



Secrets in the Dark: A Life in Sermons

Frederick Buechner, Brian D. McLaren

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Frederick Buechner has long been a kindred spirit to those who find elements of doubt as constant companions on their journey of faith. He is a passionate writer and preacher who can alter lives with a simple phrase.

Buechner's words, both written and spoken, have the power to revolutionize and revitalize belief and faith. He reveals the presence of God in the midst of daily life. He faces and embraces difficult questions and doubt as essential components of our lives, rather than as enemies that destroy us. "Listen to your life!" is his clarion call. This theme pervades this definitive collection of sermons, delivered throughout Buechner's lifetime. Presented chronologically, they provide a clear picture of the development of his theology and thinking. Reflecting Buechner's exquisite gift for storytelling and his compassionate pastor's heart, *Secrets in the Dark* will inspire laughter, hope, and bring great solace. Turn the pages and rediscover what it means to be thoughtful about faith. See why this renowned writer has been quoted in countless pulpits and beloved by Americans for generations.

Secrets in the Dark: A Life in Sermons Details

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Marilyn says

This collection of Frederick Buechner's sermons is a great introduction to anyone who has not yet read anything by this national treasure. He is a magical writer who gets to the heart of our longing and need for our true home.

Cynthia says

One of the Best

Wow...I want to read it again! The last few chapters aren't as exciting, but all very well written with heart.

Sarah Eisele says

I read this here and there. Buechner is a Pulitzer-Prize nominated (runner up for Godric) author who I adore. He's a thoughtful, honest, "authentic" Christian author and preacher. I love his books and his sermons.

Pat says

In the sermon "The Calling of Voices", Buechner refers to the scripture Isaiah 6:1-9. This sermon was based from that scripture along with a verse in Matthew.

"Where we most need to go. Maybe that means that the voice we should listen to most as we choose a vocation is the voice that we might think we should listen to least, and that is the voice of our own gladness. What can we do that makes us gladdest, what can we do that leaves us with the strongest sense of sailing true north and of peace, which is much of what gladness is? Is it making things with our hands out of wood or stone or paint on canvas? Or is it making something we hope like truth out of words? Or is it making people laugh or weep in a way that cleanses their spirit? I believe that if it is a thing that makes us truly glad, then it is a good thing and it is our thing and it is the calling voice that we were made to answer with our lives." And also where we are most needed. In a world where there is so much drudgery, so much grief, so much emptiness and fear and pain, our gladness in our work is as much needed as we ourselves need to be glad."

"And in the end that is the vocation, the calling of all of us, the calling to be Christ. To be Christs in whatever way we are able to be. To be Christs with whatever gladness we have and in whatever place, whatever brothers we are called to. That is the vocation, the destiny to which we were all of us called even before the foundations of the world."

This was one of my favorite sermons.

This book is a compilation of Frederick Buechner, one of the most admired preachers and writers of our time. It makes a great book to sit by your nightstand.

Larry says

frederick buechner is an ordained presbyterian minister and professional writer. this book is a collection of amazing, moving, sermons that are so different than what we usually hear from our pulpits. you experience them like a sunset, learn things you never thought of before, and are more spiritual at the end

Yvonne says

Frederick Buechner has a blessed gift for choosing words and turning phrases, and for telling the human story of a spiritual being.

SOME QUOTES:

in principio Greek

bereshith Hebrew

IN THE BEGINNING

Before anything yet had been made that was to be made, before whatever it was that happened to make it possible for Being to happen. You can't speak literally about such things, of course, but we assume that he is speaking as seriously as physicists also speak seriously about the possibility at least of a time beyond time before creation happened.

At that point where everything was nothing or nothing everything, before the Big Bang banged or the Steady State was stated, where there was no up and no down, no life and no death, no here and no there, at the very beginning, John says, there was this Word, which was God and through which all things were made.

Frederick Buechner, "Air for Two Voices," Secrets in the Dark, 2006, p.118

"the mystery that life itself comes from" (Hey, that's my definition of GOD!)

p.75-76

... The whole earth is holy because God makes himself known on it, which means that in that sense a church is no holier than any other place. God is not more in a church than he is anywhere else. But what makes a church holy in a special way is that we ourselves are more present in it. (Bold mine.)

