

Thomas Merton: A Spiritual Guide for welcoming hope, humility and joy into Advent and Christmas. Led by The Rev. Barbara Merritt (minister emerita) and The Rev. Sarah Stewart. (Senior Minister)

First Session: Friday Dec. 2, 12:00 pm to 1:30 pm in the Dining room

Finding Hope in This World

“Advent is the “sacrament” of the essence of God in His world....His hidden birth in our lives...The kingdom of God is thus already “in the midst of us”. St. Bernard, “It does not behoove thee, O man, to cross the seas, to penetrate the clouds, or to cross the Alps. No great journey is shown to you. If you wish to meet God, go as far as your own heart.”

It is quite clear that St. Bernard conceives this as a liberation, a breaking but of the prison of “selfhood.” In particular it is a liberation from a miserable pre-occupation with our own failings.” (*Advent in Spirituality of St Bernard*)

“The certainty of Christian hope lies beyond passion and beyond knowledge. Therefore we must sometimes expect our hope to come in conflict with darkness, desperation and ignorance.

It is important to remember the deep, in some ways anguished seriousness of Advent, when the mendacious celebrations of our marketing culture so easily harmonize with our tendency to regard Christmas, consciously or otherwise, as a return to our own innocence and our own infancy. Advent should remind us that the “King who is to Come” is more than a charming infant smiling (or if you prefer a dolorous spirituality, weeping) in the straw. There is certainly nothing wrong with the traditional family joys of Christmas, nor need we be ashamed to find ourselves still able to anticipate them without too much ambivalence. After all, that in itself is no mean feat.

But the Church in preparing us for the birth of a “great prophet,” a Savior and a King of Peace, has more in mind than seasonal cheer. The advent mystery focuses the light of faith upon the very meaning of life, of history, of man, of the world and of our own being. In Advent we celebrate the coming and indeed the *presence* of Christ in our world. We witness to His presence even in the midst of all its inscrutable problems and tragedies. Our Advent faith is not an escape from the world to a misty realm of slogans and comforts which declare our problems to be unreal, our tragedies non-existent...

...the fact remains that our task is to seek and find Christ in our world as it is, and not as it *might be*. The fact that the world is other than it might be does not alter the truth that Christ is present in it and that His plan has been neither frustrated nor changed: indeed, all will be done according to His will. Our Advent is a celebration of this hope...What is uncertain is not the “coming” of Christ, but our own reception of Him, our own response to Him, our own readiness and capacity to “go forth and meet Him”.

Advent for us means acceptance of this totally new beginning. It means a readiness to have eternity and time meet not only in Christ, but *in us*, in Man, in our life, in our world, in our time. ” (*Advent: Hope or Delusion? Seasons of Celebration*)

Second session, December 9, 12:00-1:30pm Dining room:

The Darkest Time of Year

“Christ always seeks the straw of the most desolate cribs to make his Bethlehem.”

“In my interior life there is a raw and inflamed and infected thought and emotion, and it concerns the choir and the head cantor. The pitch-pipe blows and the cantor comes in a quarter tone below the pipe and the choir comes in a quarter tone below him, and we all start singing together like a bunch of rusty machines. This week I am sub-invitor, and so my pride is involved. I give out the psalms on what I think is the right note which is supposed to be, these days, “F#”. In ten seconds we are all singing “f,” and then “e,” and I, on my side, continue to sing with painstaking refinement to sing what I think is “f#.” Father Raymond’s voice can be heard on the other side in a loud, piteous complaint, which gets everybody mad, and f-sharp becomes totally unpopular. Then someone else, as a reproach to the Abbot’s side, sings e-flat and immediately the novices and the solid contingent of flats on our side picks it up and it goes down to a “d”, and I relapse into an undignified tone, sulking with all my might, and muttering things which do not assuage my feelings. And that is how it is every day. Sometimes I get so sore I am out of breath. Then the head-cantor comes in with his notion that we must stop abruptly every time we come to a bar, and I shudder and enter into a significant hush, which is intended to convey the thought that I cannot possibly cooperate with a sacrilege.

I wonder if Jesus ever gets tired of waiting for me to grow up. I hope not.

(Dec.2, 1948, *Entering the Silence: the Journals of Thomas Merton*, Vol.II)

“The heart of man can be full of so much pain, even when things are exteriorly all right”. It becomes all the more difficult because today we are used to thinking that there are explanations for everything. But there is no explanation of most of what goes on in our own hearts, and we cannot account for it all. No use resorting to the kind of mental tranquilizers that even religious explanations sometimes offer. Faith must be deeper than that, rooted in the unknown and in the abyss of darkness that is the ground of our being. No use teasing the darkness to try to make answers grow out of it. But if we learn how to have a deep inner patience, things solve themselves, or God solves them if you prefer: but do not expect to see how. Just learn to wait, and do what you can and help other people. Often it is in helping someone else we find the best way to bear our own trouble.” —(from his Christmas letter, 1966)

I have what you have not. I am what you are not. I have taken what you have failed to take and I have seized what you could never get. Therefore you suffer and I am happy, you are despised and I am praised, you die and I live; you are nothing and I am something, and I am all the more something because you are nothing. And thus I spend my life admiring the distance between you and me"; at times this even helps me to forget the other men who have what I have not and who have taken what I was too slow to take and who have seized what was beyond my reach, who are praised as I cannot be praised and who live on my death.

