

AUGUST 2009

SERMONS AND MEDITATIONS OF THE SWEDENBORGIAN CHURCH

OUR DAILY BREAD



I (she) never want to leave.



THE JOURNEY

Invitation

You are invited to use *Our Daily Bread* as a source of inspiration and as a guide for personal meditation and reflection. It is also a resource for home, small group, and church worship. Each issue has a theme, with weekly sermons focusing on various aspects of that theme. Daily meditations provide food for thought throughout the week.

Our Daily Bread has been published by the Swedenborgian Church since December 1949. May you be fed with spiritual nourishment as the Lord gives us this day our daily bread.

Prayer

Let me walk in the way you love, O God.
Let me love you for yourself. Let me love you in all things.
Let me taste the sweetness of your love
and let it work its beauty in me,
Until I love with that divine love with which you love me;
Through Christ our Lord.
- Gertrude More (1606-1633)

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From the Editors

Dear Readers,

August is a month of transition. For many, these weeks mark the last chance to take a leisurely vacation before the winter holidays; others are already facing the end of the slower days of summer and preparing for the start of the industrious autumn months. Whether wending our way toward a cherished destination or readying ourselves for the season’s turn, we are all, in some sense, journeying.

A journey contains many phases, from anticipation through active travel to bittersweet recollection, but, as many of this issue’s sermons suggest, the beginning of a journey is perhaps the most pondered portion. Our church teaches that our intentions, or goals, are what motivate us; our ends are our beginnings. With this in mind, we start and end with sermons by Eli Dale, Rev. Kathy Speas, and Leah Goodwin that focus on the necessities for beginning a journey. Revs. Kim Hinrichs and Jonathan Mitchell reflect on the difficulties of arriving at a place of heavenly delight, but they also inform us that heaven is only as far away as our desire to be close to the Lord.

Life’s journey, however, is not about the destination; rather, it is a rich narrative whose meaning emerges from the pilgrimage itself. We hope this issue will not only inspire reflection on your own journeys, but also help you manifest your fullest humanity in the world.

Blessings,
Leah and Kevin

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AUG **2** In the Wilderness with Wild Beasts

Ms. Eli Dale

Genesis 8:6-18

At the end of forty days Noah opened the window of the ark that he had made and sent out the raven; and it went to and fro until the waters were dried up from the earth. Then he sent out the dove from him, to see if the waters had subsided from the face of the ground; but the dove found no place to set its foot, and it returned to him to the ark, for the waters were still on the face of the whole earth. So he put out his hand and took it and brought it into the ark with him. He waited another seven days, and again he sent out the dove from the ark; and the dove came back to him in the evening, and there in its beak was a freshly plucked olive leaf; so Noah knew that the waters had subsided from the earth. Then he waited another seven days, and sent out the dove; and it did not return to him anymore.

In the six hundred first year, in the first month, the first day of the month, the waters were dried up from the earth; and Noah removed the covering of the ark, and looked, and saw that the face of the ground was drying. In the second month, on the twenty-seventh day of the month, the earth was dry.

Then God said to Noah, "Go out of the ark, you and your wife, and your sons and your sons' wives with you. Bring out with you every living thing that is with you of all flesh—birds and animals and every creeping thing that creeps on the earth—so that they may abound on the earth, and be fruitful and multiply on the earth." So Noah went out with his sons and his wife and his sons' wives.

Genesis 9:8-13

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, "As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with

you, as many as came out of the ark. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth."

God said, "This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.

Mark 1:9-15

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

At once the Spirit drove him out into the desert, and he was in the desert forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him. (Mark 1:12-13)

Chances are you have been driven into the wilderness at least once, maybe more often, in your life. If you haven't yet, I hope you have it to look forward to.

I don't intend to sound mean. The dry places, the unproductive spaces of our lives, are where we find out about ourselves. In the places of emptiness, paradoxically, we do a great deal of finding. In the wilderness we come face-to-face with ourselves, building our strengths and, with the help of the Lord, overcoming our wild beasts. The process can be agonizingly wonderful.

So welcome to the first Sunday in Lent, when we accompany Jesus as he is driven into the wilderness.

