

## Saving Annville

by [Kathryn Reklis](#) in the [August 31, 2016](#) issue



RELIGIOUS BUT NOT SPIRITUAL: Dominic Cooper plays Jesse Custer, the demon-angel minister in *Preacher*. Photo by Lewis Jacobs / Sony Pictures Television / AMC. All rights reserved.

In AMC's new drama *Preacher*, Jesse Custer (Dominic Cooper) returns home to pastor his dead father's congregation in Annville, Texas. The whole town knows he's a bad boy with a sordid past, and at first he seems lost in his new role. He reads verbatim his father's old sermons to a handful of parishioners. His throat visibly constricts when he's forced to offer pastoral advice to a congregant. But everything changes when Jesse is possessed by a mysterious force that grants him the power to make people do what he commands. Suddenly he's invested in his job.

*Preacher* is based on a comic book series by Garth Ennis and Steve Dillon that has accumulated a cult following by pushing every boundary of sacrilege and violence. In the first two episodes of the television show, for example, bodies explode, people are set on fire, limbs are amputated by a chainsaw, and body parts are strewn across sun-drenched Texan cornfields. There are also angels, demon-angel hybrids, and hints of a dethroned deity wandering the earth.

The main characters besides Jesse are a drug-addled vampire and a foul-mouthed hit woman who builds bazookas out of coffee cans. There's enough violence to satisfy a small planet of adolescent boys. But there are also church budget meetings, stolen communion wine, and worries about the megachurch that has a Starbucks in its lobby. These last details make *Preacher* one of the churchiest shows on television.

Convinced that God is inside him, Jesse becomes filled with a sense of righteous purpose and determines to save the town. It needs saving. Ordinary sins like pride, envy, malice, gossip, and anger compete with graphic acts of violence. In addition, the community suffers from widespread poverty, joblessness, and failing schools. Jesse calls on his supernatural power to settle a marital dispute about how much screen time the kids should have, turns the pedophilic school bus driver to the straight and narrow, and convinces the town's sadistic oligarch to "serve God."

But then his mind control starts wearing off in unpredictable ways. He realizes that it's not God inside him after all, but a demon-angel baby called Genesis that's been spawned by a supernatural star-crossed love affair.

I don't recommend trying to reconstruct the details of this cosmology. The theology is as excessive as the violence. But inventing personal cosmologies is a familiar tactic for making sense of messy human realities. John Milton did it in *Paradise Lost* when he invented an elaborate drama of Satan's fall from grace and battle with God. Kendrick Lamar used the same tactic in his award-winning 2015 album, *To Pimp a Butterfly*, when he personified the temptations of fame, fortune, and dragged in the character of "Lucy" (Lucifer).

In *Preacher*, the more the metaphysics run off the rails, the more the ordinary lives of the characters come into focus. Despite his close encounters with supernatural power, Jesse is "religious but not spiritual." It's hard to tell what it means to him to believe in God. But he does believe in the church he refuses to abandon. Someone has to sit with the grieving parent, comfort the fearful child, and speak a word of hope to the worn-out single mother. Someone has to collect the offering, buy the communion wine, and fold the church programs.

In the comic book series, Jesse and his miscreant friends blow up the church and wander the globe looking for God in order to give him a piece of their minds. In the TV show, all of the action—the violence and the small acts of grace—happens at the church. It's the gathering place for misfits, outcasts, and seekers who stumble together into friendship, community, and sometimes even spiritual refuge. Despite its violent excesses, *Preacher* reminds us that although our battle may be against the powers and principalities, the real struggle happens when two or three are gathered.