

WHAT LIES BENEATH . . .

Even though I have pictures of my garden from previous years, I am always surprised by the variety of flowers that seem to magically pop up in the spring. In winter when the ground is hard, strewn with decaying leaves and tangled branches it is difficult to remember that not too long before it was alive with brilliant reds, yellows, purples, and blues and scented with the sweet aroma of lilacs. And yet, as the ground begins to thaw, my garden always wakes up and comes back in splendor.

How does that happen? What goes on underground that brings about this rebirth? Those questions come to my mind each Lent as we are invited to go underground and let go of what is seen and spend more time in that inner space where we meet God.

If you're like me, you start Lent with great intentions and plans to deepen your relationship with God, but these often end up like New Year's resolutions that get dropped by mid January. I'm hoping that this year can be different—that I can be more patient than I was as a child planting seeds deep in the soil in a flower pot and expecting blooms the next day.

As I'm getting older I'm realizing that just like the unseen workings beneath the dirt that go on in the gray winter days are probably the most important ones in the life of a flower the seemingly unproductive time of silence and contemplation also is likely the most important time for one's spirit.

How to get to what lies beneath beyond my day-to-day relationships and activities and the ever-present draw of my cell phone and the daily news, I'm learning, is not a problem to be solved but an invitation to be answered. To be honest, I'd rather work out the answer to a problem than say "Yes" to an unknown territory where God is in control and I'm not. I like control, knowing what's going to happen and planning ahead. Yet I find that the invitation is both enticing and scary at the same time.

I remember that my Dad embarked on a journey like this one Lent guided by the writings of Thomas Merton, the Trappist monk and mystic who answered the call to solitude and in his cloister found God revealing God's self and the beauties, wounds, and cries of the world.

This Lent, I'm thinking about following my Dad's example and letting Merton's *Thoughts in Solitude* be my guide to the places deep down inside where I can just "be" with God. More than 50 years after his death, I find Merton a trustworthy guide.

Even sensing the invitation he says, tells us that we are already there "The only thing to seek in contemplative prayer is God; and we seek Him successfully when we realize that we cannot find Him unless He shows Himself to us, and yet at the same time that He

would not have inspired us to seek Him unless we had already found Him. And it is a real and personal encounter. Hard as it is to convey in human language, there is a very real and recognizable (but almost entirely indefinable) Presence of God, in which we confront Him in prayer knowing Him by Whom we are known, aware of Him Who is aware of us, loving Him by Whom we know ourselves to be loved. Present to ourselves in the fullness of our own personality, we are present to Him Who is infinite in His Being, His Otherness, His Self-hood. It is not a vision face to face, but a certain presence self to Self in which, with the reverent attention of our Whole being, we know Him in Whom all things have being"

And that presence can be with us even when we are in the midst of our busy days.

"As soon as man is fully disposed to be alone with God, he is alone with God no matter where he may be—in the country, in the monastery, in the woods or in the city. As the lightning flashes from east to west, illuminating the whole horizon and striking where it pleases... the infinite liberty of God flashes in the depths of that man's soul, and is illumined. At that moment he sees though he seems to be in the middle of his journey, he has already arrived at the end. For the life of grace on earth is the beginning

of the life of glory. Although he is a traveler in time, he has opened his eyes, for a moment, in eternity."

Many times along this journey when life feels overwhelming and confusing and I find it hard to know the next right step to take, I find myself identifying with this well-known prayer from Merton:

"My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone."

And so, this Lent I hope to be patient and trust that my willingness to journey into the soil of my soul and rely on God's grace at work tending the process of growth and letting go within me will result in the sweetness of God's new Easter life.

~~ Angela Anno