What I mean is that if we come to a church right, we come to it more fully and nakedly ourselves, come with more of our humanness showing, than we are apt to come to most places. We come like Moses with muck on our shoes -- footsore and travel-stained with the dust of our lives upon us, our failures, our deceptions, our hypocrisies, because if, unlike Moses, we have never taken anybody's life, we have again and again withheld from other people, including often even those who are nearest to us, the love that might have made their lives with living, not to mention our own. Like Moses we come here as we are, and like him we come as strangers and exiles in our way, because wherever it is that we truly belong, whatever it is that is truly home for us, we know in our hearts that we have somehow lost it and gotten lost. Something is missing from our lives that we cannot even name -- something we know best from the empty place inside us all where it belongs. We come here to find what we have lost. We come here to acknowledge that in terms of the best we could be we are

lost and that we are helpless to save ourselves. We come here to confess our sins. That is the sadness and searching of what church is, of what we are in a church -- and then suddenly FIRE! The bush bursts into flame. And the voice speaks our names, whatever they are -- Peter, John, Ann, Mary. The heart skips a beat. "YOU! YOU!" the voice says. Does it? Does any voice other than a human voice speak in this place? Does any flame other than a candle flame on Christmas Eve ever leap here? I think so. I think if you have your ears open, if you have your eyes open, every once in a while some word in even the most unpromising sermon will flame out, some scrap of prayer or anthem, some moment of silence even, the sudden glimpse of somebody you love sitting there near you, or of some stranger whose face without warning touches your heart, will flame out -- and these are the moments that speak our names in a way we cannot help hearing. These are the moments that, in the depths of whatever our dimness and sadness and lostness are, give us an echo of a wild and bidding voice that calls us from deeper still. It is the same voice that Moses heard and that one way or another says. "GO! BE! LIVE! LOVE!" sending us off on an extraordinary and fateful journey for which there are no sure maps and whose end we will never fully know until we get there. And for as long as the moment lasts, we suspect that maybe it is true -- maybe the ground on which we stand really is holy ground because we heard that voice here. It called us by name.

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Carol says

First read in 2006, I read and reread this book, a chronology of sorts that tracks mature writer Frederick Buechner's pilgrim progress. Meandering around subjects, spell-binding and insightful, his honesty compels readers to trust and follow where he leads. People with doubts about Christianity will appreciate how from time to time, Buechner admits his own faith struggles and doubts and then comes back to center his faith on the person of Jesus Christ. Exquisite writing and heartfelt warmth of emotion stand out on every page.

Luke says

This book had one huge plus and one huge minus. Buechner is an incredible thinker and communicator of God's Word. He gives tons of insight into stories I have heard taught many times before. That said, I read a book of his sermons and I am not sure that he believes the biblical gospel. An interesting read for someone

who is interested in biblical communication.

Jim Gray says

This book has been tremendously helpful both in my faith and for inspiring me as a creative. Buechner is a true storyteller.

C says

Frederick Buechner has the unique ability to speak newness and wisdom into the spiritual truths we have known for so long but still fail to grasp. His storytelling ability and graceful prose is unlike any preacher or Christian inspiration author I have ever found. He renews the passion in the seeking, and the fundamental truth that Jesus died for me.

Some of his best:

"If we forget that we are waiting, if we come to believe that the best we have found of God here in these shadows is the best there is, if we come to believe that the most God wants of us is to be religious the way we are religious in a church, then we have lost touch with the living depths of our faith."

"It is not objective proof of God's existence we want but, whether we use religious language for it or not, the experience of God's presence."

"In such a world, I suspect that maybe God speaks to us most clearly through his silence, his absence, so that we know him best through our missing Him."

"...at its heart the painful wincing is directed less to the preposterousness of the claim that Jesus saves than it is directed to the preposterousness of the claim that people like ourselves are savable."

"...and in a way the entire remainder of the Bible is about how history itself is the record of the Creator's endless efforts to restore his creation to himself, to clothe it again in the glory for which he created it in the first place."

Steve Penner says

Nothing can compare to Buechner's fiction, not even his sermons. But they are still worth the read. This book comprises many (maybe all) of Buechner's sermons from the first given at Phillips Exeter prep school in 1959 to his welcome of students at another school in 1997--almost 50 years of sermons. Buechner's high prose and turn of a phrase are unparalleled. I can only imagine what they sounded like when first spoken. I used this volume as a morning devotional and found it inspiring and a great way for my imagination to kick off the day.

