

“Mercy within Mercy within Mercy”: Thomas Merton’s Merciful God

By Michael Plekon

At the very end of *The Sign of Jonas*, Thomas Merton has God speaking to his prophet and friend, Jonas.

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. I have forgiven the universe without end, because I have never known sin.

“What was poor has become infinite. What is infinite was never poor. I have always known poverty as infinite: riches I love not at all. Prisons within prisons within prisons. Do not lay up for yourselves ecstasies upon earth, where time and space corrupt, where the minutes break in and steal. No more lay hold on time, Jonas, My son, lest the rivers bear you away.

“What was fragile has become powerful. I loved what was most frail. I looked upon what was nothing. I touched what was without substance, and within what was not, I am.”¹

This is one of the most beautiful passages in all of Merton’s writings, these intimate words of God to Jonas/Jonah. The figure of Jonah, from the beginning of the Christian tradition, has been an image of death and resurrection. A lesson from this book, including the Song of Jonah, is one of the ancient readings for the Easter Vigil. But the sign of Jonah was a very personal verbal icon for Merton.

He chose *The Sign of Jonas* as the title for his very first volume of selections from his journals. The book covered the period he documented from December, 1946 through July 4, 1952, the night described in the last pages when he was on fire watch at the Abbey of Gethsemani. It was a time of important events and changes for Merton, or Father Louis, his religious name. There was his solemn profession of vows in the Cistercian order, then Abbot Frederic Dunne’s death and the election of the new abbot, James Fox, as well as his own ordination to the diaconate and finally to the priesthood on May 26, 1949.

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It was a complicated time for a complicated man. It was a period of depression and confusion for Merton. He experienced profound doubt about his ability and future as a writer. But it was also a time of his discovering peace in solitude, and the desire for solitude in order to read, write and pray would become critical for him in the years to come, in a growing and busy monastic community. Merton also acquired a sense of confidence in his writing, and this collection of journal entries was important in this accomplishment. Not only was he encouraged by the old and the new abbot to write, his gifts for teaching and his insight resulted in his appointment as the master of the student monks and their principal instructor.

Merton titled various sections of the collection of journal entries: “Journey to Nineveh,” then several with reference to the main events of the period – “Solemn Profession,” “Death of an Abbot,” “Major Orders,” “To the Altar of God,” but then “The Whale and the Ivy” and “The Sign of Jonas” and “Fire Watch, July 4, 1952.” Merton’s own introduction documents the challenges of his own life in these years, but also those of a community bursting at the seams with people trying out the monastic life, almost three hundred jammed into buildings intended to accommodate little more than a third of that number. There is a strong dose of Merton’s early monastic fervor through the journals. Absent are what would mark his later years – passion for the civil rights and anti-war movements, frustration with the stagnant and counterproductive aspects of monastic life and his clashing with both his own abbot and higher-up superiors in the Order. His profound interest in Eastern Orthodoxy, in the Asian religious traditions, in the challenge of a life with God in the midst of the twentieth century – all were yet to come. Rather, in *The Sign of Jonas*, there are the joys, the difficulties and many, many details of monastic life as lived by the Gethsemani Trappists in the years before the Second Vatican Council. It was a stark, harsh life, with hours of formal liturgical prayer in the church. The fasts were severe, the hours of manual labor long, the food scarce, and a sign language was used for essential communication, ordinary conversation not being permitted. Not too many years later Merton would begin to write critically about the lack of solitude and time for reading and prayer in the highly organized life of his monastery, along with the need for a return to simplicity and humanity found in monasticism’s earliest days and practitioners. He would also realize that much of his idealization of this life and demonization of the world he had left behind was a delusion, perhaps a projection of his own self. It was, for sure, a perspective out of which he fortunately passed to a more open, loving embrace of people and the world.

And yet, *The Sign of Jonas* contains rich reflections on seeking God and one’s identity and meaning in life, as in early books like *Seeds of Contemplation*² and *No Man Is an Island*.³ “*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. I have forgiven the universe without end, because I have never known sin.*” These moving words of God to Jonah offer us something powerful. For Merton, the sign of Jonas was a very personal image, one of death to his former existence and a new life as a monk. But it was not an image for himself only. He made it clear that every one of us “is signed with the sign of Jonas, because we all live by the power of Christ’s resurrection.” All of us travel toward our destiny, our Nineveh, “in the belly of a paradox” (*SJ* 11).

