

# The Forest Is My Bride

by Bill Graves

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You, my faithful and beloved congregation, may or may not recall that this is my third sermon to you this month of April. Let me review where we have been: On April 6, we considered what our 7<sup>th</sup> Principle, reverence for the interdependent web of all existence, teaches us about our societal addiction to imported, processed, oily, starchy foods that comes from monocultures built on fossil fuels and chemicals.

On April 13 we considered what I suggested was a calling to bring an infusion of love into the human tragedy that is going on at our doorsteps here in Skagit Valley. I'm talking, of course, of immigrant rights and the prospect of our joining the New Sanctuary Movement.

These are what I might classify as "exhortation sermons" and I think there is a place for them in our faith, which does call us to justice and mercy and co-creation of life, and we are justifiably proud of that.

That having been said, I promise, no more exhortations this year.

I know we all come here in some ways broken in spirit, and tired, and alone. We have health worries and money worries and relationship worries. We weep about a war without end, economic prospects that frighten us, an environment coming unraveled, national policies built on deceit, arrogance, torture, etc. etc.

Sometimes these days, most of the time, we need our churches to help us cope, to give us faith, and hope and joy. I have said it before and I'll say it again: How now must we live? By holding the suffering of our world in one hand (we are not true to our faith if we ignore it or brush it under the rug). But let's not forget to hold joy and awe and beauty and gratitude in the other hand.

And just "taste and see", in the words of Liturgy professor—"taste and see"—the world of a spiritual master I admire unceasingly, Thomas Merton. If you taste and see for a while and your eyelids feel heavy, that's OK too, except you may miss some of the images Frances will show you.

Before we enter into this banquet I need to tell you a little about Thomas Merton who clearly was one of the most influential theologians and social critics of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. From 1941 until shortly before his death in 1968, Merton was a contemplative, Trappist Monk at a monastery called Gethsemanie located in rural Kentucky. During those 27 years at Gethsemanie he authored 65 publications including "The Seven Story Mountain", a sort of spiritual autobiography that sold nearly 2 million copies.

He served as spiritual mentor or director of an amazing assortment of people including Dorothy Day, the Editor of the Catholic Worker, Rev. Daniel Barrigan, Joan Baez, Boris Pasternak and Martin Luther King, Jr. He wrote extensively on the subject of non-violence and was a leading critic of both the Nuclear Arms Race and the Viet Nam War.

During the last decade of his life Merton became immersed in Buddhism. Imagine that a Catholic Monk as a leading teacher of Buddhism! Actually, Merton is not the only one. In 1968, he made an extended pilgrimage to Asia where he had long conversations with both the young Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh. On May 8, 1968, at age 53, he was electrocuted by a faulty wire in his hotel room in Thailand. On the May 8 that's coming up in a few days there will be a service in Seattle honoring the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Merton's death.

One of the least well known areas of Merton's work is: His nature writings. Merton described himself

as a spiritual brother of Henry Thoreau, whom we UU's hold a special place in our heart for. Merton recognized before almost anyone else the imperative of developing of a new sense of the sacredness of the natural world. Doing that is "The great work", of our era according to another Catholic priest I greatly admire, Thomas Berry.

So I would invite you to become comfortable now, and go on a voyage with me: To experience the natural world through the eyes of the mystic, to enter Merton's world for a few minutes. I invite you to "taste and see."

Merton often uses the term "God" as synonymous with the mystery and wonder of the natural world. I like that symbolism: "The mystery and wonder of the natural world". There is no dualistic separation here between the spiritual and the material world; never an image of God as "something out there", separate from the natural world, except to invite human dominion over it.

Here is a rich metaphor from the prose-poem, *Hagia Sophia*. Rosemary, I know, will recognize Hagia Sophia as the Greek for Holy wisdom:

The Sun burns in the sky like the Face of God, but we do not know her countenance as terrible. Her light is diffused in the air... by Hagia Sophia. We do not see the Blinding One in black emptiness. She speaks to us gently in ten thousand beings, in which Her light is one fullness and one wisdom. Thus, she shines not on them but from within them. Such is the loving-kindness of Wisdom.

In 1958 Merton was permitted to move out of the Cloisters and live alone in a hermitage in the forest within the monastery grounds. If you wondered where the title of my sermon came from, well, its from this passage in Merton's journal:

...I live in the woods out of necessity. I get out of bed in the middle of the night because it is imperative that I hear the silence of the night, alone, and, with my face on the floor, say psalms, alone, in the silence of the night.

...the silence of the forest is my bride and the sweet dark warmth of the whole world is my love and out of the heart of that dark warmth comes the secret that is heard only in silence, but it is the root of all the secrets that are whispered by all the lovers in their beds all over the world.

I would venture to say that what he heard in the murmurings of wilderness were the sweet songs of living things whose choirs he joined as a solitary monk offering a psalm of glory and thanksgiving.

And that brings me to birds, a corner of the natural world that Merton and I and Frances [and Roger and Barbara Johnson] are particularly fond of. Birds are surely jewels of the natural world. In his journals I counted over 35 species that Merton identified, described and relished in. They were his beloved neighbors at his hermitage.

The life of a monk at Gethsemanie is rigorous and includes a ritual singing of "lauds", which is the chanting of psalms in praise of the morning done at around 4:00am.

In his hermitage Merton experienced a different kind of lauds. Here is a lovely 1960 journal entry:

The other Thursday, the *full meaning* of lauds said against the background of waking birds and sunrise.

