

The monsters we fear

Religion and horror often ask us to reflect on the same set of questions.

by [Brandon R. Grafius](#) in the [October 2023](#) issue



(Illustration by Enrique Quintero)

In 1973, James Bond made his way to New Orleans to *Live and Let Die*. Dirty Harry brought his brand of tough justice to more criminals with *Magnum Force*. And an animated fox robbed the rich and gave to the poor in Walt Disney's *Robin Hood*. But the most unusual hero in cinema that year carried a crucifix instead of a gun and spent more screen time wrestling with his faith than fighting bad guys. Rather than being a spy or police officer, he held the uneasily combined professions of priest and psychiatrist. *The Exorcist* was the highest-grossing movie that year, a cultural phenomenon that reinvigorated the horror genre.

Traditionally, the relationship between Christianity and the genre of horror—on the page and on the screen—has been adversarial. There’s too much violence in these stories, too much pessimism, too little hope, and far too little God. When religion does show up—often in the form of an ineffective bureaucracy, an abusive parent, or a bumbling priest—it’s often the subject of mockery.

But what if that’s not the whole story? What if horror, as a genre, can actually help us think through some of the questions that are most important to our lives of faith? What if horror can help open our imagination up to a world that acknowledges our anxieties but also includes the Divine? *The Exorcist* is about good versus evil and terrifying things that go bump in the night. But it’s also a story of the power of faith—and what it means to try to hold onto that faith in a world where evil lurks.

I’ve been a horror fan since I watched *Scooby-Doo* as a toddler, and then, as a second grader, popped the Disney movie *Something Wicked This Way Comes* into my VCR. I’ve always been drawn to mystery, to the sense that the world is larger than I apprehend—and to the feeling that such stories are not necessarily safe places for me to be. Wes Craven once said that a good horror director conveys to the audience that he doesn’t have their best interest at heart. I’ve always found that to be a thrilling departure from stories that we know will behave politely and not push us outside of our comfort zones.

But it wasn’t until I was working on my PhD that I started to piece together how frequently horror narratives use religion as a way to bring audiences into this space outside our everyday lives. I began to recognize that horror is something that can be studied academically—and that there might be something especially useful in looking at how horror and the Bible interact with each other.

Film critic and scholar Robin Wood described the basic plot of the horror movie as “normality is threatened by the monster.” In the beginning, everything is as it should be in the suburbs, as in John Carpenter’s *Halloween*, or at a beachfront vacation rental, as in Jordan Peele’s *Us*. The situation at the beginning of the horror film is usually one we recognize from our own lives. But everything changes when the monster, in whatever form, arrives. It’s in this space of disorientation that questions of faith elbow their way into the story.

The Bible itself is full of horror stories; Phyllis Trible explicated several of them from a literary-feminist perspective in her classic *Texts of Terror*. The great sea monster

Leviathan swims through the book of Job, shows up in a handful of psalms, and is retold as a campfire tale by Isaiah and Ezekiel. There are all sorts of stories in Judges that would qualify, perhaps most obviously the horrifying ordeal of the Levite's concubine in Judges 19. It's always struck me as odd that the Flood narrative of Genesis 6–9, a dark tale of an angry deity who wipes out the world, is a Sunday school staple. Darren Aronofsky's 2014 film *Noah* emphasizes these elements (along with some extra-biblical storylines from the books of Enoch), giving us a vision of what this story entails once we push aside the stuffed animals and sing-alongs.

And we shouldn't make the mistake of thinking horror is confined to the Hebrew Bible. The New Testament is full of exorcism stories—and a lengthy crucifixion that Mel Gibson made into *The Passion of the Christ*, one of the highest-grossing horror films of all time. The book of Revelation is packed full of monsters.

But churches too frequently decide to ignore these dark corners of scripture. Before I got to seminary, I'm pretty sure I'd never read Numbers 25 (in which the priest Phinehas kills an Israelite man and a Midianite woman for their unsanctioned relationship) or Judges 19. I've never heard either of these passages talked about from the pulpit on a Sunday morning. When we've been brought up to believe that everything in the Bible is morally good and edifying, it's hard to know what to do with such passages of brutality. So rather than asking if horror is a good mode of questioning for people of faith, maybe we should start asking why so many of our religious stories are also horror stories—and how we can learn from the dialogue between these two modes of relating to the world.

Much of the Bible isn't about telling us what we should do so much as showing us what the world is like—and who we are as humans. If we don't attend to the horrifying passages of scripture and work to incorporate them into our life of faith, it's easy for us to feel stuck when bad things happen. We're left wondering why these things are happening to us and why it seems like God doesn't care. Without the theological resources of the Bible's passages of horror, it's easy for us to assume that our negative experiences indicate something is wrong with us—or with God. Neither of those options is a good place to stay for very long.

