

The French twentieth-century working-class mystical Catholic writer of books of prayer, Fr. Michel Quoist, wrote “We are not God, we are simply the image of God and our task is gradually to discover that image and set it free.”

Our first hymn is Green #291, “O Holy City, Seen of John”

Our first reading is from the Revelation of John 22:1-5

“Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb ² down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. ³ No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and God’s servants will serve the Lord. ⁴ They will see God’s face, and God’s name will be on their foreheads. ⁵ There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever.”

A second reading comes from Margaret Fell’s words in the 1694 introduction to the publication of *The Journal of George Fox*:

“And George Fox said, “Then what had any to do with the Scriptures, but as they came to the Spirit and gave them forth. You will say, Christ saith this, and the apostles say this; but what canst thou say? Art thou a child of Light and hast walked in the Light, and what thou speakest is it inwardly from God?” This opened me so that it cut me to the heart; and then I saw clearly we were all wrong. So I sat me down in my pew again, and cried bitterly. And I cried in my spirit to the Lord, “We are all thieves, we are all thieves, we have taken the Scriptures in words and know nothing of them in ourselves.”

And finally, from Robert Barclay's *Apology* of 1676, "This is the great work of the Scriptures, and their service to us, that we may witness them fulfilled in us, and so discern the state of God's spirit and ways upon them, by the inward acquaintance we have with the same Spirit and work in our hearts."

Our second hymn is red #278 "Brother James Air"

Joys and Concerns---then music interlude

Dear Friends—Let us seek to discern and read the deep sacred texts of all our lives and hopes and hearts, the scripture of our current, ongoing revelation. We pray to know the sacred blessings of empathy in this world that can also carry us beyond our single experience through the mediation of Light within and all around. May the comfort of the sacred talismans and touch stones of faith and hope and love in the world, through nature and shared lives and silent contemplation connect and complete us. We are grateful for the visions and the visionaries of inner Light, of settled being, of startled insight. Bless us not only in the days and times to come, but in the full moment of every overflowing now, with one another as witnesses, as prophets, as shepherds, as lambs. Amen.

Our third hymn is green book #287 "God Who is Father, Mother"

Children may now head downstairs for time with each other.

Message: Dear Friends, Our opening quotation from Fr. Michel Quoist that "We are not God, we are simply the image of God and our task is gradually to discover that image and set it free" captures so well that sense that we are both in the world, but not fully of the world. We are capable of a perspective beyond our direct experiences, and that perspective can be directed towards the divine. In a similar sentiment Quoist also wrote that God speaks through life and therefore we ourselves add a page to the Gospel

every day. It is interesting that the French Catholic church released him from parish work and named him an itinerant priest for youth in Le Havre so that he was in a sense commissioned to answer that of God in those that he found so readily in the gritty streets of the city as well as on his trips to Latin America during the founding days of liberation theology.

One element of that theology was an effort to make real God's justice here on earth in real places and times, just as we sang in the opening hymn. The hymn was commissioned by Henry Sloane Coffin in 1907 when he thought the social gospel movement needed more hymns directly about modern life and social needs, the calls of justice. So, we started this morning with the calls in both directions, out of this world to the divine image and into this world to use that blessed insight as the model for action. One also could think of it as calls into our sacred core, the Inner Light, the part we call that of God in each of us, and then out into the world. In those senses, I invite us all to live in the middle of the light, the middle of God's call, the center of Light. As St. John describes it in his Revelation, it is a place, a sacred city, that needs no sun or moon or even lamp, because God has let there be Light. In fact, that statement about needing no sun nor moon nor lamp is repeated several times in Revelation, and so even the Bible itself is bound with Light at both the beginning and the end. A Light that fills the universe externally, everywhere, and a Light that guides and fills every individual.

I think that sometimes, and for some people, the idea of being in touch with inner light, of receiving a message in meeting or having a mystical experience sounds like a very rare and wonderful and profound experience, and it is. But answering that of God in all that you meet, in the world in which you walk, is also a profound and constant joy, a revelation. I hope you all have or can recall days of wonder. Where each moment and object and detail has an appreciable magic. We can also live in a constant sacred presence,

in a mystical noticing of God around us in a snowy field, a burning bush, a tree, and still also have the rare experience of deep mystery that is special, but also somehow the same. It is a blessing to be among Friends, to come to meeting to share that wonder, because in the language of our day to day culture, these observations of wonder and beauty and appreciation can sound odd or silly or frivolous or naïve or appropriate only for poetry in a busy and cynical time.

I used to play squash regularly with a faculty colleague who was an expert in German philosophy of the heavy and dark sort. What was a pleasure was not only having a friend who played at the right level for a good workout and a balance of wins and losses, but one who had a penchant for discussing the deep questions of life and its meaning. As part of our friendship, I could not resist teasing his seriousness to some degree. However, I also distinctly recall the day we were talking about a hike or a walk and I mentioned that the earth was always speaking, and he interjected “no, it is always singing!”, and I expected to look over at him and see a mocking or teasing face, and it wasn’t that. He wanted the earth to sing, both for me and for him, perhaps through me for him. We often are told to let our lives speak, but we can also speak out loud, and that too can touch another. It is another example of the Light, the sacred living in between, both within and around. And for a philosopher, the meaning of life is central to thought, as is the purpose for action. In a society that is very individualized, it is certainly quite natural for us to try to find the meaning and purpose for our own lives and circumstances, our vocation or calling. But there is also the bigger and more comprehensive overall meaning of all Life.

These are the scriptures to which Margaret Fell and Robert Barclay, two early articulators of what Quakerism or being part of the Religious Society of Friends might mean, were referring. The mystical traditions of God speaking directly to and through individuals has always been part of the Judeo/Christian and

Muslim traditions of the Book, with prophets and saints and constant calls to mindfulness and prayer and inspirations of art and architecture that extend through the contemplative practices and religious orders of all of the world's religions, the shamanistic attention to the messages of the universe. In all traditions, the common is ever interweaving with and displacing the official. So, in the vision John has in revelation of the holy city, a natural source of food, the tree of life feeds all and heals all, the water is abundant and pure, in a city! And the healing is also between nations, is Peace, because of Light within. Keeping scripture without, only outside, in a museum or a book, a shrine or script rather than a natural presence, gives no space for us, for life. We need direction and comfort and understanding in this world now, in our lives day to day, and the ability to offer them to others here among Friends and in the world. It is not a simple thing, to just say, "excuse me while I go get some divine revelation", but one of the main ideas of our method as Quakers is that the place we can go to do that is in silence, together, and within. Deeply centered, but in community. That we certainly may appreciate art and texts, even draw from them, but we don't want to get too distracted by books, rituals, symbols, holidays that we think the sacred is in those things. We are writing the true and sacred scriptures of our times, in context, each one of us in our particular space and time and community, to which we must pay attention if we are to bring peace and justice to our world, to know our fate, our future, God's love. We live, Life itself is, between the beginning and the end, bounded by Light on all sides and within, in the center.

Closing hymn is green #152 "This is Holy Ground" and in the second verse, recognizing that the blessing of which we speak and the sacred calling we feel has no gender, please use the alternate word of "God" to replace every use of the pronoun "he".

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