

THE MONASTIC WAY

Joan Chittister

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Art by Ansgar Holmberg



The Monastic Way is for people who lead a busy life, but long for greater spiritual depth. Each month in 2017, Joan Chittister invites you to explore words of Scripture that stretch the soul and help you to construct your world differently—to discover how God dwells among us in surprising forms.



It is God who made the
universe, in beauty, dignity,
and holiness.

Psalm 96

A Universe of Holiness

Spring was achingly robust that year. Everything, it seemed, had burst into riotous presence at the same time, in a single big bang of life.

The bushes were bursting with new growth. The sun was on fire above us. And over there, next to the new Arts building, an entire swath of campus had come ablaze with tulips. “Look at all those tulips,” my companion said. “I’ve never seen so many in one place.” I remember blinking, trying to wipe away the blur in my eyes. “Where?” I said.

It was a strange moment, an even stranger conversation. “How did you not see those?” the other person said. “Because,” I answered, “It’s more like me to see one thing at a time.”

For me, at least, it is the ability to see the one peculiarly distinct thing in a myriad of its copies: one tulip in a bed of them; one disinterested person in a party full of people; one gesture of support in a sneering crowd.

It is in the singular that I see God.

For many people, nature is the face of God. For me, too, in many places and times—on the lake at night, in the mountains at dawn, in the depth of fresh snow, when the gardens and streets are a riot of flowers. But not always. It’s when I find the qualities of God in people that I am most stunned, most overwhelmed by the presence of God in our midst.

Then, I begin to realize that God is nothing but a sacred magnet, an irresistible force, a composite of goodness so rare, so impacting that it stops the breath in me and empties me out. Then, because of this moment, I can start life fresh and new again.

The great grace of life is that the moments of Godness—the sacred moments—are plenty if we will only allow ourselves to see them, to recognize what is behind the apparent, embedded in the dark, overlooked in the fog of distraction in which we each live.

It is the face of an old woman who did not turn sour despite life’s batterings. I have a recent picture of her on my desktop as I write. She lived in the apartment across the hall from us when I was a grade school child. She has eyes like crystals, the picture proves to this very day.

She talked to me when I was lonely, with no one to play with and no way to find anybody. I thought of her as the motherhood of God.

She was gentle with me after I was scolded soundly for jumping on the backs of trucks that drove through our alley. I found in her the Merciful God.

She remembered me and called me by name when I knocked on her door again just a few years ago, after climbing the stairs to see if she was still there, still alive. I knew she was the God who waited for me to come back.

The sacred overwhelmed me as I watched a nurse take the hand of my dying friend and promise her painlessness on the last part of her journey to God. I knew in her the healing God.

The sacred engulfed me when friends stood by me in my grief, silent signs of ongoing life and endless love. I saw in them the patient understanding of God.

I saw the grief of God on the face of a young man whose wife could not conceive and who mourned himself for not being able to do anything to comfort her despite his own despair.

I saw the boundless sacred joy of God when that same young couple, after one fruitless attempt after another to have a family, finally surrendered to another kind of real parenthood—adoption—and almost immediately got pregnant themselves.

I have known the raging disappointment of God in people who have given their lives to balance the scales of life that tip against the poor, the sick, the abused and still trusted their determination to go on trying.

Indeed, the God of endless beauty, of cleansing pain, of numbing grief, of sad and wounded love or wild and boundless joy is embodied in the universe.

Life, I have begun to realize, is simply about learning to see God here, in the sacred embrace of this life, so that I will be ready and waiting to go on to the next.



Saturday, July 1: Because God is everywhere, everywhere is a glimpse into the God of creation.

Sunday, July 2: Everything is sacred. Everything is a message about life to us. Everything is meant to grow us beyond the mundane and into the essence of life.

Monday, July 3: Walk around a block in your neighborhood today. Ask yourself of everything you see, What of God am I meant to see or understand by this? That simple walk will be enough to wake up in you another whole part of life.

Tuesday, July 4: Now walk down a street in a section of town you've never walked in before. What did you see about God here; what did you learn about life here that you had not been so conscious of before?

Wednesday, July 5: Now walk through a part of your town that is most rundown, least cared for, little developed. Where is the face of God, the voice of God for you in this place? Remember as you go the insights of Wendell Berry who says, "There are no unsacred places; there are only sacred places and desecrated places."

Thursday, July 6: The whole notion of being able to separate the sacred from the secular is itself heresy. Everything is of God. Out of everything some good can, must, will come if we will only take the time to extract it for ourselves.

Friday, July 7: There is no such thing as a waste of time. There is only the question of what I am doing with it in the here and now. What do I learn from it; what do I think about during it; what sacred space do I take from it to stretch myself beyond the boredom of the ordinary? Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, "To the poet, to the philosopher, to the saint, all things are friendly and sacred, all events profitable, all days holy, all people divine."

Saturday, July 8: We have to get over waiting for miracles. We must begin to believe that every day is a miracle. And then, somehow, to learn from it enough to make it so.

Sunday, July 9: The reason we miss so many miracles in life is because we have not been taught to recognize them. It is a miracle when someone apologizes for something. It is a miracle when our own hearts soften toward someone. It is a miracle when we begin to realize that we are meant to learn something new about life every day.

Monday, July 10: The ordinary is one of life's greatest teachers. When we finally absorb the sacredness of the ordinary, happiness comes.

Tuesday, July 11: What we call dull is the inability to recognize that in the humdrum lies the call to holiness. Holiness is the willingness to see what needs to be done so that life can be better for others, and making the commitment to do it.

