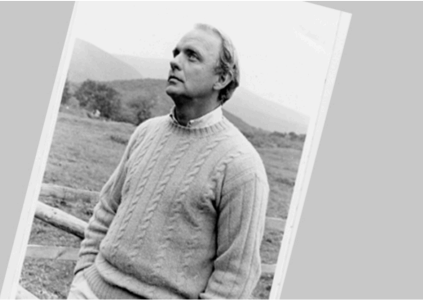


Frederick Buechner

Sermon Illustration



In Memoriam: Revd Carl Frederick Buechner, Jul. 11, 1926 — Aug. 15, 2022

Here at the Frederick Buechner Center, we wanted to give you—should you desire it—the opportunity to celebrate the author’s life, work, and ministry this coming Sunday with your church family.

To that end, we have produced what we hope is a helpful resource for you as you prepare your sermons. Given the circumstances, this document is slightly different to our usual lectionary aid. It contains two groups of Bible texts and texts from the works of Frederick Buechner:

- **Group 1** contains a selection of Buechner’s favorite Bible texts paired with suitable and relevant texts from his own work;
- **Group 2** as usual, contains this week’s lectionary texts paired with suitable and relevant texts.

What follows is a short summary and then the texts themselves, set out in a format that we hope you will find easy to navigate.

Group 1

Pairing 1:

- Theme:
 - Eternal life with God
- Reading:
 - Psalm 23:1-4
- Buechner Texts:
 - “‘Praise, Praise!’ I croak” from *Godric*
 - “Eternal Life” from *Wishful Thinking*

Pairing 2:

- Theme:
 - Trusting in the love of God
- Reading:
 - Romans 8:37-39
- Buechner Text:
 - “All’s Lost—All’s Found” from *A Room Called Remember*
 - “Don’t be scared” from *The Eyes of the Heart*

Pairing 3:

- Theme:
 - Heaven
- Reading:
 - Revelation 21:1-5
- Buechner Text:
 - “Heaven” from *Whistling in the Dark*

Group 2

Proper 16
Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost
August 21, 2022

Pairing 1:

- Theme:
 - Praise
- Lectionary Reading:
 - Psalm 103:1-8
- Buechner Texts:
 - “‘Praise, Praise!’ I croak” from *Godric*
 - “The ultimate joy and goodness of things” from *The Sacred Journey*

Pairing 2:

- Theme:
 - Heaven
- Lectionary Reading:
 - Hebrews 12:18-29
- Buechner Texts:
 - “Dying” from *Whistling in the Dark*
 - “To have faith is to remember and wait” from *A Room Called Remember*

GROUP 1: Buechner's favorite Bible verses

PAIRING 1

Theme:

- Eternal life with God

Reading:

- Psalm 23:1-4

Buechner Texts:

- “Praise, Praise!’ I croak” from *Godric*
- “Eternal Life” from *Wishful Thinking*

Passage: Psalm 23:1-4

1 The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.
2 He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;
3 he restores my soul.
He leads me in right paths
for his name's sake.
4 Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I fear no evil,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff,
they comfort me.

Passage 1: *Godric* (1980), p.96

“Praise, praise!” I croak. Praise God for all that's holy, cold, and dark. Praise him for all we lose, for all the river of the years bears off. Praise him for stillness in the wake of pain. Praise him for emptiness. And as you race to spill into the sea, praise him yourself, old Wear. Praise him for dying and the peace of death. [...] What's lost is nothing to what's found, and all the death that ever was, set next to life, would scarcely fill a cup.’

Passage 2: *Wishful Thinking* (1973), p.21-3

‘When you are with somebody you love, you have little if any sense of the passage of time, and you also have in the fullest sense of the phrase a *good* time. When you are with God, you have something like the same experience. The biblical term for the experience is Eternal Life. Another is Heaven. [...] This side of Paradise, people are with God in such a remote and spotty way that their experience of Eternal Life is at best like the experience you get of a place approaching it at night in a fast train. Even the saints see only an occasional light go whipping by, hear only a sound or two over the clatter of the rails. The rest of us aren't usually awake enough to see as much as that, or we're mumbling over our nightcaps in the club car. But the day will break and the train will pull into the station, and the ones who have managed to stay with it will finally alight. We think of Eternal Life, if we think of it at all, as what happens when life ends. We would do better to think of it as what happens when life begins. St. Paul uses the phrase Eternal Life to describe the end and goal of the process of salvation. Elsewhere he writes the same thing in a remarkable sentence where he says that the whole purpose of God's slogging around through the muck of history and of our own individual histories is somehow to prod us, jolly us, worry us, cajole us, and if need be bludgeon us into reaching "mature manhood...the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ." (Ephesians 4:13). In other words, to live Eternal Life in the full and final sense is to be with God as Christ is with him, and with each other as Christ is with us.’