At 2;30—no sounds except sometimes a bullfrog. Some mornings, he says *Om*—some days he is silent. The whippoorwill who begins his mysterious whoop about 3 o'clock is not always near....

The first chirps of the waking birds—"le point vierge" of the dawn, a moment of awe and inexpressible innocence, when the Father in silence opens their eyes and they speak to Him, wondering if it is time to "be"? He tells them, "Yes." Then they one by one wake and begin to sing. First, the catbirds and cardinals...and some others I do not

recognize. Later the song sparrows, wrens...etc. Last of all doves, crows.

With my hair almost on end and eyes of my soul wide open I am present, without knowing it at all, in this unspeakable Paradise and I behold this secret, this wide open secret which is there for everyone, free, and no one pays any attention....One to his farm, another to his merchandise. Not even monks shut up under fluorescent lights, face to face with the big books and the black notes and with one another, perhaps no longer seeing or hearing anything in the course of festive Lauds. [end quote]

In many of his writings Merton speaks of a “hidden wholeness” of all things, which is “Wisdom, the Mother of all, *Natura naturans*... the gift of my Creator’s Thought and Art ....” He felt this sacred essence best in creatures operating in an uncorrupted, wild, state. Here is an example:

Yesterday I was sitting in the woodshed reading and a little Carolina Wren suddenly hopped on to my shoulder and then on to the corner of the book I was reading and paused a second to take a look at me before flying away.... There is something you cannot know about a wren by cutting it up in a laboratory and which you can only know if it remains fully and completely a wren, itself, and hops on your shoulder if it feels like it.

People who watch birds and animals are already wise in their way.

I want not only to observe but to know living things, and this implies a dimension of primordial familiarity which is simple and primitive and religious and poor. This is the reality I need, the vestige of God in His creatures. And the Light of God in my own soul. [end quote]

I always thought there was something spiritual about bird watching. Merton saw incarnate in birds nothing less than pure revelation from sacred scriptures. Again from his journal:

The warblers are coming through now....Watching one which I took to be a Tennessee warbler. A beautiful, neat, prim little thing—seeing this beautiful thing which people do not usually see, looking into this world of birds, which is not concerned with us or with our problems. Watching those birds was a food for meditation or a mystical reading. Perhaps better.

In the following passage about another species of warbler we can get a sense of what he means by the “contemplative experience”:

In the afternoon, lots of pretty little Myrtle Warblers were playing and diving for insects in the low pine branches over my head, so close I could almost touch them, I was awed at their loveliness, their quick flight, their hissings and chirpings, the yellow spot on the back revealed in flight, etc. Sense of total kinship with them as if they and I were of the same nature, and as if that nature were nothing but love. And what else but love keeps us all together in being.

Birds are a constant source of spiritual renewal. At a time when he was despairing about events happening in the peace movement, Merton had this encounter:

While I was standing there quails began to whistle all over the field and in the wood. I...thought sure they were all dead for there have been hunters everywhere. No, there they are! Signs of life, of gentleness, of helplessness, of providence, of love. They just keep on existing and loving and making more quails and whistling in the bushes.

Here are a few more of Merton’s neighbors as described by him:

An Indigo Bunting flies down and grasps the long, swinging stem of a tiger lily and reaches out, from them, to eat the dry seed on top of a stalk of grass. A Chinese painting!

[W]anting to read and think but not being able to because of the sweetness and fullness of time which is too good to lose....The sun, the Summer Tanager (I finally connected the song with the bird), the clear morning, the trees, the quiet....

Meadowlark sitting quietly on a fence post in the dawn sun, his  
Gold vest—bright in the light of the east, his black bib tidy,  
Turning his head this way, that way. This is a Zen quietness  
Without comment.

It is called Steller's Jay. Does the jay know whose bird he is? I doubt it. A marvelous blue.

It is interesting how Merton's reflections on birds often mirror situations preoccupying his mind. Although a cloistered monk in principle, Merton was not immune from romantic and erotic fantasy. Sandwiched between 1966 journal passages filled with alternating joy and anguish over a love affair he was having with a student nurse he met in a Louisville hospital, he describes himself "surrounded by lovemaking bumblebees", and:

Today I saw this male [cardinal] sitting beautifully on a fence post  
post singing joyfully—but at first no female. Then I saw her flying  
in and out of a big rosebush in the hedge, where the new nest is, and  
was happy.

A year earlier at a time when his journal is focusing on SAC planes and the bomb, he describes Crows as: "[V]ociferous and self-justifying, like humans. They are not two, they are many. They fight each other and the other birds, in a constant state of war."

In his final years seeds of ecological outrage were growing in Merton. Hear his angst upon realizing that poison he put out to deter ants killed some Tufted Titmice:

The other day there was a beautiful whistling of titmice—and now [some] lay dead on the grass under the house, which may well have been some fault of mine....What a miserable bundle of foolish idiots we are! We kill everything around us even when we think we love and respect nature and life. I hope I at least can learn, but in the light of Holy Week I see, again, all my own internal contradictions....

I will close with the following excerpt from Merton's journal:

Sermon to the birds, "Esteemed friends, birds of noble lineage, I  
have no message to you except this: be what you are: be *birds*.  
Thus you will be your own sermon to yourselves!"

Reply: "Even this is one sermon too many!" [end quote]

So I say to you, Esteemed friends, people of noble lineage, I have no message to you except this: Be what you are: Be compassionate with yourselves, and each other, and your neighbors the birds. And, then you will be your own sermon to yourselves.

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#### **SOURCES:**

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