The man who lives in division is living in death. He cannot find himself because he is lost; he has ceased to be a reality. The person he believes himself to be is a bad dream....
— (*New Seeds of Contemplation* p 48)

Third Session, December 16, 12:00-1:30pm Dining room:

The Crisis of Our Time (and of All Times)

“We live in crisis, and perhaps we find it interesting to do so. Yet we also feel guilty about it, as if we ought not to be in crisis. As if we were so wise, so able, so kind, so reasonable, that crisis ought at all times to be unthinkable. It is doubtless this “ought,” this “should” that makes our era so interesting that it cannot possibly be a time of wisdom, or even of reason. We think we know what we ought to be doing, and we see ourselves move, with the inexorable deliberation of a machine that has gone wrong, to do the opposite.”

(Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander, New York: Image, page 66)

Into this world, this demented inn, in which there is absolutely no room for Him at all, Christ has come uninvited. But because He cannot be at home in it, because He is out of place in it, His place is with those others for whom there is no room. His place is with those who do not belong, who are rejected by power because they are regarded as weak, those who are discredited, who are denied the status of persons, who are tortured, bombed, and exterminated. With those for whom there is no room, Christ is present in the world. He is mysteriously present in those for whom there seems to be nothing but the world at its worst ... With these He conceals Himself, In these He hides Himself, for whom there is no room.

—(Raids on the Unspeakable)

The only thing that is to be regretted without qualification is for a person to adapt perfectly to totalitarian society. Then he is indeed beyond hope. Hence we should all be sick in some way. We should all feel near to despair in some sense because this semi-despair is the normal form taken by hope in a time like ours. Hope without any sensible or tangible evidence on which to rest. Hope in spite of the sickness that fills us. Hope married to a firm refusal to accept any palliatives or anything that cheats hope by pretending to relieve apparent despair. And I would add, that for you especially hope must mean acceptance of limitations and imperfections and the deceitfulness of a nature that has been wounded and cheated of love and of security: this too we all feel and suffer. Thus we cannot enjoy the luxury of a hope based on our own integrity, our own honesty, our own purity of heart.” (To Czesław Miłosz, Sept. 12, 1959)

If we are fools enough to remain at the mercy of the people who want to sell us happiness, it will be impossible for us ever to be content with anything. How would they profit if we became content? We would no longer need their new product. The last thing the salesman wants is for the buyer to become content. You are of no use in our affluent society unless you are always just about to grasp what you never have. The Greeks were not as smart as we are. In their primitive way they put Tantalus in hell. Madison Avenue, on the contrary, would convince us that Tantalus is in heaven.

— *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 84

Fourth Session: December 16, 12:00-1:30pm Dining room

United in Love

If you want to know what is meant by "God's will", this is one way to get a good idea of it. "God's will" is certainly found in anything that is required of us in order that we may be united with one another in love. ...Everything that is demanded of me, in order that I may treat every other person effectively as a human being, "is willed for me by God under the natural law." ...I must learn to share with others their joys, their sufferings, their ideas, their needs, their desires. I must learn to do this not only in the cases of those who are of the same class, the same profession, the same race, the same nation as myself, but when those who suffer belong to other groups, even to groups that are regarded as hostile. If I do this, I obey God. If I refuse to do it, I disobey Him. It is not therefore a matter left open to subjective caprice.

— *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions Press, 1961) p 76-77

May we all grow in grace and peace, and not neglect the silence that is printed in the center of our being. It will not fail us. It is more than silence.

— (from a letter to Amiya Chakravarty and his students at Smith College April 13, 1967, included in *The Hidden Ground of Love*)

*"Time is not given to us to keep a faith we once had
but to acquire a faith we need now "*

*Into this world,
this demented inn,
in which there is absolutely no room for him at all,
Christ has come uninvited.*

*But because he cannot be at home in it,
because he is out of place in it,
and yet he must be in it,
his place is with those others for whom there is no room.*

*His place is with those who do not belong,
who are rejected by power because they are regarded as weak,
those who are discredited,
who are denied the status of persons,
tortured,
excommunicated.
With those for whom there is no room,
Christ is present in this world.*

Christmas is given us to make us love the kind of humility that is love, and embraces contradictions and difficulties and all the rest with joy. (Dec 25, 1948)