Instead, I think we need to read these uncomfortable passages, recognize their place in the Bible, and seek to learn what they might have to say to our life of faith. Sometimes, it's as simple as the acknowledgment that life is sometimes awful and bad things happen. In a passage like Judges 19, much of the awfulness in life comes

out of the awfulness that's in the hearts of human beings. Judges 19 doesn't tell us what we should do; it shows us who we are. Or at least who we are when we rely too much on ourselves, with no concern for how to relate to one another or to God.

In all of their inspiration and wisdom, the biblical writers found it important to include stories where the horrors of the world rise up to the surface. A similar process is often at work in the nightmares we watch at the movie theater or stream on our TVs. The horror genre helps us look more honestly at the world and also opens up our imaginations to the reality of what we can't see, to the possibility that there might be more to this world than we can understand.

Horror auteur Jordan Peele has scriptural references scattered throughout his movies. His most recent movie, *Nope*, starts off with a quotation from the rather obscure prophetic book of Nahum. His previous film, *Us*, is threaded throughout with references to Jeremiah 11:11, most obviously in the placard of a homeless man seen repeatedly at the beach. The passage is a threat of disaster, issued by God against Jerusalem for their inability to follow God's commandments. While the threat of judgment has a chilling resonance with the film's concluding apocalyptic imagery, the passage also introduces the question of justice that undergirds the film. Through the repeated use of this biblical passage, Peele suggests that the invasion of the "tethered"—doppelgangers created by a cloning experiment gone awry—might be a divine response to our inability to construct a just world.

Religion and horror frequently ask us to reflect on the same set of questions in different ways: questions about community, about our place in the world, about how our world might be larger and stranger than we can imagine. When we take horror stories seriously, we can carry this wrestling with us into the more frightening corners of the Bible.

These sorts of questions have become more common in horror since *The Exorcist*. Directors began engaging more directly with social concerns than their predecessors did. The increasing intensity of these questions led to a growth in the academic discipline of horror studies, with scholars using a growing array of methods to explore the ways that horror films connect with our lives.

Often, these questions emerge out of the anxieties of everyday life, anxieties that horror forces us to confront. While there's a monster of some kind on the screen, as viewers we connect to a real, tangible fear about our own lives. The best horror is

about what makes us anxious, what makes us worry, what we don't want to be true but we're afraid might be. In the best horror movies, there's always a fear that hides just underneath the monster that's on the screen—a fear that connects directly to our lives.

The Exorcist, still probably the most famous of all horror movies, has religion right on the surface. But many still overlook how important faith is to the story. The eponymous character Father Karras is shown from the beginning to be a man struggling with his faith. He doesn't see much good in the world around him, and he openly questions whether the church is doing any good at all. When he confronts the demon Pazuzu in the body of the young girl Regan, he's not sure if his faith is strong enough to stand up to evil. It's only when he reconnects with the virtue of self-sacrifice and answers questions about his own doubt by affirming the power of God that he prevails. The surface narrative is the tale of a demonic possession, but at its heart, the story is really about a priest's crisis of faith.

Watching a priest battle against the demonic presence who's taken up residence in the body of a child, we might wonder whether our faith is strong enough to stand up to evil. When we watch the mask-wearing Michael Myers slash his way through his family's quiet suburb on Halloween night, we might worry that our communities aren't as safe as we like to tell ourselves they are or that our families aren't the safe havens we might like them to be. And even when we see a shark cruising up to the beach to interrupt the Fourth of July festivities, we might think about how easily our lives can be disrupted by events out of our control, often events that we never saw coming.

In many ways, we're drawn to the life of faith as a way of helping ourselves navigate these same fears. We look at the world around us and see that people don't always get rewarded for doing what's right; our faith tells us that there are deeper, more important rewards than the monetary success or fame that the world dishes out. We see people suffering through no fault of their own and experience some of this suffering ourselves; our faith tells us that God cares about those who are suffering, in ways deeper than we can understand. We wonder what meaning life has if it's all going to end in death; our faith tells us that there's more to existence than the life we see and that there's a hope beyond what our senses reveal to us.

As a genre, horror approaches these questions sideways—or by reflecting them back at us through a distorted fun house mirror, like the mirror in which young Adelaide

sees herself in *Us*. While the reflection is transformed and reshaped, we still recognize it. And we can use this reflected image to look at the questions with a new set of eyes.

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The *Christian Century*'s community engagement editor [Jon Mathieu](#) chats with this article's author [Brandon Grafius](#) about the horror genre and its significant overlap with Christian scripture and spirituality.