Wednesday, July 12: A young boy in one of our major cities saw that homeless people were sleeping on the streets without blankets or coats. So he organized both his parents and his friends to collect and distribute those things to the street people in need of them. That was a miracle. "To pay attention, this is our endless and proper work," the poet Mary Oliver teaches us.

Thursday, July 13: The central question in life is whether or not we look for the needs around us and then do a miracle or two of our own to alleviate them where we are, as well.

Friday, July 14: The real problem is not the dearth of miracles in our time. It is that we take our miracles for granted. We rest in the work of others and forget that we were put here to add to it before we do. Elizabeth Barrett Browning writes, "Earth's crammed with heaven, and every common bush afire with God, but only he who sees takes off his shoes. The rest sit round and pluck blackberries."

Saturday, July 15: It's not so much what's around us that does or does not harbor the making of a miracle for us. It's what's in us that makes us able to see miracles or to make them happen.

Sunday, July 16: The sour-hearted cannot hear the call of miracles around them. They hear only their own complaints within them. Then they wonder why life is so cruel to them. "The heart," Bhagawan Nityananda says, "is the hub of all sacred places. Go there and roam."

Monday, July 17: When we discover that it is our own blindness that is blocking the miracles of life for us, we cease cursing the darkness. We begin to take responsibility for being a miracle for somebody else.

Tuesday, July 18: Learning is a lightning rod route to the world of the miraculous. Study the leaf and discover the miracle of life before your eyes that you have never seen before. "The eyes see," Robertson Davies wrote, "only what the mind is prepared to comprehend."

Wednesday, July 19: Sometimes it is death that best opens our eyes to life. Therefore, thank God for the miracle of death that makes us conscious of every sacred moment in life.

Thursday, July 20: Try to appreciate what you have before it's gone. More than that, you will have realized that the God who made miracles for us today has made the future, too.

Friday, July 21: The spiritual error of life is to assume that miracles happen only when it's over. On the contrary. As the mystic Mechtild of Magdeburg wrote, "The day of my spiritual awakening was the day I saw all things in God and God in all things."

Saturday, July 22: Life is not about sin and suffering. It is about learning to recognize the miracles of life so we can learn, with confidence, to expect the miracles that come when life here ends.

Sunday, July 23: All of life speaks to us. If we would only listen. If we can only learn to hear. Meister Eckhart says, "Every creature is a word of God." We need only to pay attention, to practice the *lectio* of life, to get the message.

Monday, July 24: In times of stress it is difficult to hear the voice of God in the song of sorrow. And yet, it is precisely when we begin to listen for the melody under the chords that we can finally understand the entire arrangement. As Hildegard of Bingen says, "There is the music of Heaven in all things."

Tuesday, July 25: Life smothers us in the banal and the routine. We lose our sense of wonder and our taste of heaven. We get immersed in ourselves at our most functional level. No wonder we miss the glory of what it is to be alive. "To survive," Chrystos says, "we must begin to know sacredness. The pace which most of us live prevents this."

Wednesday, July 26: The sacred in us grows out of the depth of search for God everywhere. We are not the ones waiting for God. God is already with us. God is waiting for us to realize it and rank the rest of life accordingly.

Thursday, July 27: The great mystery of life lies in the fact that it is through the created world and all its creatures that we come to know God. It is a matter of the eyes, the mind, and the heart. It is not a matter of books and footnotes, as enlightening as these may be.

Friday, July 28: God does not reason with us. God beguiles us, seduces us and magnetizes us with the miracles of living until finally we begin to see that life is really bigger than life alone. As A.W. Tozer puts it, "We might be wise to follow the insight of the enraptured heart rather than the more cautious reasoning of the theological mind."

Saturday, July 29: The role of religion is to make us conscious of the sacredness of life. But the things of religion—feast days, fasts and rules—are only meant to get us in touch with the holiness of life. They are no substitute for it.

Sunday, July 30: To live life fully depends on whether we cultivate the consciousness of the sacredness of it or not. "The whole of life," Teilhard de Chardin writes, "lies in the verb 'seeing.'"

Monday, July 31: To experience the sacredness of life is to understand that everything is a sacrament, everything in life invites us to a deeper experience of what it means to love life and to learn from it—all of it in all its forms. As Albert Einstein wrote, "There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle." To be happy, choose the second option.

— FOR A LISTENING HEART —



It is God who
made the universe,
in beauty, dignity,
and holiness.
Psalm 96

*Spend a few minutes
with this quote and
then ask yourself:*

- What do these words say to me? What feelings or memories do the words evoke in me?

- What do these words say about my spiritual journey?
- My journal response to this quote is:

JOAN CHITTISTER is an internationally known author and lecturer and a clear visionary voice across all religions. She has written more than forty books and received numerous awards for her writings and work on behalf of peace and women in church and in society. www.joanchittister.org

ANSGAR HOLMBERG, a Sister of St. Joseph of Carondelet, is an inclusive artist whose paintings and illustrations appear in numerous periodicals and publications. They can be found in parish communities, retreat centers, schools, and homes across the US, Canada, in Europe and Australia.

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Joan Chittister:
Benetvision

355 East Ninth St. • Erie, PA 16503-1107 • T: 814-459-5994

F: 814-459-8066 • benetvision@benetvision.org

Benetvision is an outreach of the Benedictine Sisters of Erie, PA.

www.joanchittister.org