



“While Shepherds Watched Over Their Flock at Night”

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Ever since I was a little boy when I would hear the Advent and Christmas stories read aloud in Sunday worship and in Sunday School, the powerful themes of light and darkness were readily apparent to me. In Matthew 2, for example, the Magi travel from the East to Jerusalem and inquire of the people, “Where is the One who has been born king of the Jews? We saw His star when it rose and have come to worship Him.” (Mtt. 2:2)

We assume this means that those wise kings saw a special, heavenly star rise up before them after evening came. Or, think about the many times in the Advent story when God visits His faithful people at nighttime within a dream. We read also in Matthew that these same Magi upon finding their newborn Messiah, fell down before Him and worshiped Him.

“On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.”¹ (Mtt. 2:11-12)

In the following verses here we read:

“Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, ‘Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.’ Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, ‘Out of Egypt I have called my son.’” (vs 13-15)

Another of my favorite Advent Bible readings again uses the contrast of light and darkness, found in Isaiah 60:1-3...

“Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples;

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but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.”

In the Old Testament, God’s Word also displays dramatic usage of darkness and light, and we find that some of these verses show darkness having a negative and hellish symbolism, while others display darkness in a more neutral or positive way. For example, at the very beginning verses in the Creation myth: “The earth was without form, and void; and darkness was on the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.” (vs. 1-2)

Our theology tells us that spiritual times of obscurity and self-centeredness, when we’re choosing to rely on our own self-sufficiency, can be a vital prelude to a new and glorious stage of spiritual enlightenment, when God says to us personally, “Let there be light!” This can symbolize new awareness of God’s wisdom and purpose in life. For example, darkness also plays a positive role during Abraham’s challenging moment of doubt and struggle to understand the long and difficult pathway that he and Sarah had been on, where now into their older years of life they still were childless, and so in the darkness of night we read that “the LORD took him [Abraham] outside and said, ‘Now look up into the heavens and count the stars, if you are able. So shall your offspring be.’” (Gen. 15:5) And right then Abraham believed what God had said, and it was counted unto him as a great moment of spiritual growth!

We can take note in this powerful story in Abraham’s life that it was the contrast of the pitch black darkness of the empty spaces within our Milky Way Galaxy, which allowed him to perceive the billions of stars above him as his object lesson if you will, showing him the truth that one day his descendants would number more than the stars above. Another Old Testament reference revealing a positive usage of darkness is found in Exodus 19, when God tells Moses that He will reveal Himself to the people of Israel and speak to them for the first time in a dense cloud of smoke, which reads: “Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘I am going to come to you in a dense cloud, in order that the people may hear when I speak with you and so trust you ever after.’” (vs. 9)

New Church theology teaches us that all of these stories (and many others) throughout God’s Holy Word involving darkness, nighttime, shadows, clouds of dense smoke and obscurity, are here to remind us that for many reasons we all are going to

encounter moments when we are struggling to understand both who and what God is and how the Lord is working and moving in our lives. We may be suffering and struggling inside in some serious way and so we feel lost, afraid and confused as to how to make sense of life. Sometimes our darkness may be created out of our own selfishness and worldly ways of living, and at other times it can be created out of some tragedy, a heartbreaking loss or perhaps because we lack the knowledge we need to have faith in the Lord.

Back when I was in seminary during the Fall of my sophomore year at the Swedenborg School of Religion, I was engulfed by a very thick cloud of spiritual smoke and darkness, because I had gone through three massive betrayals in my life during the early Spring and then in the Summer of that year. I just couldn't fathom why a loving and wise God would allow so much pain and trauma in my life all at once? I felt confused and in doubt as to how the Lord's Divine Providence could actually be working through and within so much pain. I remember one day when I was feeling particularly frustrated, in doubt and confused inside, I got into my old 3-door, grey Honda Accord hatchback to go for a long drive...somewhere...anywhere...so that I could duke it out one-on-one with God in a showdown to rival any of those we find within the Psalms. When I found a secluded place, I pulled over and I shouted up to the Lord, "Why?! Why have you led me into this bleak and horrible wilderness in my life, Lord?! Why did you allow not one, not two but three horrible traumas to happen to me like that?! Why have you forsaken me on my road of life?!"

