

## Thomas Merton and the Mercies of the Night

By Alan Kolp

*Watchman, what of the night?* The night, O My Lord, is a time of freedom. You have seen the morning and the night, and the night was better. In the night all things began, and in the night the end of all things has come before me.<sup>1</sup>

The Voice of God is heard in Paradise: *“What was vile has become precious. What is now precious was never vile. I have always known the vile as precious: for what is vile I know not at all. What was cruel has become merciful. What is now merciful was never cruel. I have always overshadowed Jonas with My mercy, and cruelty I know not at all. Have you had sight of Me, Jonas My child? Mercy within mercy within mercy.”* (SJ 362)

These words open and close the epilogue to *The Sign of Jonas*, which Thomas Merton entitles “Fire Watch, July 4, 1952.” In a suggestive way these epilogue words frame the focus for this paper. Literally and metaphorically, it is in the night that we confront who we are. In the process, we are led to discover the mercy of God – mercy that delivers us into freedom and further into the Paradise of God’s full Presence. This is the path trod by every spiritual pilgrim. It is essentially a contemplative quest. And the key is mercy: *“Mercy within mercy within mercy.”*

Merton describes this contemplative “night quest” in his little book *Contemplative Prayer*. He says that contemplation “is the paradoxical response to an almost incomprehensible call from God, drawing us into solitude, plunging us into darkness and silence, not to withdraw and protect us from peril, but to bring us safely through untold dangers by a miracle of love and power.”<sup>2</sup> Here we will trace this paradoxical response to the call God extends to each one of us. The response leads us from light to darkness, from knowing through unknowing, threatened by peril, but brought safely and miraculously into the Divine Presence. Our pilgrimage response can be detailed in three stages.

### Light to Darkness

Merton’s formation and life as a contemplative literally began in the night. While his journey leading up to his entrance into the monastery at Gethsemani in December, 1941 is well-known, we join the story when he already has taken his place in the monastery. As any visitor knows, the monastic day currently begins in darkness with vigils at 3:15 a.m. It was even earlier for the monks when Merton lived at Gethsemani. The monks would rise at 2:00 a.m. for an hour of little offices and meditations, followed at 3:00 a.m.



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by matins and lauds. The day ended with compline at 6:10 p.m.<sup>3</sup> This meant that Merton experienced the literal night and day differently than folks of his time or of our own. Consequently, Merton doubtlessly had a different relationship with the night than most people. This literal relationship with the night – especially since he would be dealing with spiritual issues – led him to connect with the metaphorical night described so eloquently in spiritual literature.

We get a good sense of how both the literal and the metaphorical nights blend together, and when separated, lead in different directions, when we listen to Merton’s commentary on prayer. To God Merton says,

I have prayed to You in the daytime with thoughts and reasons, and in the nighttime You have confronted me, scattering thought and reason. I have come to You in the morning with light and with desire, and You have descended upon me, with great gentleness, with most forbearing silence, in this inexplicable night, dispersing light, defeating all desire. I have explained to You a hundred times my motives for entering the monastery and You have listened and said nothing, and I have turned away and wept with shame. (*SJ* 352-53).

Merton had to be taken into that inexplicable night to learn about his true self and learn about the God who created him and who would lead him home to Paradise. Even in the early 1950s, Merton knew that he needed to be drawn into a transforming process to become his real self. In *No Man Is an Island*, Merton notes, “We must accept the fact that we are not what we would like to be. We must cast off our false, exterior self like the cheap and showy garment that it is. We must find our real self . . . created to be a child of God.”<sup>4</sup>

### **Mundane and Mystical**

While every day is not like every other day, our days tend toward the normal and routine. For the most part, our days are mundane – worldly in the original sense of the Latin word *mundus*. Typically, the mundane is not tinged with the Spirit; or rather, it probably is tinged with the Spirit, but we don’t notice or recognize the Special within the ordinary. Like all people, Merton had to learn how to “see.” Metaphorically, this meant he would have to leave the day and be moved into the spiritual night. This metaphorical move would also transform the mundane into the mystical. This spiritual, metaphorical, transformative journey is always a journey of faith. Merton is clear and articulate when he describes his journey of faith – a journey that clearly began before he entered Gethsemani, but deepened and flourished in that monastic laboratory. Faith is a process by which we open and welcome the Holy One into our *mundus* – our mundane world. Merton declares:

faith incorporates the unknown into our everyday life in a living, dynamic and actual manner. The unknown remains unknown. It is still a mystery, for it cannot cease to be one. The function of faith is not to reduce mystery to rational clarity, but to integrate the unknown and the known together in a living whole, in which we are more and more able to transcend the limitations of our external self.<sup>5</sup>

