

“Boomtown”

Television is a minimalizing medium. Thirty- or 60-minute shows don't allow for much subtlety, so producers reduce characters to caricatures and simplify complex issues to make them fit into the allotted time. Those are the producers who try; most have settled for “reality” television, abandoning the notion of well-produced, scripted dramas.

NBC, a network certainly guilty of pandering to America's prurient interests with reality television—“Playboy Bunny Fear Factor,” for example—has also emerged as the network offering the most interesting cop drama since the glory years of “NYPD Blue.”

“Boomtown” isn't billed as a postmodern cop drama, but with its reliance on several narrative perspectives to tell one story, it certainly falls into a postmodern category, at least in a literary sense.

Graham Yost, whose work on “Band of Brothers” made me a believer in television's potential, created “Boomtown.” Although the program is riddled with clichés (and what cop drama isn't?), Yost's trust in the TV viewer allows the show to transcend the standard cop genre fare.

A recent episode focused on religion, and it illustrates the maturity and complexity of “Boomtown's” perspective.

Mykelti Williamson plays Fearless, an African-American cop, military veteran and product of a rough neighborhood upbringing. His childhood friend now pastors the neighborhood church. Both are called on to help a family when a young boy murders a marijuana dealer.

Both Fearless and the pastor knew the dealer, for all three shared a common past:

They were molested by the same coach as boys.

Fearless and the pastor took different, “healthy” paths to confront their pain, but the dealer became a victimizer. The young boy shot his abuser to protect himself and his mother, because the abuser was threatening the mother’s life to ensure the boy’s silence.

Fearless tracks down and confronts his own abuser—the old coach—with a gun, hoping to prevent more victims in the cycle. The coach tells Fearless that he now counsels pedophiles, and that he hasn’t acted on pedophilia in 20 years, thanks to the grace of God.

“Why would the grace of God come to someone like you?” Fearless asks.

“I don’t know,” the coach says. And then he prays for Fearless—not one of those irritating television prayers where it’s obvious the writer knows nothing about Christianity, but a heartfelt plea for healing and a restoration of faith.

A later conversation with his girlfriend clues us in to Fearless’ conflict. How can someone so despicable be absolutely certain of God’s grace, while Fearless still struggles with faith in a good, personal God in light of the abuse he suffered as a child?

After leaving the coach’s apartment, Fearless goes by the boy’s house. He admits his own past and attempts to help the boy cope with his own pain. We are not privy to the conversation, and neither is the pastor we see standing outside the window, watching with a hint of a smile.

Fearless returns to church the next Sunday, searching for the faith he had as a young child. His girlfriend has encouraged him to regain some of the things he lost, to stop being a victim.

The pastor directs his sermon at Fearless. “Where is God when a child is abused?” the pastor asks. “Where is God when evil men fly a plane into a building?” The answer, again, is “I don’t know.”

He doesn't leave it there, though. God's inscrutability isn't a sufficient answer. Something has to be done to assuage the damage sin does to its victims. Hand-wringing and philosophizing get us no closer to healing.

"When I see a man reach out to a young boy and share in his pain, I say, right there," the pastor says. "God is there."

It's not a theodicy exactly, but somehow the creator of a cop drama has understood that we are called to be God's vicars in the world. In the absence of an answer, we can provide presence, comfort, encouragement and support.

This is no caricature of religion, no mean-spirited riff on Christianity. It's a surprisingly insightful story about incarnational ministry and God's terrible silence.

***Greg Horton** is a freelance writer and former pastor. He is currently pursuing a master's in theology at Southern Nazarene University. He and his wife, Susan, live in Oklahoma City and attend First Baptist Church of Oklahoma City.*