, and it explains a lot of human behavior. You know this already because of the work of Joseph Campbell.

Some version of the hero’s journey is present in every religious tradition. In the Hebrew Scriptures, it’s the story of Jacob, who makes his way home years after his cheating has banished him to a foreign land. As Jacob makes his way home, he encounters many difficulties. He wrestles with an angel; he comes out of that fight with a limp that humbles and humanizes him.

In American literature it’s *The Wizard of Oz*. Dorothy is the hero of that story, and all her encounters with lions and tigers and bears and evil witches and flying monkeys are about her trying to get home, back to the farm in Kansas. The hero’s journey explains *Pirates of the Caribbean* and the post-Civil War novel *Cold Mountain* and even all those Disney movies about dogs who get lost and travel thousands of miles to get back to the children who love them.

And *The Odyssey* is the myth that Joel and Ethan Coen based the story of *O Brother, Where Art Thou* on. George Clooney is the sly, smooth-talking hero, not-so-subtly named *Ulysses* Everett McGill. He’s got two less sophisticated companions, Pete and Delmar, and the three of them escape from a prison chain gang and head toward home, across Mississippi in the Depression era 1930’s. They’re going to reclaim a treasure that’s supposedly waiting there, and Everett’s wife Penny (Penelope in Homer’s poem), who’s just about to marry another man.

Along the way they run into a menagerie of odd characters and strange tribulations. Three beautiful, but dangerous women (the Sirens from Homer's poem), a one-eyed Bible salesman who tells them he's in the business of selling 'truth' (a contemporary Cyclops), and an evil sheriff who seems to show up everywhere, like the Devil himself, who never stops hunting down those escaped convicts. Over and over again they are rescued by unlikely angels: a child who drives a getaway car with a block of wood tied to his foot so he can reach the gas pedal; a blind radio operator; a bank robber; a young black man who's likely to be lynched at any moment but who also has a musical talent that ultimately saves them.

There's nothing subtle about this movie. The opening credits tell us right off that the movie is based on *The Odyssey*. You can also see, quite clearly, scenes that parody *The Wizard of Oz*. What the movie doesn't advertise is a whole bunch of biblical imagery, which saturates the story. In addition to the baptism scene we watched a little while ago, there's a prophet, in the form of an old, blind, black man who endlessly pushes a handcar along the railroad tracks, with no destination. He speaks mystical truth to Everett and Pete and Delmar; early on, he tells them to watch out for the devil. What's the devil look like? Is he black? No, the prophet says; "he's white. He's got empty eyes and a big dog." And the prophet appears again, in the movie's last scene, as though he's been watching out for them the whole time.

There's a scene where Everett lays down in the woods to sleep. His pillow is a stone, just like in the story of Jacob, who laid down with a stone under his head just before he dreamed of angels leading him up a ladder that connected him to God.

And then there's the final salvation scene in the movie. The devil—who is also the sheriff—has finally caught up with them; the three fugitives are just about to be hanged.

[movie clips]

Whether you explain it as divine intervention or a federal infrastructure project, a great flood seems like God's response to Everett's prayer. It saves the Soggy Bottom Boys from execution, and it saves the world from destruction.

And through all of this, Everett is transformed—from a slick criminal who robbed an armored car to a forgiven, smart but still-naive guy who was actually jailed for practicing law without a license and who might try dentistry next. He could go nose-to-nose with a notorious bank robber, but he wilts when his wife counts to three. He cares for no man but he will do anything to reclaim his role as *pater familias* to his six little daughters.

You may have watched this movie and thought, "What the heck does this satire of everything sacred have to do with seeing God?" I think you got it. This is what the Coen brothers do in their movies. They take stereotypes—our myths—and stretch them far enough to reveal hypocrisy. They exaggerate them enough to expose our affectations and the stories we live by without thinking.

This movie is undoubtedly—and intentionally—irreverent. But its characters take religion seriously. *And*, I would argue, so do the filmmakers. They said they based this story on *The Odyssey*, but the Coens admitted years later that they never actually read Homer's poem. What is absolutely clear is that they know their Bible. Whether they are believers or not, Christianity

is their tradition, their home base. There are biblical phrases and characters and images buried all through this movie.

So here's the question this movie raises for me—for us, I think: Is God offended when filmmakers or writers or cartoonists—or anybody—mocks religion? Should *we* be offended when someone satirizes our religious tradition? Does God have a sense of humor, or should religion be off-limits to satirical humor? Like so many questions, I think the answer is, “It depends.”

There's a difference between being irreverent about your own religious tradition and mocking someone else's. Do you remember when the offices of the French journal Charlie Hebdo were attacked by Islamists several years ago? That attack was a reaction to European cartooning of Mohammed in a way that was offensive to Muslims all over the world. I'm not defending terrorism—ever—but maybe mocking another tradition's sacred images ought to feel a little bit dangerous—out of bounds—to us.

But even Jesus used irony about his own tradition. I'm pretty sure he was exaggerating to make a point when he talked about people who have a log in their eye trying to take the speck out of someone else's. Our own sacred stories sometimes make the best humor.

Our Scripture reading this morning was a story Jesus told about two brothers. Their father asked each of them to go outside and do some work in the yard—as fathers do. One brother said, ‘Yessir, I will do it.’ And he did nothing. The other son said, ‘No way. I'm not going out there.’ But then he went and did exactly what his father asked of him. Which of these two, Jesus asked his listeners, did what his father wanted? The answer is obvious. It was probably painfully clear to the religious people Jesus was talking to.

I imagine that the son who answered ‘no’ did it not exactly respectfully. That he grumbled, maybe even turned his back and ridiculed his father for asking. But then he went and did the right thing. The father in this story wasn't thrown off by the ‘no’, or even by the disrespect. What mattered to him was the work that needed to be done.

I wonder if God doesn't feel the same way about most irreverence—whether it comes in movies or jokes or satirical pieces of art. I wonder if God doesn't chuckle a little when we know the stories well enough to embed them in our humor. Because then I imagine God says, both to people who believe and to those who don't, “Now, just go love one another.”