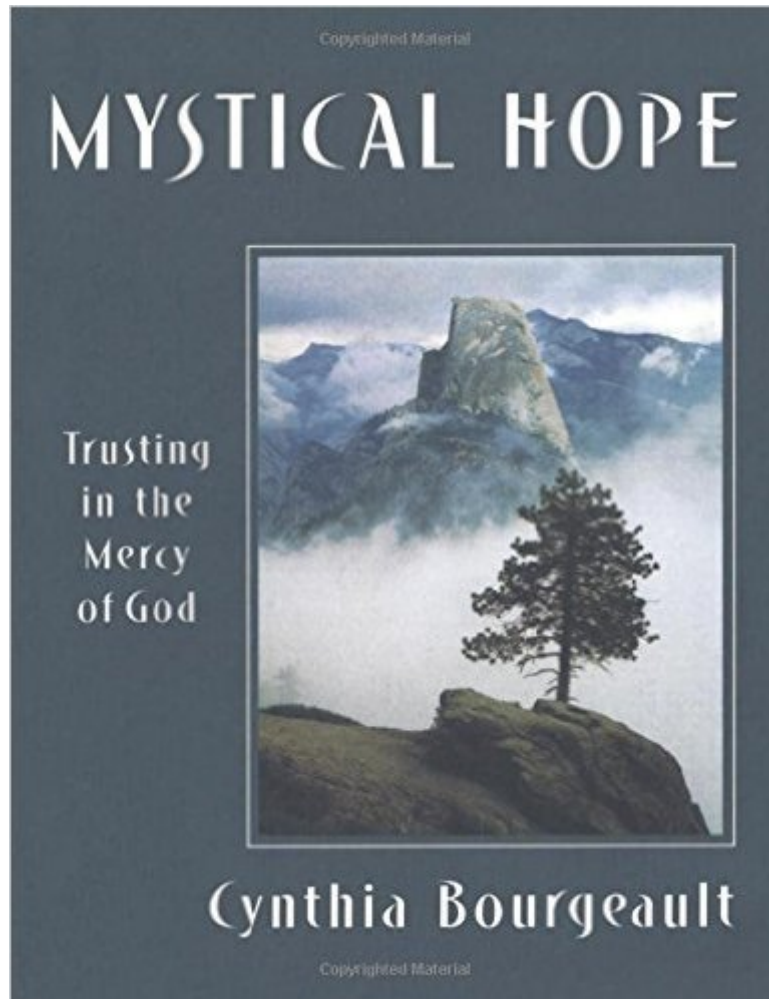


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Mystical Hope: Trusting In The Mercy Of God (Cloister Books)



Synopsis

In five interwoven meditations, *Mystical Hope* shows how to recognize hope in our own lives, where it comes from, how to deepen it through prayer, and how to carry it into the world as a source of strength and renewal.

Book Information

Series: Cloister Books

Paperback: 120 pages

Publisher: Cowley Publications; 60390th edition (March 28, 2001)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1561011932

ISBN-13: 978-1561011933

Product Dimensions: 5.1 x 0.4 x 7.1 inches

Shipping Weight: 4.8 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.6 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (44 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #231,265 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #54 in [Books > Christian Books & Bibles > Christian Denominations & Sects > Protestantism > Anglican](#) #60 in [Books > Christian Books & Bibles > Christian Denominations & Sects > Protestantism > Episcopalian](#) #159 in [Books > Christian Books & Bibles > Theology > Mysticism](#)

Customer Reviews

At a time when people are yearning for good news, Cynthia Bourgeault's new book invites us to find our way to the hope that does not disappoint or fail. In our usual way of looking at things, hope is tied to an outcome: "I hope I get this job" or "I hope my mother gets well." The Bible introduces us to a different kind of hope that has its source not in events but in the mercy of God, a lifeblood of compassion connecting our heart to God's heart and the heart of all creation. In five interwoven meditations, *Mystical Hope* shows us how to recognize this hope in our own lives, where it comes from, how to deepen it through prayer, and how to carry it into the world as a source of strength and renewal. About the author: Cynthia Bourgeault has studied and taught in a number of Benedictine monasteries in the United States and Canada. An Episcopal priest, she is well known as a retreat and conference leader, teacher of prayer, and writer on the spiritual life.

