

“Bridges”



Reflections for the Seasons of Advent and Christmas
2017-2018

The West Virginia Institute for Spirituality
1601 Virginia Street East
Charleston, WV 25311

December 10, 2015

“Have you had sight of me...?”

Mercy within mercy within mercy”

(Thomas Merton, Sign of Jonas, p.362)

Today we remember Thomas Merton’s (1915-1968) double anniversary: 1941 was his reception into Trappists Monastery, Gethsemane, KY. When he was asked ‘what do you ask of us?’ he replied, “Mercy”. 1968 was his accidental death by electrical short-circuiting fan, Bangkok. Thailand.

His writings speak to me in my search for meaning and for God throughout my life, helping me to notice God’s actions of faithful loving kindness. Like John the Baptist, Merton directs me to choose Christ.

His journals reveal the meandering paths of God’s mercy through his life. Mercy is, first of all, God’s grace-filled movement toward each person: now, here, this. And it is God’s mercy that enables one to see and respond to God’s movements and actions. Mercy is God’s steadfast, faithful, tender and strong power that binds God to us and us to God. Mercy takes hold of us, seeping into the core of our being, and does not let us go. (Seasons of Celebrations, 175) It does not depend on one’s worthiness or one’s return of love. Mercy is pure grace, pure gift. The revelation of the mercy of God makes the whole problem of worthiness something almost laughable. (New Seeds of Contemplation, 75) Mercy is God’s love always at work to restore us to well-being in spirit, soul, body and relationships.

We show mercy to others irrespective of their dignity or whether they deserve it or not, because Jesus says, “what you have received as a gift, give as gift” (Mt 10:8) Forgiveness is mercy’s most characteristic expression.

Once we have discovered ourselves penetrated and enfolded in God’s mercy, we are able to understand others. God’s mercy alone has the power to break the power of our self-centeredness and free us to bring mercy to others.

Prayer practice: Notice and sight the paths of God’s mercy moving and acting in your life today and over the years. Be grateful for that “mercy within mercy within mercy” by sharing it with others.

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December 11, 2017

*“Every valley shall be raised up,
every mountain and hill made low,
the rough ground shall become level,
the rugged places a plain.”* -- Isaiah 40:4

I was not looking forward to a visit to a home in rural West Virginia in my role as a developmental specialist with the WV Birth-to-Three program. The weather had been rainy and wet and the home I was going to involved a walk from where I parked my car down an incline to the house. Now this would not be so bad, but there was no grass, no sidewalk, just red West Virginia clay, nice and wet and slippery on a rainy day. But I put my mud boots in my car and went anyway, knowing they were expecting me. As I got out of the car, all my fears were unfounded. There was a thick layer of straw covering the ground between the edge of the road and the house, making my walk down the hill quite unexciting. No slipping. No sinking into the mud. No drama. I was so thankful. I appreciated this family's thoughtful gesture to make a sort of bridge for me to traverse this otherwise messy and potentially dangerous barrier.

Isaiah's vision that “every valley shall be lifted up” and “the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain” speaks to me of barriers removed, of the way being made easier so that one can live one's life plainly with no rough places. This is God's wish, Isaiah's vision, and our dream. It is what we wait for this Advent.

Prayer Practice: Pray to be shown how you can make someone's otherwise rough way, more plain, and plan on doing it.

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December 12, 2017

*“Mary set out and traveled to the hill country in haste...
where she was greeted by Elizabeth...
When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greetings she cried out in
a loud voice...*

*And how does this happen that the mother of my Lord
should come to me?*

*For at that moment the sound of your greeting reached
my ears, the infant in my womb leaped for joy.*

*Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to
you by the Lord would be fulfilled.”*

And Mary said:

*“My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord;
my spirit rejoices in God my savior.” – Luke 1:39-47*

When was the last time you leaped for joy? When was the last time you leaped for joy and found the Lord in the midst of that experience? Often I think of God in the extra-special moments of life, and so He is... in the birth or various milestones of my life or a child or grandchild’s life. At a wedding, or baptism, or graduation, or funeral. But what about the ‘other’ moments of my life? What about the beauty of a sunrise, or the gentle breeze blowing across my face, or the sound of a bird singing in the tree outside. What about the rain splashing on the widow, or the story told by a neighbor, or co-worker, or relative, or friend.

There is a saying that comes to mind:

“The way is not to God, but with God.”

– Messages from the Ancestors – Wisdom for the Way



How often do we walk with God? How often do I walk with God?

Practice

Take a few minutes today and think about your last 24 hours. Review where you were, what you were doing, and what you saw – heard – touched – felt. Then look around and think about where God was in the midst of it all.

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December 13, 2017

“Those who see light can walk in the dark; those who see man can see God”
O Come, Emmanuel.

