

I must share this interpretation of today's reading from Genesis. It comes from an email list-serve from the heirs of Frederick Buechner, the famed minister, preacher, scholar, and author. It is too good not to be shared. This how Fred Buechner imagined the way the first woman may have seen herself when she looked hard into the mirror.

“Like Adam, Eve spent the rest of her days convincing herself that it had all worked out for the best. Their new life didn't turn out to be as bad as had been predicted, and somehow their marriage weathered the change. If they had moments of terrible bitterness over what had happened, they had other moments when it became more of a bridge than an abyss between them and when the question of which of them was to blame got lost in the question of how both of them were to survive. One son died an ugly, senseless death, and another went through life as disfigured by remorse as by a cleft palate. But all in all things didn't go too badly. When the last child left home, it wasn't the easiest thing in the world to be alone again with a man who, after his third martini, might still lash out at her as a snake in the grass and a bad apple, but at least they still had their independence and their principles, which as nearly as she could remember were what they'd given everything up for. They stood, however grimly at times, on their own feet.

It was only once in a while at night, just as she was going off to sleep with all her usual defenses down, that her mind drifted back to the days when, because there was nothing especially important to do, everything was especially important; when *too good not to be true* hadn't yet turned into *too good to be true*; when being alone was never the same as being lonely. Then sad and beautiful dreams overtook her, which she would wake up from homesick for a home she could no longer even name, to make something not quite love with a man whose face she could not quite see in the darkness at her side.”¹

What a pity Eve never knew how much she was loved by God – that he saved her and Adam from certain and immediate death so that she might have a chance at love. Would

that she had benefited from knowing Jesus as we do and being taught how to love by the best lover of all.

After his baptism, Jesus went into the wilderness alone to pray, he went to be with God. He fasted to see more clearly. He needed to be with God alone. He went to pray and prepare to live into his ministry, to show God's love to this world. If he had brought a mirror with him, he might have stared into his own reflection as he sorted out his role in our world – what it meant to be the Son of God. And the man Jesus saw in the mirror was a reflection of God's love.

In his musings on Lent, Buechner wrote: “In many cultures there is an ancient custom of giving a tenth of each year's income to some holy use. For Christians, to observe the forty days of Lent is to do the same thing with roughly a tenth of each year's days. After being baptized by John in the river Jordan, Jesus went off alone into the wilderness where he spent forty days asking himself the question what it meant to be Jesus. During Lent, Christians are supposed to ask one way or another what it means to be themselves.

- “When you look at your face in the mirror, what do you see in it that you most like and what do you see in it that you most deplore?
- “If you had only one last message to leave to the handful of people who are most important to you, what would it be in twenty-five words or less?
- “Of all the things you have done in your life, which is the one you would most like to undo?
- Which is the one that makes you happiest to remember?
- “Is there any person in the world, or any cause, that, if circumstances called for it, you would be willing to die for?
- “If this were the last day of your life, what would you do with it?²

We learned last week that President Jimmy Carter has chosen to live out the last days of his life at home with those he loves. He has chosen Hospice care at home rather than a hospital as the place he will die.

This Lent, this tenth of the year of the Lord, 2023, we might ask ourselves Buechner's questions. For me, I especially will focus on answering the question of what I would do with the last day of my life. I will look hard in the mirror these 40 days and see honestly who I am and whose I am. Not unlike Jimmy Carter, I would hope to spend my last day cherishing that time with the love of my life without the distractions of beeping monitors and sad faces. I would hope to celebrate with those I love most dearly. I would look in the mirror and see someone who has known a great love.

I had met former President Carter a few times before I met the love of his life. It was on one of his many visits to the Eastern Shore of Maryland where two of his close staffers lived. These two families who were good friends of ours owned Cherry Point Farm – 263 acres of heaven. We were blessed to own Cherry Island – 9 acres out in the water – where we held spiritual retreats. I was in my little Boston Whaler piled high with recycling. And as I pulled into the floating dock just off the mainland, President Carter was about to get into our neighbor's boat, a large Grady-White. He came to help me tie off the lines of my boat. As I got onto the big dock, he spoke to me like a school boy might speak of his first love: "Oh, Jo, you have to meet my wife." And he climbed into the other boat and lifted her up in his arms as though she were made of fine fragile porcelain: "This is my Rosalynn" he said. His face lit up as did hers. Their's was a true love story. Jesus was and is the model of love, but some people model that as well.

In a manner of speaking, we will be on retreat over the next 40 days. Throughout Lent we will have the opportunity to be reminded of God's love and the conflict between two kingdoms – God's kingdom and the kingdom of the world. And we will be tempted to live in this world. After those 40 long days and nights without rest or sustenance Satan tempted Jesus, but he did not resort to miracles to save himself. No, his relationship with God was more important. Jesus loved God more than himself, more than anything in the

world, more than what the world could offer. For us, the question may not be whether we love God or the world, but whether we can afford to wait until our 40 days of renewal is over. Those who perished in Turkey and Syria from the earthquakes may not have had the opportunity to look honestly in the mirror and see themselves as recipients of God's love. They may not have learned how to love from Jesus, the great and best lover of God.

The year was 1832 in the teeming, squalid streets of Paris where the rift between the rich and the poor had become unbearable. Many, rich and poor, had chosen the world, and the world had failed them miserably. In *Les Misérables* Jean Valjean raised Fantine's child Cosette as his own. After one particularly brutal battle of the French revolution where many sang of God's absence, Valjean saves the injured Marius from certain death to return the young man to his true love Cosette.

Valjean standing over Marius at the barricade begs, no prays:

God on high
Hear my prayer
In my need
You have always been there

He is young
He's afraid
Let him rest
Heaven blessed.

Bring him home. Bring him home. Bring him home.

In the end Valjean thanks God that he does get to see his Cosette and Marius united in marriage. "Thank God, thank God, I've lived to see this day" he sings.

FANTINE's ghost sings to Valjean:

Come with me
Where chains will never bind you
All your grief
At last, at last behind you.
Lord in Heaven, Look down on him in mercy.

VALJEAN sings to God:
Forgive me all my trespasses
And take me to your glory.

FANTINE responds:
Take my hand
And lead me to salvation.
Take my love,
For love is everlasting.

Then together they end with:
And remember
The truth that once was spoken
To love another person
Is to see the face of God³

Lest we forget, at the heart of every revolution there are love stories: love of power, yes, but also love of freedom. God wants people to be free, my friends, free to love, free to love God and free to love one another.

May we look hard in the mirror over these forty days of Lent. Let us ask ourselves the hard questions that Fred Buechner posed. Let us seek God's love for ourselves and one another. A life full of love need not be all ashes and sackcloth, because we know the great love of God that we will experience on Easter Day at the end of these 40 days. Let us give God this tenth of the year.

And when we look at those we love, when we look at each other – even when we look in the mirror – may we see the face of God.

Lord, may it be so. **Amen.**

¹ Buechner's article on Eve was published in *Peculiar Treasures* and later in *Beyond Words*. <https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/#inbox/FMfcgzGrcjNsWfMdsLcMXxmnjGJXDGbW>

² Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking*, HarperOne, 1993

³ *Les Misérables*, the French historical novel by Victor Hugo, first published in 1862; *Les Misérables*, the musical, Composer: Claude-Michel Schönberg, Lyrics by Alain Boublil, Jean-Marc Natel, and Claude-Michel Schönberg; Herbert Kretzmer (English librettist).