Simply to profit from reading two books by one unique author is Good News to me! It often happened with Sister Joan Chittister, Karen Armstrong, Sir Walter Brueggemann, John Claypool,

Barbara Brown Taylor and William Sloan Coffin. At least two things about Sister Cynthia's writing impress me: Her neatly awesome, appropriate quotations before each of her five chapters: One, "What you dare not hope for--that is what He gives you." (Frere Roger of Taize`Community); Two, Psalm 103:11--"We swim in the mercy as the endless sea." ; Three, "The Notion that God is absent is the fundamental illusion of the human condition." (Thomas Keating) Four, "In the middle of winter, I discovered in myself an invincible summer." (Albert Camus) In the strongest Chapter Five "Hope and the Future" she employs powerful sub-titles. Then as "Inner and Outer" she writes keenly about "contemplative prayer" being equal to "piercing prayer" which she experienced in a deeply personal relationship with Snow Mass priest, Rafe as they followed Thomas Merton. Under her next sub-title she explores as "the visionary insights at the heart of Christian mysticism" emerging from Jacob Boehme, Merton, Julian of Norwich, Hildegard of Bingen and Barbara Brown Taylor! These examples of her smoothly flowing style capture my imagination and I continue to see this as her strongest book! Accolades to one superb Lady... Retired Chaplain Fred W Hood

This is a beautifully written book, in poetic language, describing what the author calls the magnificence of the "Mercy of God" i.e. the place of Mystical Hope, that lies beyond all our petty, little hopes--a place accessible to all of us: "Deeper than our sense of isolation and separateness is another level of awareness in us, another way of knowing." My one criticism of the book was that it did not develop more fully the theme of mystical hope, as applied, for example, to those living with incurable illness, or in hospice. It seemed, rather, to just toss out the idea, and then jump into the [albeit] wonderful descriptions and details of meditation. Nevertheless, this is a five star book!

I used this book in a college Mysticism course and the students raved and thanked me for a book that reached them and that they savored. *Mystical Hope: Trusting in the Mercy of God* (Cowley, 2001) is an inviting, warmhearted, and reflective introduction to Christian mysticism by Reverend Cynthia Bourgeault, an Episcopal Priest who leads contemplative prayer retreats across the U.S. and Canada. She is a genuine contemporary mystic and minister who is not only deeply immersed in and committed to her Christian tradition and its contemplative practices, but has sincerely and richly studied Sufism (Mystical Islam). For years Cynthia Bourgeault worked closely with Centering Prayer's promoter Father Thomas Keating. *Mystical Hope: Trusting in the Mercy of God* is a short book running only 106 5" x 8" pages, including its beautiful opening epigraph, a poem by St. Symeon. But it is a deep text that holds the potential to intersect into one's contexts of faith and practice with long-lived potency. Her exploration of the meaning of mercy in the Hebrew Bible,

English, Latin, Hebrew, and French fruitfully yields a vivid evocation of "mercy" as "a fierce, bonding love," and "the power that binds one person to another in the covenant of hearts" (p. 25) Bourgeault outlines a vision of "mystical hope" that as "a life of its own" goes deeper than a response to positive outcomes, is found in a space of "presence...an immediate experience of...communion..." and characterized by "an 'unbearable lightness of being' from within." (pp. 9-10) And Bourgeault brings us to its shores in many ways, especially in two evocations of the Voyage of St. Brendan who in sailing to find the Land Promised to the Saints, finds it not by navigating in the physical world, but rather, at the moment his "inner eye opens." (p. 18) She describes a hope that runs deeper than "external circumstances and conditions," (p.9) a hope that springs and sings. And Bourgeault skillfully extracts the subtle shifts of meaning that Scripture attests to of that mystical hope. Turning to Habakkuk, she takes us through his passage from an experience of barrenness to his shift into rejoicing and proclaiming that he has found a "spring to his step" (p.6), or as Habakkuk expresses this, "...He [God] makes my feet like that of a deer." (Habakkuk 3:19) Bourgeault then turns to Jesus sitting with the Samaritan woman at the well, promising her that his water will be a "spring...of eternal life." And then she reminds us that underneath the devastating sufferings of Job ran such a "singlehearted yearning to see God face to face" (p.8) that Job voiced the ultimate "triumphant statement of mystical hope." (p.9) As Bourgeault writes, Job "sings" (p.8) these words (that George Frederich Handel so beautifully set to music): "I know that my Redeemer lives, and...yet in my flesh I will see God." (Job 19:25-26) Bourgeault's "mystical hope" is not something you receive as it is the place from which you stand, the ground of being itself. Mystical hope, as Bourgeault's examples from Jesus, Job and Habakkuk model, is the context in which one can create what people ordinarily think of as "hope." Bourgeault's book beautifully balances teaching with illuminatingly illustrative autobiographical anecdotes. One most memorable and helpful is that of her experiences navigating boats in the Maine fog as a metaphor matching and illuminating such mystical motifs as the "Cloud of Unknowing" and the "Dark Night of the Soul." Her refrain, and especially its setting in her fog-navigation anecdote, underscores that contemplative prayer as the practice of hope is to "sit in the presence of God," and maintain "inner availability to God" sounded deeply in my soul. Bourgeault emphasizes themes and examples from Thomas Merton, Thomas Keating, Father Bede Griffiths, Meister Eckhart, and Jacob Boehme. I found her occasional quotes from contemporary Sufi master Kabir Helminski and Thomas Merton's writing on Sufism also appealing. Her quote from Gerald May that the universe runs on the energy of agape (p. 30) deepens her meditation on "the Mercy." Her selection of this passage from Kabir Helminski is inspired: "Whoever makes all cares into one care, the care for simply being present, will be relieved of all care by that