Early one December, I walked into a department store with Christmas music blasting. I was greeted with “How can I help you?” My social filters faltered and too quickly I said “shoot those chipmunks.” I had been pondering what ‘put Christ back into Christmas’ meant for me: anger, sarcasm and cynicism.

Happy holidays or Merry Christmas? Commercialized, politicized, secularized, commercialized. Decorations, tree, carols, Nutcracker. Scrooge. Food baskets for the needy, special foods and pastries. Nostalgia for lost innocence. Delight for children’s experiences. Depression from hurtful memories of loss and abuse and disappointment.

Later, Thomas Merton rescued me from my cynicism and sarcasm as I pondered: “Love come out of God and gathers us to God in order to pour itself back into God through all of us and bring us all back to Him on the tide of His own infinite mercy. So we all become doors and windows through which God shines back into His own house.-New Seeds of Contemplation, p.67

There are as many layers to the experience of Christmas as there are people. Some layers, like concentric ripples, move onto the fringes. All were created by the core event: GOD IS WITH US.

Prayer Practice: Allow Christ to companion you as you prepare and shop for Christmas.

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December 14, 2017

I am the LORD, your God, who grasp your right hand; It is I who say to you, "Fear not, I will help you." IS 41:13

On this memorial of Saint John of the Cross, I think of the mystical John and I muse about a mystical approach to Advent. I consider how in this time of waiting I to better bridge my connection to the God of my understanding. I ask myself: what do I anticipate about Advent? Is it okay to anticipate nothing? When I think about the nothingness of God, it is easier for me to anticipate nothing. Good experience has taught me to anticipate nothing – not even this moment. Not even the day. Not even the outcome of Advent. Good experience has taught me that God is always full of surprises. Yes, there is the biblical meaning, the church meaning, and the historical meaning. A Babe, wrapped in swaddling clothes, born in a humble corner of Bethlehem who ends up as King of the world! There's much more to it than that: our God of nothingness is always teaching something, always reaching out to grasp our right hand, always here to help us.

Prayer Practice

Sit in purposeful silence. Imagine God's cloud of unknowing. Imagine what God is saying to you in that cloud of nothingness. Are you ready for the surprises?

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December 15, 2017

Which one of you, if their child asks for bread will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Creator who is in heaven give good things to those who ask? Matthew 7:9-11.

Paul Simon wrote a song that was popular in 1969, “Bridge over Troubled Water.”

When you're weary, feeling small
When tears are in your eyes, I'll dry them all
I'm on your side, oh, when times get rough
And friends just can't be found
Like a bridge over troubled water
I will lay me down



When you're down and out
When you're on the street
When evening falls so hard
I will comfort you
I'll take your part, oh, when darkness comes
And pain is all around
Like a bridge over troubled water
I will lay me down

Can you imagine a friend like that described in these lyrics? As a parent, that is the kind of person I want to be for my children. We can't keep our children from all trouble, but we can help them traverse the troubled waters. We can show them how to get from one side to the other. We can even be that bridge, a living example of connection. Why do we do this? It would certainly be easier to avoid the heartache that comes from seeing your child in pain. As a parent, however, I want to do what I can to help my children grow into the persons God created them to be. The motivation to be a bridge is simple: LOVE.

God our Creator loves us so much that 2000 years ago, God became Incarnate, taking on human form in order to be with us in a unique way. Jesus, God Incarnate, is a bridge, a connection, between humans and our Creator. Think of all that Jesus gave up just so he could identify with humankind. Jesus, with all of the Creator's attributes, chose to be confined to a human body – a body that experienced pain and suffering and the limitations of time and space. Why? The motivation is simple: LOVE.

Prayer Practice: This Advent, remind yourself daily that you are the beloved child of God, precious and beautiful to behold. Anticipate the re-birth of your brother, Jesus.

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December 16, 2017

Sir 48:1-4, 9-11



“You were destined, it is written, in time to come to put an end to wrath before the day of the Lord, to turn back the hearts of fathers toward their sons”

This Scripture passage is speaking of the prophet Elijah and how at the appointed time Elijah will put things right, between fathers and sons, in other words, the Kingdom.

To put things right between fathers and sons really does speak of building bridges, building bridges to reconciliation between those who have differences or conflicts that are unresolved. Jesus is the common consideration. When building bridges, the phrase, “What would Jesus do?”, is applicable. How does Jesus build bridges? Jesus would always find the common ground, the common ground of the one true God. Look to the heavens and you will see the bridge maker.

When we seek reconciliation with those to whom we have broken relationships we begin the bridging of the chasm between. We are in the process of building the bridge that will eventually allow a coming together. A bridge forged in steel, strong and true, not to be broken.

Remember those to whom you have severed a relationship. Find ways to build a bridge to reconciliation. God wants this for us. Can you do this for the sake of God? Can you do this for the sake of the Kingdom, to bring peace into the Kingdom?

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