These words paint the broad meaning of the word faith. Faith ranges from the things in which we believe and trust (the known) to the mysterious, deeper level of the Spirit (the unknown).

We do well to analyze more sharply the range of this faith process in order to understand how it took Merton (and can take us) from the mundane to the mystical. For him this faith journey was a contemplative journey. It is a journey into the night – the metaphorical night of becoming his true

self. That journey brings a cross and causes death. Here is how Merton again puts it in *New Seeds of Contemplation*: “Beyond rational temperance there comes a sacrificial death which is on a higher level than mere virtue or practiced discipline. Here the Cross of Christ enters into the life of the contemplative. Without the mystical death that completely separates him from created things, there is no perfect freedom and no advance into the promised land of mystical union” (NSC 209-10). This passage comes from a long narrative about this faith process of crucifixion–death–new life. In it we observe how Merton employs the “Dark Night” spirituality from John of the Cross and that apophatic tradition of the Carmelites. For example, Merton describes the death to the old self with Carmelite language: “this ‘death’ of sense and of spirit which brings the final liberation from attachment, is not the fruit of man’s own ascetic effort alone. The Dark Night, the crisis of suffering that rends our roots out of this world, is a pure gift of God” (NSC 210). Merton shows that we receive this gift and then begin practicing it in daily life – living mystically in our mundane world.

We see how the mystical transforms our mundane world, for example, in the way he portrays the process of faith as God’s ongoing work of love. Again, notice the “night” language:

True contemplation is the work of a love that transcends all satisfaction and all experience to rest in the night of pure and naked faith. This faith brings us so close to God that it may be said to touch and grasp Him as He is, though in darkness. And the effect of such a contact is often a deep peace that overflows into the lower faculties of the soul and thus constitutes an “experience.” Yet that experience or feeling of peace always remains an accident of contemplation, so that the absence of this “sense” does not mean that our contact with God has ceased. (NSC 211)

Merton’s sentiments in this passage facilitate the transition to the third stage, in which we understand how the contemplative life is our personal journey back home to Paradise with God.

### **Contemplative Heading Home to Paradise**

During his monastic years, as we have seen, Merton learned literally to arise in the middle of the night to begin his day. Doing this allowed him to experience the grace of God move him into the metaphorical night. This merciful process was actually contemplative formation. Merton describes this journey of faith into the dark night:

During the “dark night” of the feelings and senses, anxiety is felt in prayer, often acutely. This is necessary, because this spiritual night marks the transfer of the full, free control of our inner life into the hands of a superior power. And this too means that the time of darkness is, in reality, a time of hazard and of difficult options. We begin to go out of ourselves: that is to say, we are drawn out from behind our habitual and conscious defenses. These defenses are also limitations, which we must abandon if we are to grow. But at the same time they are, in their own way, a protection against unconscious forces that are too great for us to face naked and without protection. (CP 96)

It is easy to see that the movement into the dark night is simultaneously a drawing us out of the mundane in order to learn to accept the gift of contemplative living. As such, it commences our trip home to Paradise.

It is tempting to see this process as pretty awful. But Merton demonstrates how we come to embrace the darkness and thrive in the mercy of God’s Presence. “Yet you find that you can rest

in this darkness and this unfathomable peace without trouble and without anxiety, even when the imagination and the mind remain in some way active outside the doors of it. . . . It is a gift that comes to you from the bosom of that serene darkness and depends entirely on the decision of Love” (NSC 228-29). It is easy to misinterpret Merton here by assuming the contemplative takes up residence in this spiritual land of darkness.