Joel Wentz says

A wonderful reminder that sermons need not follow the wooden, 3-point, problem-solution framework that so many preachers slavishly follow. Buechner is refreshing in his creativity, the way he weaves characters and stories into his preaching, and the earnest desire he has for people to fall in love with God. Many of the sermons in this collection are going to stick with me for a long time, and I highly recommend this book to anyone with even a passing interest in spiritual matters.

Matthew says

There is much to like here, although I admit the first few sermons after the first, which is quite good, were actually pretty disappointing. I nearly put the book down. The second half -- I suppose as he gets older -- gets much, much better. The style is similar -- anecdotal, lyrical as you'd expect from a novelist, thoughtful -- so it is not a matter of change in style; rather the first few chapters just seemed simplistic, too much of a leap of faith and not terribly realistic if well-intentioned. The second half is chronologically later and thus perhaps more grounded in his having lived more of life; it has a grittier flavor, more clever literary allusions, richer remembrances and more powerful questions.

I do think Buechner's flaw (his more serious, methodological, flaw, at least, besides the more trivial and early one of being simplistic) remains: this is that to me he seems to take a little too much liberty with the Biblical text, and reads into some episodes an emotional subtext which may not be ahistorical but I think are as much a product of the reader's imaginative recreation as of the text itself. I'm not certain how productive this is as an exercise -- certainly imaginative recreation is important for reading historical texts (which the Bible is), but I think as far as possible it should go so far only as to accurately identify probable scenarios or the author's intended representation, but shouldn't be used to go further than the text allows it to go. (I hope I said that clearly).

However this flaw becomes less apparent and less important in context of what Buechner discusses. I think this could actually be due to a certain narrative technique he starts to use. At the beginning of a preacher's career perhaps he digs straightforwardly into the passage he is given, explaining and explicating it. After a few years I suppose that gets boring. Buechner feels, to me, to have allows the passage to take him deep into his own memory and imagination, and there find a nugget of truth. But rather than linearly recreating his thought process for the reader/hearer, he extracts and separates this truth, discusses it in non-theological language, and then in conclusion quotes the passage, which in context then resonates. Sort of a reverse engineering, but it allows him to come at the text from a refreshing angle and to use it powerfully without making it pedantic.

Additional notes:

C20 The Church – the point that Jesus formed his church out of human beings “with more or less the same mixture in them of cowardice and guts, of intelligence and stupidity, of selfishness and generosity, of openness of heart and sheer cussedness as you would be apt to find in any of us”, and the further point that “even after Jesus made these human beings into a church, they seem to have gone right on being human beings”...

Also: it wasn't their idea to become a church – it was Jesus who made them a church. “They came together

because Jesus called them to come” – it was an organically formed interest group... Church, in greek, is ekklesia, or “called out”...

C23 Faith and Fiction – I liked it for the point he made that “we can never be sure we’ve bet right, of course. The evidence both ways is fragmentary, fragile, ambiguous”; but also the profound point that “a coincidence can be... God’s way of remaining anonymous”. I think this chapter overall is well combined with Heschel’s discussion of how the prophets knew God – not in a conceptual, rational sense, yet not in an abstract ‘leap of faith’ sense, either – rather, the sense of knowing a person, a presence...

C24 The Good Book as a Good Book – I like the point that God is the central character in the Bible, yet like the great white whale in Moby Dick. He is scarcely to be seen. “You shall see my back, but my face shall not be seen”. Further, God is not seen except in reflection in the faces and lives of people who have encountered him...

C26 Adoslescence and the Stewardship of Pain – interesting because he raises the same point about the story of the talents, that it seems rather unfair on the third servant who buried the talent... Buechner’s way of resolving this is that the burying act itself, or refusing to come to terms with things in our life, like pain, this buying act itself is “darkness and weeping and gnashing of teeth and the one who casts us into it is none other than ourselves”.

C27 The Longing for Home – I think I liked this simply for his description of his grandmother Naya: “The lover she had for me was not born of desperate need for me like my mother’s love but had more to do simply with her interest in me as a person and with the pleasure she took in my interest in her as the one grandchild she had who was bookish the way she was and who sat endlessly enraptured by the spells she cast”

C34 Waiting – I liked this because of its realism; he discusses his uncle’s suicide, then says” What I think about now is how even before those dark things happened, they had all been somehow there in that magical room – along with the tree and the presents and the uncles and aunts and cousins – waiting to happen. I think of how not all the love there was in that room was enough to keep them from happening. There was not Christmas enough to save the day, There was not Christ enough, There never has been Christ enough – not just for my family way back then but for all of us right now and always. And yet at some unknowable point in the future, there will be Christ enough”. And then links it to the passage – Luke 21: 25-31 – “that is what Jesus is saying in this apocalyptic passage that is our text”. (Also an example of his later ability to indirectly come at a passage from a poignant anecdote.)

