

**Movie discussion resource**                      **Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri**  
*Engage with culture without disengaging your faith.*

**Genre:** Drama

**Rating:** MA15+

**Length:** 1 hour 55 minutes

**Starring:** Frances McDormand, Woody Harrelson, Sam Rockwell

**Writer/Director:** Martin McDonagh

**Brief synopsis**

*Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* is a darkly comic drama from Academy Award nominee Martin McDonagh (In Bruges). After months have passed without a culprit in her daughter's murder case, Mildred Hayes (Frances McDormand) makes a bold move, painting three signs leading into her town with a controversial message directed at William Willoughby (Woody Harrelson), the town's revered chief of police. When his second-in-command Officer Dixon (Sam Rockwell), an immature mother's boy with a penchant for violence, gets involved, the battle between Mildred and Ebbing's law enforcement is only exacerbated. *Written by Fox Searchlight Pictures*



**General questions for discussion**

*Some general questions might provide enough framework for you to discuss the movie:*

- ❖ What stood out as the main points/highlights in the movie?
- ❖ What themes are explored?
- ❖ What assumptions were embedded in the story?
- ❖ What challenged you? What questions did it raise for you?
- ❖ Are there aspects of the story that resonated with your own experience or with the experience of others in a similar situation?
- ❖ Are there biblical or theological themes or characters that come to mind?
- ❖ Where is God present in the story? Where does God seem absent? What Christian themes speak into the context of this narrative?

***The following is written by Rev Steve Francis, Moderator, WA UCA Synod.***

Every once in a while, I watch a film that disturbs and depresses me, while at the same time commands my respect and confronts my sensibilities. You can watch the preview of the film here, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt5027774/>. But be warned - *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* is not a light-hearted comic romp, where everyone ends up living happily ever after. It is a black tragi-comedy. It won four Golden Globe awards this year including Best Screenplay, Best Actress and Best Film (Drama), and many BAFTA nominations. While I found myself at times smiling and even laughing, for the most part, I was struggling with the powerful themes of forgiveness and revenge, life and death, damnation and redemption, which collided with a blisteringly foul-mouthed script. There were some tender moments, but the issues of suffering, domestic abuse, suicide, violence and rape were very much in your face.

Without giving too much away, the story centres on a divorced mother, Mildred, who is grieving the abduction, rape and murder of her teenage daughter. She is angry, really angry at the lack of progress in the police investigation. Fuelled by this deep frustration, she rents three abandoned billboards near her home which read in sequence, “Raped while dying”, “And still no arrests”, and “How come Chief Willoughby?” These three billboards create great controversy in the town and while having sympathy for the grieving mother, most of the town seems to side with the police chief who is himself struggling with cancer.

The film is full of painful confrontations like how to deal or not deal with domestic abuse, suicide, arson, injustice and racism.

Part of what hit me was the sense of anarchic nihilism that pervades the film, where so much emotion and action come from the toxic power of revenge. At one moment the hurting mother

reflects on the awful possibility that “there ain’t no God, and the whole world is empty and it doesn’t matter what we do to each other”. Is this really the truth about our existence?

Momentarily in my mind when I heard Mildred say these words, I wanted to put up three alternative billboards before her, “there is a God”, “the earth is charged with the grandeur of God” and “life is precious and we all matter”.

How tragic that the pain and suffering of life with all its questions and injustices can lead to a conclusion that essentially life has no ultimate meaning.

The Christian gospel operates from a very different script where justice can replace revenge, love can overcome hate and forgiveness can trump bitterness. “Three Billboards” is a powerful film and points to a journey towards redemption and ruin. I found myself wishing some of the characters were more open to the road less travelled, the way of Jesus.

Probably intentionally the film is full of caricatures; corrupt police, white racists, male abusers and predictably a Catholic priest who is viewed as insensitive and hypocritical.

Thankfully, we need not live out a caricature.

The Christian community can be a billboard for love, peace and reconciliation that our world needs to see. I pray that in some small way, the billboard people see in our lives may promote the Christian hope of wholeness, a restored community and the new beginning that the gospel brings.

=> *Discuss your response to Steve’s comments about the film.*

<https://unitingchurchwa.org.au/blog/three-billboards/>

Lacing a western-tinged tale of outlaw justice with Jacobean themes of rape, murder and revenge, the film finds a grieving mother naming and shaming the lawmen who have failed to catch her daughter’s killer. The anarchic nihilism of the narrative is underpinned with a heart-breaking meditation upon the toxic power of rage. When characters, struggling to make sense of all this chaos, utter platitudes such as “anger just begets greater anger” and “through love comes calm”, it seems less like a killing joke than a weirdly sincere mission statement.

Seven months after her daughter, Angela, was abducted and killed, Mildred Hayes (Frances McDormand) emblazons the roadside billboards of the title with signs taunting police chief Willoughby (Woody Harrelson) about the lack of arrests. For Mildred, the Ebbing police force is “too busy going round torturing black folks” to solve crime. “I got issues with white folks too,” declares bozo cop Jason Dixon (Sam Rockwell) after throwing someone out of a window – a bravura one-shot sequence pointedly orchestrated to the lilting strains of His Master’s Voice by Monsters of Folk.

The righteously angry Mildred has her own demons, torturing her bullied son, Robbie (Lucas Hedges), with her guilt-driven vendetta, wrestling with the awful possibility that “there ain’t no God, and the whole world’s empty, and it doesn’t matter what we do to each other”.

From the opening morning-mist shots of those lonely billboards to the flames that evoke the burning crosses of the KKK, cinematographer Ben Davis perfectly captures the film’s knife-edge balance between humour and horror, mayhem and melancholia.

Whether each of these characters is on a road to redemption or ruin is left open-ended.

=> *Discuss your response to this excerpt (from an article by Mark Kermode in The Guardian).*

<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/jan/14/three-billboards-outside-ebbing-missouri-review-frances-mcdormand>

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