



OUR DAILY BREAD
Resources for Spiritual Questers

From This Time Onward

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Readings

Isaiah 7:10-14

*Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, saying, Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test. Then Isaiah said: 'Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.'*¹

Luke 1:26-45

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.' But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.' Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' Then the angel departed from her.

*In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.'*²

¹ New Revised Standard Version Bible: Anglicized Edition, copyright 1989, 1995, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

² Ibid.

Isaac and Samuel and Jesus, et. al.: unlikely and little noticed births which led to the transformation and salvation of the people, despite the “powers that were.” Like the story of Sarah and Hannah and others, the story of Mary is the story of power being taken from the rulers and politicians, from the military strategists and the financial experts, and restored once again to the individual. It is a story which reminds us, and teaches us, that power lies not in structures or institutions, not in traditions or laws, but in the gifts of the spirit. Our true identity, our worth as human beings, lies not in what the world thinks of us, but in who we are in God’s eyes.

Isaiah: in the midst of conflict, at the height of battle, a woman conceives.

Luke: in the midst of oppression, at a time of national uncertainty, a woman conceives.

Us: in the midst of our personal and national crisis, with our divided will, our limited understanding, our impatience and fear, in the midst of all this, a new life is forming within us; new possibilities for being fully human are seeking to be born in us. It’s the new life promised by God, which flows to us as we practice repentance, and create a “sacred space” within us into which God can descend and dwell. From this day forward, if we are willing.

I mentioned repentance, an essential theme for both Lent and Advent. John the Baptist, with his call to repentance, is the long awaited response to God’s promise of salvation. He is an image of the mind rendered awake, vigilant and active, casting a bright light on all that had been hidden. After all, genuine repentance is not a matter of beating yourself up or feeling worthless (“worm theology”), but a matter of examining ourselves and identifying those motives which are not compatible with spiritual life. This kind of repentance does two things simultaneously: it clarifies our spiritual condition for us, and opens us up to higher influences. As we gain insight into our state, we become free to turn to God; and as we turn to God, we are raised up to further truths about ourselves. Repentance leads us out of the cave of our own illusion and

misunderstanding; it is a difficult, uphill climb that we must do freely, as if of ourselves. John the Baptist represents the difficulty of this effort.

However, once we emerge into the light, we realize that it is also warm; once we encounter the truth about ourselves and about God, we realize that it is also loving and compassionate. It is at this point that we are in a position to move from being active to being passive; from labor to rest; from self-sufficiency to the reception of a higher power. Mary represents the heart rendered soft and pliable, responsive and receptive to the warmth of God's healing love. As John represents the bright light of Divine Truth (judgment), Mary represents the warm mercy of Divine love, which forgives us and brings us to new life. She corresponds to the new openness that is possible for each of us; a deeper, more real and productive connection to God. (Let's remember that the God of love is also the God of life, creation, growth, renewal, healing, and new beginnings. With God, all things grow, and life is increased.)

Swedenborg is quite consistent in his interpretation of Mary. In the language of correspondences, Mary represents the natural or material body which enabled the Lord to enter into human experience. (Cf. mater, and "mat" in many languages, also connected to matter and material.) She was that "point" through which spirit entered into nature, and the Divine into the human condition. The sexual metaphor of human procreation is no accident, but stems from the organic nature of correspondences. Throughout scripture, the relationship of female to male corresponds to the relationship between the human and the Divine; as well as the relationship between our body and spirit or mind. Mary thus signifies a being who is wholly other than God (e.g., embodied, powerless), and yet perfectly suited for God, as male and female are wholly other than *and* perfectly suited for each other. As the body is fully responsive (that is, passive) to the activity of the spirit, so Mary (representing the body) is fully responsive, not only to the act of conception, but to the Lord's will throughout his life.

Swedenborg would have had little use for the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception (formulated in 1875), asserting that, were Mary not fully human, the Lord's experiences of

temptation and victory would not have been genuine, lasting, or effective. So, through Mary, the Lord enters into an authentic human experience.

It is from this notion of Mary as the external, human form through which the incarnation takes place, that she is also linked with the Church: the bride of Christ, the feminine counterpart to the masculine Divine, no more or less necessary for the wholeness of creation. Like Mary, the church constitutes the human, outer, visible manifestation of the Divine. Mary and the Church: that “being” in which the spirit flows through and becomes visible in the world; where the effect of God’s activity upon us is seen.

This imagery is easier to understand when we remember Swedenborg’s repeated assertion that the church is not an institution or organization. In its highest sense, the church refers to the individual in whom God dwells; one who has entered into a covenantal relationship with the Lord, and now lives from different motives and beliefs. We are the church when we embody the spiritual qualities represented by Mary; qualities of humility and innocence, obedience and reception. These are the qualities that transformed or rendered “Mary” into a vessel able to receive and embody the Divine. “Mary” thus represents anyone who, through faith and commitment, has so formed themselves as to be a suitable vessel for the Divine.

Now, as attractive as these qualities are to us on one level, they are not always endorsed by the world at large. Qualities of obedience and humility, innocence and emptiness, passivity in the presence of God, acquiescence and even vulnerability to God’s will. They seem in fact to run counter to the qualities which are so valued and promoted, not only in our culture, but in human nature itself. These are the qualities of strength and autonomy, power and prestige, the courage of one’s conviction and the willingness to take control of one’s own destiny. These are in many ways quite different from the attitude which says, “Let it be to me according to your Word.”

Consider the issue of dissent and opinion in America today. Voices that call for a response that is balanced, reasonable, compassionate, and humble/contrite, are regularly silenced

or condemned. The call of innocence, forgiveness, and radical compassion (i.e., praying for our enemies), is dismissed as naïve, simplistic, and even cowardly or close to treason. But such voices will always be heard, especially from mothers, but also from all who value human life above the illusions of self.

It could be said that everything up to this point, up to Mary, was prologue. We all know that you can't be a little bit pregnant. Until the annunciation, the OT promise of salvation was still a matter of theory and speculation, still in the future, still unknown, still bidding its time, still waiting for fulfillment. But now, with the announcement of God's advent, everything begins to change. In this way, the annunciation stands as a spiritual symbol for each of us, describing a moment of acceptance and obedience to God which liberates and empowers us (cf. the Magnificat). What about us, and the lives we have lived till today, till this moment? Can we say with Mary, that "from this time onward, all generations will call me blessed"?

Once our hearts are finally touched by God, our lives are forever transformed. Once we glimpse even the smallest piece of reality, illusion no longer has the same hold on us. Once we see the light, the darkness, even when it returns, is no longer fearsome. Once we taste mercy, forgiveness and love and acceptance, then enmity and vengeance begin to wane. Once we can see through the devices of the proprium, the lower self, we are no longer content to fool ourselves or others. Once we see the sunlight of God's love and wisdom, we are no longer spellbound by the fiery glow of the self. And such a point, everything changes. Instead of despair, hope; instead of sorrow, joy; instead of conflict, harmony; instead of war, peace; instead of doubt, faith; instead of fear, love.

And so, this is how God descends to us, acts on us, recreates us, and transforms both our values and our beliefs. This is how the Lord's incarnation is realized, made real, in our own lives. Through faith, humility, innocence, obedience; through spiritual passivity, allowing ourselves to be affected and changed by the power of God's love. Mary's passivity, which

allowed her to hear, understand, and be obedient to God's Word, is an ideal image of the church, the people of God, made ready to receive the Lord.

Amen.