I suggest that Merton knows life at two levels. Thomas Kelly, a Quaker contemporary of Merton who, as far as I know, never interacted with Merton, puts it simply and in a way that helps us understand Merton’s experience:

The possibility of this experience of Divine Presence, as a repeatedly realized and present fact, and its transforming and transfiguring effect upon all life – this is the central message of Friends. Once discover this glorious secret, this new dimension of life, and we no longer live merely in time but we live also in the Eternal. The world of time is no longer the sole reality of which we are aware. A second Reality hovers, quickens, quivers, stirs, energizes us, breaks in upon us and in love embraces us, together with all things, within Himself. We live our lives at two levels simultaneously, the level of time and the level of the Timeless.<sup>6</sup>

Kelly is correct, but is limited if he thinks it only applies to Quakers. It is true of all spiritual people. But this Quaker language does help us understand what being contemplative meant for Merton. The experience is primary; the language – whether Quaker or Trappist – is secondary.

Kelly’s words also help us see that the contemplative person experiences life from the merciful perspective of the eschatological pull toward home – toward Paradise. In fact, Merton can compare the contemplative to those original two inhabitants of Paradise. Merton claims, “The situation of the soul in contemplation is something like the situation of Adam and Eve in Paradise. Everything is yours, but on one infinitely important condition: that it is all given” (NSC 229). The gift of Paradise is not merely a post-mortem reward for good people. According to Merton, we begin the trek home to Paradise in the here and now. He did it in a monastery, but we can be sure he did not limit Paradise to the monastic locale.

The contemplative journey into the metaphorical night, and then deeper into darkness to the Paradise of the mystical Presence of the Holy One, is an experience of “*mercy within mercy within mercy.*” It is through this journey into the night and darkness that we experience the paradox of God’s mercy. In the darkness we find light! Merton describes it eloquently:

And it is in the deepest darkness that we most fully possess God on earth, because it is then that our minds are most truly liberated from the weak, created lights that are darkness in comparison to Him; it is then that we are filled with His infinite Light which seems pure darkness to our reason. In this greatest perfection of faith the infinite God Himself becomes the Light of the darkened soul and possesses it entirely with His Truth. And at this inexplicable moment the deepest night becomes day and faith turns into understanding. (NSC 135)

Having followed the journey into the night and darkness, it is fitting we conclude this exploration by acknowledging finally that the deepest night becomes a new form of “day,” a day which appears as the light of wisdom.

## Conclusion

In the beginning Merton told us we see the morning and the night and the night is better. To move through the day and embrace the night commences a process that Merton succinctly summarizes: “the way to God lies through deep darkness in which all knowledge and all created wisdom and all pleasure and prudence and all human hope and human joy are defeated and annulled by the overwhelming purity of the light and the presence of God” (*NSC* 208-209). By faith we make this merciful journey through deep darkness into the light of a very new kind of day. Merton articulates it in this fashion: “Faith is what opens to us this higher realm of unity, of strength, of light, of sophianic love where there is no longer the limited and fragmentary light . . . where the Truth is One and Undivided and takes all to itself in the wholeness of *Sapientia*, or *Sophia*. . . . Our full spiritual life is life in wisdom, life in Christ. The darkness of faith bears fruit in the light of wisdom” (*NSC* 141).

To experience the light of wisdom is the paradox of entering the mercies of the night. Merton knew well the paradox of life – the mercies of the night. Of course, Merton gets the last word. “I have had to accept the fact that my life is almost totally paradoxical. . . . All life tends to grow like this, in mystery inscaped with paradox and contradiction, yet centered, in its very heart, on the divine mercy.”<sup>7</sup>

1. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1953) 349; subsequent references will be cited as “*SJ*” parenthetically in the text.
2. Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1969) 115; subsequent references will be cited as “*CP*” parenthetically in the text.
3. Information provided by Thomas Merton Center Director Paul M. Pearson (email to the author, April 27, 2017).
4. Thomas Merton, *No Man Is an Island* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1955) 203.
5. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961) 136; subsequent references will be cited as “*NSC*” parenthetically in the text.
6. Thomas R. Kelly, *A Testament of Devotion* (New York: HarperOne, 1992) 67-68.
7. Thomas Merton, *A Thomas Merton Reader*, ed. Thomas P. McDonnell (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1962) ix-xi; rev. ed. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Image, 1974) 16-17.