C35 The Word of Life – interesting because of his discussion here of attendance and ambiguity regarding the wedding of a lesbian couple he and his wife knew.

Laura Luzzi says

I enjoyed all of these sermons, they relate very much to the human nature. I especially liked the sermon on adolescence and dealing with your pain in order to grow into maturity.

David L. Cook says

I can't remember where I heard about Frederick Buechner but recently decided to read one of his many books. I decided on this one since it is a collection of his sermons. What a wonderful introduction to a fine man. I feel in some ways many religious traditions have kind of lost the art of the sermon. We seem to hear the ratings of some evangelicals that seem intended to inspire by fear and guilt to the other extreme the dry "talk" with little inspiration, imagination or thought provoking inspiration that moves us to change. I wish more religious leaders would read Buechner and apply his approach to the art and inspiration of the sermon. I most definitely will be reading more of his work.

Favorite quote: "All the absurd little meetings, decisions, inner skirmishes that go to make up our days. It all adds up to very little, and yet it all adds up to very much. Our days are full of nonsense, and yet not, because it is precisely into the nonsense of our days that God speaks to us words of great significance—not words that are written in the stars but words that are written into the raw stuff and nonsense of our days, which are not nonsense just because God speaks into the midst of them. And the words that he says, to each of us differently, are "Be brave...be merciful...feed my lambs...press on toward the goal."

Seth says

This book is a collection of talks and sermons from Beuchner. I thought this book was fantastic. He does such a great job with word pictures and the style of writing he chooses to use. It's almost like listening to your favorite old person tell stories all day.

It took me a little while to finish because it is a collection of different talks and so there's no consistent "story". Unless you count how the Gospel has shaped Beuchner's life.

Julie M says

This is one of my VERY FAVORITE books! Frederick you are a gift!

Joy says

Finally finished this last night. I think if more ministers preached like Frederick Buechner, more people might consider going to church. What makes his sermons so moving is the acceptance of human beings as flawed creatures who are doing what they can to stumble towards the eternal. In many of his sermons he addresses doubt as a normal part of spirituality and he is able to be clear about the differences between religion and faith. He himself also comes through his sermons as one of the flawed, not one of the saved and I think that this makes the texts more readable.

In addition, his illustrations and allusions are beautifully done. Mostly they come from real life, Buechner's own experiences or the experiences of others. But he seems to have a great gift for being able to take the people from the Bible and fill out their stories too. He is also wonderful at being able to help you realize that the Biblical text doesn't have to be parsed down into a neat package that you hand the congregation and say, "This is what it means, run with it." Instead, he says frequently that it's actually a good thing not to always

understand, that the text is meant to draw us closer to the Mystery, which is far bigger than we will ever understand.

The book gave me some inspiration for sermon writing and delivery. Buechner suggests that the sermon should draw people into the text so that in some way they feel like they were there. He also pointed out that if one is preaching about the joy of grace and salvation, etc., the sermon should reflect that these things are, indeed, a joyful thing.

I also want to think about how to help my people think about the great Mystery and not always give them such neat endings to my sermons.

I love Frederick Buechner, so I figured I would like this one. This is a collection of his sermons and even though I've only read a few, I found one I wish I could preach.

Christine says

Buechner is so clear, thoughtful and eloquent. I remember trying to read him in high school and getting nowhere. I think I just had to grow up a bit. He's so wise and smart and yet so clearly full of heart and soul as he describes his encounters with Jesus. . . . I'm going on a Buechner-bender at the moment as I have 4 book by him checked out from the library. He's feeding my soul.

Chris says

Buechner is always a fantastic addition to my life: empowering, challenging, humorous and wise. This collection of his sermons and essays is no exception. They are chronologically arranged and as such provide a moving arc of his life: in the end we see Buechner the old man bidding adieu to his old school and to life itself. Powerful stuff, for Christians, whole, doubting and otherwise. He paints his prose in vibrant strokes and with a master's ancient dexterity.
