



OUR DAILY BREAD
Resources for Spiritual Questers

Woman, Child, Wings, Dragon, Earth

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Readings

Isaiah 42:5-9

This is what God the LORD says— the Creator of the heavens, who stretches them out, who spreads out the earth with all that springs from it, who gives breath to its people, and life to those who walk on it: “I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand.

I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles, to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.

“I am the LORD; that is my name! I will not yield my glory to another or my praise to idols. See, the former things have taken place, and new things I declare; before they spring into being I announce them to you.”¹

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Revelation 12:1-6, 13-17

A great portent appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. She was pregnant and was crying out in birth pangs, in the agony of giving birth.

Then another portent appeared in heaven: a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems on his heads. His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to the earth.

Then the dragon stood before the woman who was about to bear a child, so that he might devour her child as soon as it was born. And she gave birth to a son, a male child, who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron. But her child was snatched away and taken to God and to his throne; and the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, so that there she can be nourished for one thousand two hundred sixty days. [...]

So when the dragon saw that he had been thrown down to the earth, he pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child. But the woman was given the two wings of the great eagle, so that she could fly from the serpent into the wilderness, to her place where she is nourished for a time, and times, and half a time.

Then from his mouth the serpent poured water like a river after the woman, to sweep her away with the flood. But the earth came to the help of the woman; it opened its mouth and swallowed the river that the dragon had poured from his mouth.

Then the dragon was angry with the woman, and went off to make war on the rest of her children, those who keep the commandments of God and hold the testimony of Jesus.²

² Ibid.

Emanuel Swedenborg, *Apocalypse Revealed* §564

“But the earth helped the woman, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed up the river which the dragon had spewed out of its mouth.” This symbolically means that the multitude of reasonings flowing from falsities that followers of the dragon put forward come to nothing in the face of the spiritual truths rationally understood that are advanced by the [angels] of whom the New Church is formed.³

³ Swedenborg, Emanuel. *Apocalypse Revealed*. London: Swedenborg Society, 1970.

On June 19, we celebrated the birthday of the Swedenborgian church, or as it has called itself since its beginning: The Church of the New Jerusalem, or the New Church for short.

In many of his books, Swedenborg describes the beginning of a new church in both heaven and in the world, a church that is represented by the descent of the New Jerusalem, which we explored together a few weeks ago. At one point, Swedenborg recounts a vision of the Lord calling together his twelve disciples in heaven and sending them out to preach the gospel of this new church to the whole spiritual world, a message that says: the Lord God Jesus Christ reigns and that this kingdom will last for ages upon ages. Swedenborg tells us that this event occurred on June 19th, 1770 and thus those of us in this world who are inspired by the writings of Swedenborg celebrate this day, the day that a new thing that the Lord was doing was definitively announced. Thus, The New Church has always resonated deeply with the vision of the holy city Jerusalem descending from heaven.

Our identity, as a group of people, is tied to this vision of a city that represents the presence of God in the world, that calls forth a future in which all suffering will end, and issues to a challenge to us now to be vessels for its manifestation.

But, the vision of the holy city is the *culminating* metaphor of the book of Revelation, the shining and beautiful picture with which that book ends. The rest of the book is certainly less peaceful and this is because the way to the holy city will be full of challenges. It takes work, fearlessness, and persistence to bring a new consciousness into being. So while many believe the book of Revelation is predicting the return of Jesus to earth, the New Church sees the events in Revelation as a grand cosmic story, as a representation of spiritual events that have already happened, and are continuing to

happen in the hearts of every human being. The book of Revelation tells of the endurance and the courage that it takes to live a life of faith and love. Specifically, we can see this playing out in the image of the woman clothed with the sun and the dragon, which communicates to us the process, the danger and the hope of birthing a life of love into the world.

The woman clothed with the sun is a beloved figure in Swedenborgian theology. She represents what Swedenborg calls a new church⁴. Just to be clear, when we talk about church in this mystical context, we are not referring to a specific earthly organization but rather the manifestation of God's connection with people in this world, whatever form this is taking. This can take the form of secular organizations, it can take the form of informal groups of people, it can take the form of one person striving to unite wisdom and love in their lives, as well as groups gathering as we do in places of worship. So really, by a "new church" is meant all the various ways a new spiritual consciousness and reality is becoming manifested for humankind. The woman clothed with the sun represents this new hope and this new way of engaging with spirit, a new opportunity continually given to open up to the presence and guidance of the Lord.

The woman clothed with the sun also gives birth to a child. In Swedenborg's worldview, this child represents doctrine⁵. Doctrine can be such a loaded word but all it means is how a church, or a group of people, or even an individual, thinks about truth, and what we think that truth is calling us to do. But the child does not represent

⁴ Apocalypse Revealed §533

⁵ Apocalypse Revealed §543

doctrine as we might have come to understand it; dry, intellectual and disconnected. The child represents a doctrine of life, a living religion, brand new and alive, where faith and love together lead us into action. The woman needed to labor to give birth to this child, because when the truth moves us to act it can sometimes take a lot of work to figure out how that needs to show up in our lives. But when we do that work, and figure out how truth will be showing up for us, this effort to produce our own “doctrine of a life well-lived” is protected by God. And it is not so much that our own precious interpretation or construct of doctrine is protected, but rather, God protects our sacred capacity to see truth and let it move us into action, into a new way of living. God protects our ability to give birth to ever new interpretations of our context and how God wants us to show up in it, because this is how we grow, this is how we regenerate.

