

Thanksgiving Eve
The Rev. Ian Burch
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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I think I may have had a legitimate revelation the other day. I say this sort of jokingly, but there's a chance it might be true.

Let me set up the scene for you. Our Sunday morning adult education class has been a little thin in terms of content the last few months. The priest who typically runs that program has had a number of increased family responsibilities, and so instead of bringing in teachers and speakers, he and I have been trying to just make sure that we have good video series in place for people who want to learn more about their faith. This isn't ideal, but in this strange pandemic world, I think we can agree it's better than nothing.

What this means is that about every other Sunday, after church I have to run over to the adult education room and make sure to press play on whatever the latest video is that we're watching. We have learned about lots of things watching these videos, but lately, they have had a decidedly interfaith focus. We watched several hours on the life of Muhammed last month. Folks seemed to like it, so we added a video this month about the life of the Buddha.

I didn't have much interest in the topic, but then, as I was sitting in the class, learning alongside everyone else, I was struck by how powerful the video was. We learned about the ways the Buddha tried to think really hard about the problems of human suffering and to try to create a world with more peace and more compassion. Many of the particulars were, of course, different, but I could not help but hear in the video some of the same longings that I notice among Christian people.

But here, I think, is where I found myself having a bit of a revelation. As the video was coming to a close, the interviewer moved from asking historians about the life of Buddha and started to ask Buddhist monks about their lives and how they understood the teachings of the Buddha.

Three or four of the monks shared some of the ways in which the teachings of Buddha impacted their lives, and then there were some shots of the monks deep in their meditative practices.

As I sat there watching them, I could not but be moved by the way that peace seemed to shimmer off their faces. Eyes closed, lips relaxed, shoulders open and low, head slightly bowed. In that moment, I could actually feel their peace begin to extend to me, even through a television screen. And, more than that, I could feel inside of me a longing for that kind of peace.

In our country, and I am afraid to say, sometimes in our church, we are so quick to let ourselves be swept up in the business of it all. The haste, the chaos, the production, and consumption. It is a kind of addiction. I know that Christianity has a long and beautiful history of centering prayer — monasticism, mysticism, Lectio Divina, the great silences in prayer. Christians have access to these places of peace. But for some reason, for me anyway, it took listening to a monk from a different faith to remind me of the importance of accessing the stillness in my own faith.

These last few weeks, my mind has been anything but still. The news has felt like sandpaper against my equanimity, and I have been walking around alternately tense or grieving or tired or annoyed. I would not say that I have done a very good job making sure that I was living in prayer and making time for listening sessions with God. Something happens to me — and maybe to you too — that when life becomes more complex and difficult, that is when I remember to rely on the spiritual practices I have been taught less, even though it is exactly those times when I need to be relying on them more. And just when the stress of life seems to overwhelm, here we are, in God's house, being still in the candlelight. This is a little slice of the heaven Jesus preaches about.

When I read tonight's gospel about the lilies and grasses of the field, I could so clearly see the face of that monk — head bald, body wrapped in brilliant saffron robes — who seemed to have learned one of the lessons of my own faith that I so often have trouble with.

Thanksgiving is, of course, an act. We like to go around the table and ask people what they're grateful for. And I think there's nothing wrong with that. But I also wonder if thanksgiving can be a posture that we adopt toward this life. Peace in our heart and gratitude for this one, strange and precious life that we are fortunate to live. What would it be like to take this parable of Jesus about the futility of worry and to apply it robustly to our lives? I know that my mind can go in a million directions, and even more so around the holidays. But I think today I am being called into a different kind of priest.

There is a wonderful concept that comes out of the Reformation — the priesthood of all believers. It's kind of a corrective to the overwhelming power that priests had in the middle ages. The priesthood of all believers says that we are all priests who are lucky enough to know Christ. I wonder, though, if, in addition to all being priests, we could also all be monks today — heads bowed in prayer, foreheads relaxed and without worry — as we ponder the teaching of Jesus that tells us to relax into the will and the oneness of God.

I see this Christian life as a constant invitation from the Christ into a relationship of endless compassion, peace, and gratitude — of thanksgiving. It just is a little ironic that it took a Buddhist this week to teach me about the teachings of Christ. Happy Thanksgiving. Amen.