

I See Dead People

“I see dead people.” That’s the signature line from the 1999 sleeper hit film, *The Sixth Sense*, about a boy who communicates with ghosts. “I see dead people” is also, I think, a pretty good characterization of American culture today. For, ghost stories are all over the place in books, in TV shows, and in movies. These stories come in various forms, not just horror. There are also comedies like *Ghostbusters* and *Beetlejuice*, romances like *Ghost* with Patrick Swayze and Demi Moore and *Field of Dreams*, featuring ghosts of baseball greats. And there are a number of children’s movies like *Caspar* and *The Haunted Mansion*, which is based on the theme park ride at Disney World. On TV you find reality-shows like *Ghost Hunters* and its many spinoffs, featuring supposedly real-life paranormal investigators. Outside of movies and TV, Ghost Tours are a booming business, offering guides in cities like New Orleans or Charleston or London to supposedly haunted locales. (Richmond and Williamsburg have tours too, in case you’re interested...)

To be fair, ghost stories are hardly a new phenomenon. The spirits of the deceased show up in antiquity, in Homer’s *Odyssey* and in Virgil’s *Aeneid*, as well in Scripture. In Isaiah 14, the prophet describes a vision in which the king of Babylon will be tormented by the “spirits of the departed.” In 1 Samuel, which we just read, Saul unwisely rouses the ghost of the prophet Samuel. And in the Gospels, Jesus is suspected three times of being a ghost himself—once when he’s walking on water, again when Herod thinks Jesus is the spirit of John the Baptist come back to haunt him, and once more after he’s resurrected in the Upper Room.

But these references are mostly asides. The one time Scripture directly comments on the idea of ghosts, in Deuteronomy 18, it’s to tell God’s people not to mess with them: “Let no one be found among you who ... practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft or cast spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead.” In other words, talking to the dead is strictly off limits.

Accepting that admonition, what are Christians to make of this, of our culture’s preoccupation with ghosts? One way to look at it is to see it as a scandal, a tragedy, a sign of a great moral decline. People used to know better than to mess around with fortune-telling and séances and Ouija boards, as these were things only “morally debased” people would do. But now they are commonplace occurrences, the stuff of entertainment, not only to watch on the screen but to play at themselves.

But there’s another way to look at this phenomenon, a way that sees ghosts and ghost stories not simply as “proof of societal collapse,” but as revealing something about ourselves and God. You see, when we see something at odds with our faith, it is generally better for us Christians to not simply denounce it, but to first ask “why”: Why are people interested in this? What does it serve,

what good does it purport to offer? In this case, *why do people love ghosts?* What do ghosts and ghost stories do for them? What do they say about peoples' longings and desires?

To answer these questions, I invite you to consider ghost stories themselves, what they are about. Going back to the Victorian Era, ghost stories have almost always been about the same things. They tend to revolve around the themes of unresolved injustice, strong personal moral evil, and sometimes a haunted location.

In stories with the first theme, the dead haunt the living world because they have died either as a result of some great injustice, murder say, or before they could put an injustice right. Their haunting may be an attempt to bring the injustice to light. Or, the haunting might be malicious, in which case it's because the wronged spirit cannot let go of their pain.

Now, this doesn't mean that resolution always comes with someone going to jail or suffering punishment. Instead, the resolution can come when hidden things are revealed, hidden bodies are found, secrets are told, and evil deeds are disclosed. That's what happens in the movie, *What Lies Beneath*. There, the ghost of a murdered college student haunts a woman until she discovers that her own husband is in fact the young woman's murderer. And in *Crimson Peak*, ghosts lead a new bride to uncover how her husband and his sister had schemed to murder his three previous wives in order to inherit their money.

Sometimes it's not the ghosts of the innocent or wronged that linger on, but rather the ghost of the person who did the wronging. In such stories, the malevolence of certain persons is so great that it survives their death. This is the theme of movies like *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, *Poltergeist*, and *The Haunting*, where the ghosts of particularly evil individuals come back to do harm to the living.

This theme of personal evil as the cause of haunting is interesting, as it suggests that evil isn't just a relative quality, but has a power and force of its own, such that it leaves its mark, its stain, on the earth even after all parties are dead. It's as if personal moral evil is such an affront to nature, to reality, to God, that it forever marks the soul, preventing it from resting, from passing on.

In some instances, the evil is so pronounced, so powerful that it affects the material world, attaching itself to a particular place and corrupting it. Think here of the haunted hotel in Stephen King's *The Shining* and the possessed house in *The Amityville Horror*.