I must have sounded a lot like Job did after he had lost all of what he cherished most of us in life: he lost his family, his wealth and major assets and then his health. All kinds of people, including Christians, can feel angry with God at times, especially when we feel hurt. Job was a righteous and good person who lost everything he held dear, which lead him to cry out toward God one day when he said, "I cry to you and you do not answer me; I stand, and you merely look at me. You have turned cruel to me; with the might of your hand you persecute me." (Job 30:20-21)

But God understood Job's ranting and anger, and He accepted Job for all of his honesty and his choice to remain in dialogue with the Lord. God did not engineer Job's calamities, but He did allow Satan to attack Job, which God used to both test and purify Job's faith and trust in God, leading this broken man into a much greater

relationship with the Divine One. Indeed, there are all sorts of painful and difficult losses and tragedies that may come our way in life; we may find ourselves lost and adrift in fear, anxiety and anger at life. But our all-loving and wise God knows how to carefully and mercifully guide us through them, leading us into vital spiritual growth and new levels of faithfulness. The reality is that God's interests and goals often far exceed our own limited ability to understand why major losses and hardships are allowed to happen. God does not intend for bad things to happen to us in life, but He is always fully with us and able to comfort us, even though we may feel inside that He is absent. Yet it is at these times when the Lord is closest to us, guiding us through our dark and confusing difficulties into some new measure of what is good and wise.

By the end of the Book of Job we see that Job came to perceive and experience God's comforting Presence in ways that far exceeded his awareness before his tragedies had struck. By going through his many afflictions, somehow God drew Job more deeply into his spiritual potential. That story teaches us that before Job's trials and tribulation, he had missed out on truly experiencing the living God of pure Love and Wisdom.

In Chapter 42, Job said to the Lord,

“I know that you can do all things; no purpose of yours can be thwarted. Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know. My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you.” (vs 2-5)

Hundreds of years after Job's incredible journey of life, another faithful man also endured and came through his own “dark nights of the soul,” which led Emanuel Swedenborg to write with his quill pen, “The Lord's love transcends all human understanding.”² (*Secrets of Heaven* §2077)

In conclusion, this brings me back now to our powerful spiritual theme this third Sunday in Advent, dealing with spiritual JOY in life. Because of thousands of years of spiritual decline our entire world was shrouded in confusion and a long-term snowballing of inhuman evil and false ways of thinking.

Yet it was during those times of thick darkness when God led the Magi on their long, winding trek as they followed their star, leading them to the manger of Christ's

² Swedenborg, Emanuel. *Arcana Coelestia*. Translated by John Potts. West Chester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation, 1998.

birth. And it was on a cold and dark night when an angel burst upon the lives of those shepherds watching over their flocks at night saying to them,

“Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.” (Luke 2:10-11)

And so, what hard, painful and confusing things are perhaps going on in your own life lately, leaving you feeling afraid, anxious or even angry with God or with life? Whatever or whenever tragedy comes your way, you can take heart from our great story of Advent that through it all our Savior will never forget you nor abandon you.

We can follow the example of Bible characters like Job, like Mary and Joseph and like the Magi, by staying engaged in God’s Word, by sticking with your life of prayer and by choosing even during times of suffering to be loving and caring with others. And, like those humble shepherds at nighttime, you can follow their example of tending and protecting the “sheep” that are with you—those tender, good elements inside of you and the values that you treasure inside, which help you to remain connected to spiritual blessings and strengths in life—like making room in your life for ongoing prayer and worship with other good people, like those sitting beside you here today. For through it all, especially when things feel bleak and confusing, our precious Lord Jesus Christ will continue to advent or come anew into your life experience!

Let yourself trust and know that God is coming anew in your life, and as the angel said unto those shepherds,

“Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!”

Amen.