But notice we are not alone. Like Jonah, we too try to run and hide from God. We try to get as far away as we can. Yet to do so is impossible. We cannot get away from God. It is Merton’s God that I want to put before us during this season of Lent, when we are reminded to “return to the Lord our God,” who is “gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love”

(Joel 2:13). Merton's God is the One also recognized by so many holy women and men – Julian of Norwich, Dorothy Day, Mother Teresa and Mother Maria Skobtsova, Sergius Bulgakov and Henri Nouwen: not the fearful Judge but the familiar, intimate God who creates all out of love, who is “love without limits,” holding everything as one might clutch a small hazelnut in one's hand. This God is inextricably tied up with Jonas, with each of us, God's creatures, God's children. The fragile becomes powerful, what was cruel becomes merciful: “Mercy within mercy within mercy.”

As the theologian and priest Sergius Bulgakov noted, God needs us and the world. God wanted to go out of himself in love, to live in love with all of us, all of creation.⁴ There is an abundance, an extravagance, almost a foolishness or absurdity, as Paul Evdokimov said, in God's overshadowing Jonas, Merton and all of us with mercy – mercy within mercy within mercy.⁵ God forgives the universe without end. God knows no sin. Poverty, simplicity of heart, is infinite. Wealth, even ecstasies of spirituality, are prisons. God loves what is weak, frail, nothing.

What a contrast with how we think, feel and live, we who are created in God's image and likeness. We make mansions and fortunes. We seek prestige and power. We could hardly imagine lowering ourselves to be poor, fragile, but that is where God is. And that is where my true self, your true self also is. Sisters and brothers like Dorothy Day, Mothers Teresa of Calcutta and Maria of Paris knew that. This message of the prophet Jonah, of the monk Thomas Merton, is a gift, not only for Lent and Easter but always. As Merton wrote, “For me to be a saint means to be myself. Therefore the problem of sanctity and salvation is in fact the problem of finding out who I am and of discovering my true self.”⁶

God is searching for us, always living in us. We can run from Nineveh or New York in a ship, a plane, a project, and never achieve any distance from God. I end with Merton again, in his *Asian Journal*, from a talk he gave in Calcutta in October, 1968, not long before his death in December of that year:

The only ultimate reality is God. God lives and dwells in us. We are not justified by any action of our own, but we are called by the voice of God . . . to pierce through the irrelevance of our life, while accepting and admitting that our life is totally irrelevant, in order to find relevance in Him. And this relevance in Him is not something we can grasp or possess. It is something that can only be received as a gift. Consequently, the kind of life that I represent is a life that is openness to gift; gift from God and gift from others.⁷

Throughout his writings, Merton came back over and over to the theme of the abundant, limitless mercy of God. Observers like Fr. James Martin, SJ have seen this same vision dominant in the sermons and statements of the new bishop of Rome, Pope Francis.⁸ Many are surprised at such insistence on divine compassion, forgiveness, even patience. Yet, for all the other important gifts Merton made over the years in his writings, from his distinctive take on the presence of God everywhere to the innumerable possibilities of prayer and the struggle to find one's true self, I believe his vision of God as mercy is at the heart of all his insights and binds them together. And we never lose the need for this vision – “Mercy within mercy within mercy.”⁹

1. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1953) 362; subsequent references will be cited as “SJ” parenthetically in the text.
2. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1949).
3. Thomas Merton, *No Man Is an Island* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1955).
4. Sergius Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 2002).
5. See Paul Evdokimov, “God’s Absurd Love and the Mystery of His Silence,” in *In the World, of the Church: A Paul Evdokimov Reader*, ed. and trans. Michael Plekon and Alexis Vinogradov (Crestwood NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001) 175-94.
6. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961) 31.
7. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone, Brother Patrick Hart and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973) 306-307.
8. See <http://americamagazine.org/content/all-things/pope-francis-and-mercy>.
9. The original version of this essay was presented as a homily at Corpus Christi Church in New York City on March 10, 2013, at a Sunday Lenten Vespers. Co-sponsored by the parish and the Corpus Christi Chapter of the International Thomas Merton Society, it was part of the year-long commemoration of the seventy-fifth anniversary of Thomas Merton’s baptism in the church on November 16, 1938.