

Wednesday of the Third Week of Advent

I offer you a few words, again, from Nina Mac Laughlin's essays this Advent in *The Paris Review* online. The movie she references *Into Great Silences* has been shown here a few times in my movies and faith offerings. It is an awesome movie filmed inside the Carthusian Monastery, Chartreuse in France.

I saw in one Easter Season in San Francisco thinking it would be a sleeper where I could get some rest, the silence was stunning, I did not sleep.

"We're one week away from the solstice and until then, darkness will inhale a little more light each day. But its lungs are filling. It'll take twenty-six seconds of light today, twenty-two tomorrow, shallower pulls until it can take in less than one second on the solstice itself. Remember: winter hasn't even started yet. Has it snowed where you are? Did you sled as a child? Do you remember the last time you sled? Winter invites a turning in, a quieting, an upped interiority, but this time around we're coming on months of it already—will we be able to find our way back out? Time will tell. For now, here we are. An assertion—a reminder—of aliveness. Or as Issa puts it:

Here,
I'm here—
the snow falling.

The snow falling. Here, falling, crystal quiet. It's a quiet that's captured in the documentary *Into Great Silence*, about a Carthusian monastery in the French Alps. The film is close to three hours long; there are almost no words. The camera focuses on a large farmhouse sink. The light that washes in through the window is snow light. A large metal mixing bowl tilts to dry. The camera closes in. A droplet collects on the lip of the bowl. It swells. It rides the ridge down and hangs off the edge of the bowl. It is white and blue and gray, a translucence, a fluidity. The tension begins to build. You come to know, with a startling amount of pain, at some point this drop will fall. It will drop to the basin and splash into hundreds of tinier drops. When will it fall? The suspense becomes awful. You want it to fall, to relieve you, to let you feel like you can take a full breath again. But also, look at how beautiful it is, the pearl bottom, its perfect, uncorrupted smoothness. A shape that takes on the feel of time. With its beauty comes the agitation, the confusion, the uncomfortable

suspense of its end. And you want it to end, *drop, please*. And you want it to last forever, to swell and swell so it spills through the screen, absorbs you into it, swallows the whole world, warm and full, with space enough for everything and light like no other light. The drop hangs between its two intervals, its accumulation and its end.

It falls. Something inside collapses. On the lip of the large metal bowl, another drop takes form. Tiny drops collect to make a larger drop, together in isolation and silence. Like the monks of this monastery who devote their time on this earth to prayer.

“The primary application of vocation is to give ourselves to the silence and solitude of the cell,” states Carthusian Statute 4.1. Not every moment though. The film shows one wrenching, beautiful scene: a group of the monks on the mountain, eight of them, white-robed figures ascending a steep and snowy hillside, stony crags above them, camera at a distance, we see human forms but not faces.

A meditative stroll, maybe. Get the blood moving in the winter months. But look, two monks sit down and slide down the sweep of mountain! And then more, some sitting, some skidding down on their feet, two almost crash into each other, they tumble, roll down the hill in the snow in their white robes. Down they go! And all you hear is their laughter and their whoops. Crying out as they pick up speed, the child in all of us, hands letting go.”

If you would like to borrow the DVD just email me nedgan@yahoo.com or call me at 865.8956x304