Like Liquid into an Empty Glass: Thomas Merton, John Cage and the Gospel

“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news” (Mk. 1).

The Trappist monk Thomas Merton (1915-1968) wrote the following words in the middle of the twentieth century. “The rain I am in is not like the rain of cities. It fills the woods with an immense and confused sound. It covers the flat roof of the cabin and its porch with insistent and controlled rhythms. And I listen, because it reminds me again and again that the whole world runs by rhythms I have not yet learned to recognize, rhythms that are not those of the engineer.”

“I came up here from the monastery last night, sloshing through the cornfield, said Vespers, and put some oatmeal on the Coleman stove for supper. It boiled over while I was listening to the rain... The night became very dark. The rain surrounded the whole cabin with its enormous virginal myth, a whole world of meaning, of secrecy, of silence, of rumor. Think of it all that speech pouring down, selling nothing, judging nobody, drenching the thick mulch of dead leaves, soaking the trees, filling the gullies...”

“What a thin thing it is to sit absolutely alone, in the forest, at night, cherished by this wonderful, unintelligible, perfectly innocent speech, the most comforting speech in the world...”

Merton quotes the 5th century Syrian mystic Philoxenos (d. 523) who writes, “You too go out into the desert having with you nothing of the world, and the Holy Spirit will go with you. See the freedom with which Jesus has gone forth, and go forth like Him.”

This is one way of summarizing the spirit of Mark’s Gospel. In this Gospel Jesus frequently retreats like this to the wilderness for periods of prayer and renewal. He seems to instinctively know that as in the story of Noah, God’s covenant is not just with human beings but with “every living creature,” and all creation (Gen. 9). Of the four gospels Mark uses the most compact, direct and simple language. He speaks in a forceful, abrupt, and repetitive way that is difficult to appreciate in translation.

My friend the New Testament scholar Herman Waetjen says that it is written in the “Hellenistic Greek of the uneducated lower-class residents of the rural countryside.” More importantly he points out that Mark is not writing a biography of Jesus. This is not intended to be a documentary record of the past (in the style of someone like Ken Burns).

Instead this is an aesthetic literary creation. Like a novel it forms its own world. Although Mark uses materials from the first century (places, ideas, political relations, forms of life), his world is not the past world. In many respects it is more connected to us and to our story than an ancient history could be. It is a story of us.
Mark writes about Jesus coming from an obscure, even despised region and being baptized by John in the Jordan River. The heavens are ripped apart. A voice says, “you are my son, the beloved, with you I am well-pleased.” This spirit immediately drives Jesus into the wilderness where he is “with the wild beasts and the angels minister to him.” John is arrested. Jesus returns to the Galilean countryside and gives his first sermon.

In this symbolically important statement Jesus says four things: 1. The time is fulfilled, 2. The kingdom of God has come near, 3. Repent, 4. Believe in the good news. Let me talk briefly about what each of these statements might mean today.

1. The time is fulfilled. This week the people around me are at a breaking point. They are talking to me because they have had enough. They are sick of being at home, of working remotely, of having businesses and schools closed. They desperately miss seeing their friends and loved ones. A few people this week told me the same thing, “I just can’t take this anymore.”

And to us Jesus says, “the time is fulfilled.” Whatever it is that you enjoy about this strange COVID time, make the most of it, because soon it will be a faded memory. Whatever you want to accomplish during these days, whoever you wish to connect with by phone, do it now because these days will not last. We’re not going back to the way it was before and it certainly won’t be like this for long. This is true of any historical moment and is especially the case right now.

2. The kingdom of God has come near. During his lifetime, the Roman Catholic church banned the theological writings of the Jesuit priest and scientist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955). He died on Easter Sunday in 1955. Only ten people attended the funeral and only one person accompanied his body to the graveyard. No one yet knew that he was one of the most profound religious thinkers of the twentieth century.

Yes, he had made arrangements to have his ideas published after his death. Teilhard believed profoundly that God lies absolutely near at the heart of everything and that the world addresses us by name. He writes, “without leaving the world, plunge into God.” He prays, “O God… in the life which wells up in me and in the matter which sustains me, I find much more than your gifts. It is you yourself whom I find.”

According to Teilhard Jesus helps lift the veil, so that we can see, “the transparency of God in the universe.” We can see God in physical matter. Teilhard writes about what he calls “ex-centration” where we leave behind our ego, become free of our own individuality, so that we can find ourselves in others and in the whole world. Over the years my experience of the nearness of God keeps growing stronger. I love the Lord. I feel God’s presence in prayer.

3. Repent. Jesus asks us to repent. The Greek word is metanoia and it means literally to change your mind, to alter the habits which shape how you think about the world and perceive it. For me a person doesn’t repent and then start experiencing the goodness of God. God’s generosity always comes first and then we move toward God in love and this motion changes our way of thinking.
In the 1940’s a blizzard made traveling next to impossible for the avant-garde composer John Cage (1912-1992) and the dancer Merce Cunningham (1919-2009). They performed in Chicago, parked their car in Sacramento flew to Arizona, then Denver, returned to California to pick up the car and from there drove through ice and snow to Columbus, Ohio. They arrived just in time for the performance and went right up on stage without even resting.

The people at the party afterward told them how miserable their work was and asked how they could possibly devote their lives to this. Cage himself wondered why do we go to such trouble for something that people don’t even enjoy. And then ten years later he received a letter from someone who had been at that exact performance who thanked him and said that it had changed his life.

Cage once said, “Thoreau got up every morning and walked to the woods as though he had never been where he was going to, so that whatever was there came to him like liquid into an empty glass. Many people taking such a walk would have their heads so full of other ideas that it would be a long time before they were capable of hearing or seeing. Most people are blinded by themselves.”

4. Believe in the good news. The good news is that we don’t have to blinded by ourselves. Like Jesus we can be fully God’s children. And when we are consciously in God – the world, every person and creature in it, will be transfigured miraculously to our sight.

The Dalai Lama tells the story of a king who invited the Buddha and his friends to lunch. On the way, the Buddha passed a beggar who praised the king and talked about the magnificence of the palace. After many courses of rich banquet food it came time for the prayer that would dedicate the karma of the meal. But the Buddha, instead of dedicating the merit to the host, to the king for his generosity, the Buddha chose to bless the beggar outside.

When his senior monk asked what he was doing. The Buddha replied that the king was proud of his kingdom, but the beggar was exceptional because he was able to rejoice in the king’s good fortune. Can we believe in God’s good news so sincerely that we take joy in others’ blessings? Can we begin to realize that we ourselves have and are enough?

My friends during this holy Lent I dare us to not be blinded by our self. Let us live by the rhythms in the world that we have not yet learned to recognize. Let the rain be something new to us. Let whatever is come to us like liquid in a glass.

The time is fulfilled. The kingdom is near. Repent. Believe in the good news.

“You too go out into the desert having with you nothing of the world, and the Holy Spirit will go with you. See the freedom with which Jesus has gone forth, and go forth like Him.”

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2 Ibid., 604. Philoxenos of Mabbug.