What these themes all suggests to me is that ghost stories are about more than an excuse for scaring people. They are in fact about a longing for reconciliation, for justice, for some cosmic redress to the wrongs done in this life. This longing, ghost stories show, is not limited just to this life, as the concern for justice does not die when those involved leave this life.

This understanding of justice actually resonates with the Bible. It reflects the sentiment expressed by God in Genesis after Cain kills Abel: "What have you done?" God asked Cain.

“Listen: your brother’s blood is crying out to me from the ground! And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand.” Here you have the basic ghost story structure: injustice is done to a person, their “blood” cries out, and the evil-doer is cursed. In a culture such as ours where justice is no longer a transcendent good, but a societal norm, a matter of social consensus, ghost stories harken back to an older view, one expressed in the story of Cain and Abel, where justice is demanded not only for the living, but for creation itself: the very earth cries out against the evil we do.

Now, for the majority of Christian history, the concern for justice has been addressed by the teachings of the Resurrection of the Dead and the Last Judgment: On the last day, all deeds will be uncovered and all evil would be put right. And God will take care of sinners, either, depending on your interpretation by condemning evil-doers to destruction or condemning evil itself, and restoring the person to essential goodness. Either way, evil is not dismissed or ignored, but remedied.

But as traditional Christian beliefs have retreated from societal consciousness, that desire for wrongs to be righted, secret deeds disclosed, and evil exposed has not gone away. Rather, ghosts and ghost stories have replaced God and the Church as the answer to that longing.

Now, if you ask those surveyed why they believe in ghosts, I don’t suspect they would answer with an appeal to “cosmic justice.” Most people do not think so rationally. Rather, they operate intuitively, from their guts, their feelings. They’ve *experienced* something otherworldly, something mysterious that cannot be explained by science, say. They don’t have a metaphysical framework or a fully-formed ethical system in which to place it. But their experience says that there *is* something more than just the material, than just the natural world. Hence, their openness to the *supernatural*, to ghosts.

This is important to keep in mind when you consider the strange popularity of belief in ghosts among *atheists*. You’d think that, of all people, atheists, those who don’t believe in God, would also consider ghost stories ridiculous. Atheists are strict materialists—to them, it’s “science, science, science.” They say there’s no proof that God exists, so God cannot be real. Why then, one wonders, would they be open to ghosts, which also can’t be proved by science?

The philosopher Nathan Jacobs has interviewed many atheists and people who have left the church. And what he has found is that most people who abandon religion don’t do so because it was no longer intellectually tenable, it no longer made sense. Rather, they leave because they have an existential crisis. They may talk about the “problem of evil”—how could a good God allow bad things to happen? But when they describe their concern, Jacobs observes, they’re not describing the problem of evil or the problem of pain or any other philosophical objection. What they describe is really the problem of divine hiddenness. They point to some crisis they experienced, a time when they wanted to know that God was there, wanted Him to hear their prayers and show up and address them. They wanted God to be real, palpable, tangible. And when God did not show up, that’s when they started doubting that God really exists.

Why then the appeal of the paranormal? Well, Jacobs explains, ghosts are spirits that show up. You mess around with a Ouija board, and you sense something talking to you, directing your hand. You visit a haunted house and you experience something there, another presence, something outside our world. You hear noises or voices or feel the temperature change suddenly in the room, and the natural response is to conclude that something or someone *is* there. That spirit gives you the thing that you wanted from God, which is an encounter with the numinous, the spiritual, with something beyond this world. It's not rational. It's a longing for something that's both transcendent and immediate, mysterious and fearsome. Ghosts are just thought to be more present, more real than God.

That, my friends, is a challenge to us Christians, a challenge to how we live out our faith. How is that the stories of the Bible, which are replete with the supernatural, seem so boring, while stories of ghosts and haunted houses seem exciting, intriguing, even sexy? How is that the God who made himself known to us physically, in person, in Jesus, still seems so remote, so distant when compared to ghostly encounters? Why is the justice carried out by the spirits of the wronged so much more attractive than the justice meted out by God who hates sin and knows each of our hearts? Ours is a meaty, strong, incarnated faith, not a pale, fleeting, wispy thing—so why do people prefer shadows over the real thing?

Those are hard questions for us to consider as we seek to commend our faith to others. Ghosts seem more real, more plausible to many than a God who loves them and who is even now working to put the world to rights. It is our challenge as Christians to show others how God *is* real, to show them how He *is* present to us through our prayers, through Scripture, through fellowship with one another, through the sacraments, and yes, sometimes through miracles, and to show how their longing for justice is met in Jesus' perfect judgement. For the fact is, the spiritual world of Christianity is so much more interesting, more real and more hopeful than that which is found in ghost stories. Thanks be to God!