Presence, which is the creative power." (p. 12) And Bourgeault integrates ideas and images from the new physics with balance, justice, and discernment. But the main thrust of her offering here is decidedly and devoutly Christian and when she makes her comparisons, she affirms the distinctive beauty and richness of the Christian revelation -- so much so that her descriptions of Centering Prayer and lectio divina, sacred contemplative reading (p. 60) should inspire people to follow up by reading and practicing the teachings in her book devoted to the practice of Centering Prayer.

Bourgeault's accounts of meditation give enough detail to motivate many to follow the intimations of how simply (even if not often easily) one might establish this beautifully simple meditation practice of Centering Prayer. In a beautiful passage on Gethsemani (Matt 26:52-53), she writes: "When Jesus, the living truth, yielded himself faithfully into the Mercy; when he who was the Mercy dissolved into the Mercy, in that exact moment the Mercy became one with the body of Christ. From then on and ever hereafter the Mercy wears a human face -- and that is the face of Christ." (p. 74) Her excellent chapter on death, "Dying Before You Die," presents an accessible understanding of apocatastasis ("the final restoration of all things 'at the end of time' "). Bourgeault writes of an experience of her daughter riding a ferry that became for her a vivid personal moment of apocatastasis. Experiencing the scene as a moment in which "it was all present already, all contained in a huge, stately now" led her to see how "all our times are contained in...the Mercy itself." (pp. 63-64). It was her discovery that one can taste of apocatastasis in everyday moments in which "all is fulfilled" when one stands in the Mercy. A train riding image she culls from Tolstoy's novella *The Death of Ivan Ilych* on the shift Ivan Ilych experiences of accepting his own death is also illuminating. (pp. 68-69) Another motif that traces through these pages is one Bourgeault calls "the body of hope," (p. 14, 32 et al.) a lesson she learned from a special teacher she had -- and continues to learn from even after death -- a Benedictine monk named Raphael Robin ("Rafe"). Bourgeault's earlier autobiographical account of her journey with Rafe (*Love is Stronger than Death*) (Lindisfarne Books, 1997) is truly a book that echoes in one's consciousness, a book on a Platonic love and mentoring relationship that continues after the death of one of the two people! Adapting poetic images inspired from physics, she describes what her mentor Rafe meant by the "body of hope" as a coherent field" and "a luminous web." Taking a term the Greek patristic fathers used, she calls it "the intelligible universe." (p. 32) In *Mystical Hope* Bourgeault is probing -- and maybe even provoking -- us to look in our faith for a hope deeper than one by which one "can fix anything," and instead to find the "ground of hope" (p. 59). This ground of hope rests as she points out in a realm literally "beyond the mind" -- metanoia (p. 53). I appreciate her evocation and improvisations on Jacob Boehme's term for mercy as "warmheartedness," (*Barmherzigkeit*), which she elaborates as "that 'river of God' running like the

sap through the tree of life. Another important motif Bourgeault sustains in these meditations is Merton's term for entering mystical unitive experience, which he described as le point vierge (the virgin point.) In one sense, as a point vierge, Bourgeault's book can be a sweet, warm and fast read; at a deeper level, the "ground of hope" (p. 70) and its evocation of the "protecting nearness" (p. 59), it calls one repeatedly back to reflect on its meditations more deeply and contemplatively.

This small book is one of several publications by the author, an Episcopal priest. Followers of spiritual leaders Thomas Merton, Thomas Keating and others who encourage the practice of centering and meditative prayer will appreciate this small but very thoughtful exposition of the importance of mercy and a return to a more contemplative life. I think I will be rereading this practical yet inspirational book for many years to come.

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