PAIRING 2

Theme:

- Trusting in the love of God

Reading:

- Romans 8:37-39

Buechner Texts:

- “All’s Lost—All’s Found” from *A Room Called Remember*
- “Don’t be scared” from *The Eyes of the Heart*

Passage: Roman 8:37-9

37 [I]n all these things we are more than victorious through him who loved us.
38 For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, 39 nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Passage 1: *A Room Called Remember* (1984), p.189-90

‘[I]f it is by grace we are saved, it is by grace too that we are lost, or lost at least in the sense of losing ourselves, our lives, our all. In the past, when my faith was strong, I always trusted God more or less. I trusted him with my life, which is to say I trusted him but with the presupposition that I would always be in some measure alive to say to him in the words of the *Te Deum*, “Oh Lord, in thee have I trusted; let me never be confounded,” in the sense that I would always be around to cajole with him, plead with him, and in general to remind him to be the God of mercy and love I always trusted him to be. The change is that now I begin, at least, to trust him with my death. I begin, at least, to see that death is not merely a biological necessity but a necessity too in terms of the mystery of salvation. We find by losing. We hold fast by letting go. We become something new by ceasing to be something old. This seems to be close to the heart of that mystery. I know no more now than I ever did about the far side of death as the last letting-go of all, but I begin to know that I do not need to know and that I do not need to be afraid of not knowing. God knows. That is all that matters. Out of Nothing he creates Something. Out of the End he creates the Beginning. Out of selfness we grow, by his grace, toward selflessness, and out of that final selflessness, which is the loss of self altogether, “eye hath not seen nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man” what new marvels he will bring to pass next. All’s lost. All’s found.’

Passage 2: *The Eyes of the Heart* (1999), p.171

‘[O]nce a few years ago I tried writing out a dialogue between my father and me using my left hand, because the childish scrawl it produced seemed to put me in touch with the child I was when I knew him and—who can say?—maybe with him too. “I’ve been so worried. I’ve been so scared,” my left hand wrote, and then he wrote back, “Don’t be. There is nothing to worry about. That is the secret I never knew, but I know it now.” I have the manuscript still, and it is so clumsily written that I can hardly make it out. “What do you know, Daddy?” it reads, and then his answer: “I know plenty, and it’s all good.”’

PAIRING 3

Theme:

- Heaven

Reading:

- Revelation 21:1-5

Buechner Text:

- “Heaven” from *Whistling in the Dark*

Passage: Revelation 21:1-5

1 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.

2 And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

“See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them and be their God;

4 he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.”

5 And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.”

Passage: *Whistling in the Dark* (1988), p.59

‘[T]he new you, me, everybody.

It was always buried there like treasure in all of us—the best we had it in us to become—and there were times you could almost see it. Even the least likely face, asleep, bore traces of it. Even the bombed-out city after nightfall with the public squares in a shambles and moonlight glazing the broken pavement. To speak of heavenly music or a heavenly day isn't always to gush but sometimes to catch a glimpse of something. "Death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more," the Book of Revelation says. You can catch a glimpse of that too in almost anybody's eyes if you choose the right moment to look, even in animals' eyes. If the new is to be born, though, the old has to die. It is the law of the place. For the best to happen, the worst must stop happening—the worst we are, the worst we do. But maybe it isn't as difficult as it sounds. It was a hardened criminal within minutes of death, after all, who said only, "Jesus, remember me," and that turned out to be enough. "This day you will be with me in Paradise" was the answer he just managed to hear.’

GROUP 2: lectionary pairings

PAIRING 1

Theme:

- Praise

Lectionary Reading:

- Psalm 103:1-8

Buechner Texts:

- “‘Praise, Praise!’ I croak” from *Godric*
- “The ultimate joy and goodness of things” from *The Sacred Journey*

Passage: Psalm 103:1-8

1 Bless the LORD, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name.

2 Bless the LORD, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits

3 who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases,

4 who redeems your life from the Pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,

5 who satisfies you with good as long as you live so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.

6 The LORD works vindication and justice for all who are oppressed.

7 He made known his ways to Moses, his acts to the people of Israel.

8 The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

Passage 1: *Godric* (1980), p.96

“‘Praise, praise!’ I croak. Praise God for all that's holy, cold, and dark. Praise him for all we lose, for all the river of the years bears off. Praise him for stillness in the wake of pain. Praise him for emptiness. And as you race to spill into the sea, praise him yourself, old Wear. Praise him for dying and the peace of death.

