

# Finding God on a TV Screen

By Fr. Jim McDermott, SJ

I have been a Jesuit nearly 24 years, but I am no good at the classic “Imagine yourself in a Bible story” prayer.

Maybe related, I watch a lot of TV. Cable dramas, Tina Fey/Amy Poehler-type sitcoms — I want it all.

I can justify this; I studied screenwriting at UCLA and work as a writer on a television show. But I also grew up learning TV was the “boob tube,” a way to induce a zombie-like state. Today we talk about watching TV in “binges” — not exactly a sign of healthy living.

Personally, I wonder whether TV contains reservoirs of grace waiting to be discovered. The stories we choose, characters we follow, and plot lines that affect us are not arbitrary. We watch what we watch because it speaks to our hopes, fears, and needs.

This sounds abstract, priest-y, and not at all fun, but try an experiment. Next time you watch a favorite show or movie, do the following:

- 1) Ask God to be with you and bring you light.
- 2) Enjoy the show like you always do.
- 3) When it is over, put the commercials on mute where they belong,

and consider what stirred you.

Where did you laugh or feel infuriated? Who is your favorite character? Why?

That’s it; just a couple minutes of noticing how you were affected by what you watched. You might be tempted to ask “bigger” questions, like why does that character make me so angry? Why do I wish the mom on *Mom* were my mom? What does this say about me?

But that is a slippery slope. This is not analysis, after all; just your favorite show. If questions come up, fine. But instead of trying to answer them yourself, leave them with God. “God, what is it about Barry Allen or Lisa Simpson that I love so much?” Trust that if there is something to know, God will show you in good time.

My experience is that doing this little by little helps you notice desires, dreams, and questions.

For example, I love *The Good Wife*, the CBS show about the spouse of Chicago’s district attorney, who struggles to forge her path after her husband is caught philandering. The series is about navigating impossible conflicts between a public and private

Julianna Margulies in  
*The Good Wife*



Photo by Jeffrey Neira/CBS via Getty Images

life, which I can relate to as a priest.

Taking time to notice my reactions watching the show was like shining a light inside myself. It gave me a clearer sense of something I wanted to pay attention to and bring to God.

Television is entertainment, but it is also like Jesuit prayer, a practice where we put ourselves in the hands of a story, sit back, and let it surprise and nourish us. Here, too, gifts come to us, emotionally and even spiritually. We just need to pay attention.

As Ferris Bueller said, “Life moves pretty fast. If you don’t stop and look around once in a while, you could miss it.”

Tonight, when your show is over, take a minute to look around. Whatever is on, you will not want to miss it. ✕



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