But giving birth can make us vulnerable, and so when the truth moves us to act, then the dragon is waiting to devour whatever we bring forth. The dragon represents worldliness and selfishness, our own and that of our environment or culture⁶. It represents materialism, selling out, entitlement, self-aggrandizement. And in the context of religion, it represents the idea of faith alone being able to save us, believing that faith should give us a free pass so we can do whatever we want. I think we are all familiar with the dragon part of ourselves and our world. We all have our shadow sides that just want to get our own way, that want to take the easy way, that believe we should not have to examine ourselves, we should not have to transform, we should not have to sacrifice ego, superiority, accumulation and power. We can see this everywhere. And in the dragon, we can see the kind of anger and hate that arises when we don't get what we

⁶ Apocalypse Revealed §714

want, we can see the ever-escalating defensiveness that grows out of the inability to reflect, and the unwillingness to be accountable.

So, the dragon attacks the woman, to prevent her giving birth to something new and hopeful and alive. As protection, she is given “the wings of a great eagle.” These wings represent spiritual intelligence and circumspection⁷, a God-given ability to see truth and to understand truth’s underlying order of love, to recognize and make connections, to see the story of God’s Word as a grand love story between God and humanity. The wings represent the opening up of that potential within us, this potential to feel moved by the beauty and truth of God’s ordering of the universe. Those wings take the woman away to the safety of the wilderness. Yes, the wilderness, as counterintuitive as that may seem. We can’t skip the wilderness. We all will need to wrestle with our dragon selves in our wilderness times, but we go into it with the protection of the Lord: our ability to rise above our circumstances in thought, to see God and God’s guidance, to see patterns and order and beauty and potential. The woman with her wings teaches us that being under the wing of God allows us to soar, to rise above our selfish desires, to rise above the dragon’s urgings. For us, when we can view our circumstances with God’s eyes, when we know that God is with us and will always endeavor to bring light to our darkness, this knowledge can sustain us, just as the woman is nourished in the wilderness.

There is one final character in our story: the earth - the good ground. If the woman is the possibility of new way, and the wings are a God-given ability to see truth and beauty, and the child is what the truth calls us to do, then the earth is the actual

⁷ Apocalypse Revealed §561

doing of it, the earth is *being* the church⁸. The earth is a life grounded and rooted in love, day by day. The earth is solid, the earth is real life, the earth is planting our flag, the earth is coming out of the wilderness and actually choosing to live out the wisdom of love in our actions. Swedenborg calls the earth here “spiritual truth rationally understood” but I would go further to say that it is truth understood so deeply that, in both a personal and organizational context, we are able to move beyond the life of the mind, where we tend to over-complicate and rationalize, and simply be the church, putting one foot in front of the other in service to what is good.

The earth teaches us about the power of love, about seeing the truth and grounding it, about establishing a connection to God in the living of life through each sacred moment. And as the culmination of our process, the earth provides the ultimate protection for the woman clothed with the sun and what she represents. The earth opened wide and swallowed the flood that issued forth from the mouth of the dragon.

The selfishness of the world always wants to sweep away the potential for transformation, and so the dragon tries to overwhelm the woman with a torrent of water. And haven't we all felt that we are going to be carried away by the world sometimes? The false assumptions, the expectations, the siren song of “more”? Life in this world whispers in our ear and suddenly we're floating miles away from where we thought we were. The dragon and his torrent of water is the crafty reasonings of the ego, that voice in our head leading us away from the grounding of love. The false thinking that sweeps us away from what we know is right⁹. But it is the earth—with its crystal

⁸ Apocalypse Revealed §285, §532, §564, Secrets of Heaven §8935

⁹ Apocalypse Revealed §563

clear understanding of the efficacy, the wisdom, of day-to-day loving action— that swallows the flood and saves the woman, and turns that great flood of falsity into the nothingness that it really is. The flood is in turn devoured by God’s truth for us, the truth of love.

So, these are our players: the woman, child, wings, dragon, and earth. They depict for us a story of what it looks like to try and manifest the New Jerusalem in our lives and in the world. God clears a space, creates an opening, calls us forth to give birth, provides protections. The world reacts, and our shadow selves, lash out in anger and put up obstacles. Yet, the dragon’s torrent of water is pure nothingness, as overwhelming and as powerful as it may seem.

The author Neil Gaiman wrote the following, paraphrasing G.K. Chesterton:

“Fairy tales are more than true: not because they tell us that dragons exist, but because they tell us that dragons can be beaten.”¹⁰

The truth of this story from Revelation is similar; it is scary and difficult to live a life of true spiritual transformation. The dragon is all around. But so is God. So is a woman clothed in the beauty of the sun, so is her fertility and her ability to birth something new, so is the preciousness of a new baby, so is the magnificence of soaring wings, so is the steadfastness of an earth that swallows all that would harm us. Dragons can be beaten because God will show up wherever they have the courage to call God forth. May it be.

¹⁰ Gaiman, Neil. *Coraline*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2008.

Amen.

1. Apocalypse Revealed #533
2. Apocalypse Revealed #543
3. Apocalypse Explained #714
4. Apocalypse Revealed #561
5. Apocalypse Revealed #285, #532, #564, Secrets of Heaven #8935
6. Apocalypse Revealed #563
7. Neil Gaiman, Epigraph to *Coraline*.