In the little church I built of wood for Mary, I hollowed out a place for him. Perkin brings him by the pail and pours him in. Now that I can hardly walk, I crawl to meet him there. He takes me in his chilly lap to wash me of my sins. Or I kneel down beside him till within his depths I see a star.

Sometimes this star is still. Sometimes she dances. She is Mary's star. Within that little pool of Wear she winks at me. I wink at her. The secret that we share I cannot tell in full. But this much I will tell. What's lost is nothing to what's found, and all the death that ever was, set next to life, would scarcely fill a cup.’

Passage 2: *The Sacred Journey* (1982), p.85

The next winter I sat in Army fatigues somewhere near Anniston, Alabama, eating my supper out of a mess kit. The infantry training battalion that I had been assigned to was on bivouac. There was a cold drizzle of rain, and everything was mud. The sun had gone down. I was still hungry when I finished and noticed that a man nearby had something left over that he was not going to eat. It was a turnip, and when I asked him if I could have it, he tossed it over to me. I missed the catch, the turnip fell to the ground, but I wanted it so badly that I picked it up and started eating it anyway, mud and all. And then, as I ate it, time deepened and slowed down again. With a lurch of the heart that is real to me still, I saw suddenly, almost as if from beyond time altogether, that not only was the turnip good, but the mud was good too, even the drizzle and cold were good, even the Army that I had dreaded for months. Sitting there in the Alabama winter with my mouth full of cold turnip and mud, I could see at least for a moment how if you ever took truly to heart the ultimate goodness and joy of things, even at their bleakest, the need to praise someone or something for it would be so great that you might even have to go out and speak of it to the birds of the air.

PAIRING 2

Theme:

- Heaven

Lectionary Reading:

- Hebrews 12:18-19, 22-24, 28-29

Buechner Texts:

- “Dying” from *Whistling in the Dark*
- “To have faith is to remember and wait” from *A Room Called Remember*

Passage: Hebrews 12:18-29

18 You have not come to something that can be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest,

19 and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them.

[...]

22 [Y]ou have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering,

23 and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect,

24 and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

[...]

28 Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe;

29 for indeed our God is a consuming fire.

Passage 1: *Whistling in the Dark* (1988), p.38-9

The airport is crowded, noisy, frenetic. There are yowling babies, people being paged, the usual ruckus. Outside, a mixture of snow and sleet is coming down. The runways show signs of icing. Flight delays and cancellations are called out over the PA system together with the repeated warning that in view of recent events any luggage left unattended will be immediately impounded. There are more people than usual smoking at the various gates. The air is blue with it. Once aboard you peer through the windows for traces of ice on the wings and search the pancaked faces of the stewardesses for anything like the knot of anxiety you feel in your own stomach as they run through the customary emergency procedures. The great craft lumbers its way to the take-off position, the jets shrill. Picking up speed, you count the seconds till you feel lift-off. More than so many, you've heard, means trouble. Once airborne, you can hardly see the wings at all through the grey turbulence scudding by. The steep climb is rough as a Ford pick-up. Gradually it starts to even out. The clouds thin a little. Here and there you see tatters of clear air among them. The pilot levels off slightly. Nobody is talking. The calm and quiet of it are almost palpable. Suddenly, in a rush of light, you break out of the weather. Beneath you the clouds are a furrowed pasture. Above, no sky in creation was ever bluer.

Possibly the last take-off of all is something like that. When the time finally comes, you're scared stiff to be sure, but maybe by then you're just as glad to leave the whole show behind and get going. In a matter of moments, everything that seemed to matter stops mattering. The slow climb is all there is. The stillness. The clouds. Then the miracle of flight as from fathom upon fathom down you surface suddenly into open sky. The dazzling sun.

Passage 2: *A Room Called Remember* (1984), p.12

Shall is the verb of hope. Then death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning or crying. Then shall my eyes behold him and not as a stranger. Then his kingdom shall come at last and his will shall be done in us and through us and for us. Then the trees of the wood shall sing for joy as already they sing a little even now sometimes when the wind is in them and as underneath their singing our own hearts too already sing a little sometimes at this holy hope we have.

The past and the future. Memory and expectation. Remember and hope. Remember and wait. Wait for him whose face we all of us know because somewhere in the past we have faintly seen it, whose life we all of us thirst for because somewhere in the past we have seen it lived, have maybe even had moments of living it ourselves. Remember him who himself remembers us as he promised to remember the thief who died beside him. To have faith is to remember and wait, and to wait in hope is to have what we hope for already begin to come true in us through our hoping. Praise him.