This is no place for the unprepared... This is the world of spiritual combat.

Feel your mouth go dry, your skin begin to pop, your vision begin to bleach out, your legs get weak, your mind get fuzzy. Imagine yourself in the wilderness. Look around at the untillable land, which will not bear fruit. Feel the dry wind rake across your face. Look overhead—scavenger birds are circling. Look under that rock over there—the beasts are asleep now because they know not to come out in the dry heat of the day, but they will awaken.

This is no place for the unprepared. This is no place for the faint of heart. This is not where you begin to try on Christianity to see if you like it. This is where faith propels you because you said “yes” to John the Baptist and submitted to the waters of divine Truth. The Spirit will drive each of us into the wilderness, but only as far as we are able to go. This is the world of spiritual combat. You will be given exactly what you can handle. Don’t ask for more— and don’t try to get less.

Modern Christians often approach Lent, if they approach it at all, as a kind of self-improvement program. With a wide grin and buoyant determination, we promise that this is the year we will give up swearing, cigarettes, or caffeine—this is the year we will commit to a program of exercise or regular prayer time. Like resolutions made on New Year’s Day, we promise ourselves a decisive course correction. Lent is even better than New Year’s, because we only have to promise for forty days, not for the whole year. It seems so doable.

As any of you who have tried such an approach have probably realized, even such positively inspired, well-meaning changes turn out to be doorways into the wilderness. When we make these promises at New Year’s, if we fail we will only be embarrassed around our friends. But they will also have failed to keep their resolutions, so we can all shrug our shoulders together, laugh it off, and get on with our lives. Lent may be only forty days long rather than an entire year, but given its religious focus, we may feel more compelled to keep up our

struggles. We may actually be aware of the Spirit driving us deeper, deeper into ourselves. We may be taken by surprise that a promise to give up caffeine or candy, something we thought we wanted to do for ourselves anyway, could cause interesting side effects. Having disrupted a part of our lives, we awaken the beasts within—and discover that they really are wild.

So you initiate an attempt to be less dependent or more positive. And you find yourself struggling not only with a craving for a cup o' joe or an inexplicable tiredness just before the new exercise class you signed up for, but also with your temper, your memories, your relationships, your values, your direction in life, and your understanding of who or what God is. You have awakened the beasts. Don't panic. This is a good thing.

Understand that temptation is an assault on the things you love. You may not think you "love" your morning coffee or that you "love" curling up in your easy chair instead of taking a walk or whatever is your particular issue when it comes to a Lenten sacrifice, but there is some kind of love linked to all our behavior. Your focus on the internal is also an opportunity for an assault on the good things you love. The beasts help us to clarify what we love (good or bad), and the angels help us to let go of the infernal loves while keeping a grip on those loves that are worth holding onto.

Having disrupted a part of our lives, we awaken the beasts within. Don't panic. This is a good thing.

Temptation is a process of vastation—that is, "emptying out"—and combat. The vastation will leave you feeling empty of good and truth, even empty of your connection to the Divine. The combat may leave you looking for quick relief. The risk at this time is that we will want to return to what is familiar, to what has "worked" in the past. If only those foolish beasts would just go away and let us "get back to normal!"

The Bible tells us that life is a journey from slavery, through the wilderness, into the Promised Land, and on to the Holy City. But we know that on their way out of Egypt, the people of God cried out to

Moses, “Turn around, let us go back where we know we had food to eat! We’re starving out here; this is worse than slavery.” The risk is that we might just want to set up our tent somewhere, get a few goats, and settle down. The risk is that we may choose to feed ourselves to the lions, because we have lost sight of where we are headed.

Out of the chaos of our wilderness we seek order. The hells (Satan, if you will) bring disorder, inviting us to value power and things, to desire power and things, to compete with each other to acquire power and things. The hells also provide a workable order—diabolical, but workable; seductive, but workable. If we only had more control, more money, more land, more resources, our lives would be more orderly.

***Our wilderness time
is a time of choice.***

And if things get really bad, we can find someone to blame and crucify him. That will unite us! Even hell’s order is chaotic.

The hells lead us to get lost, to misinterpret what God intends for us, to become egotistical, to become stiff-necked, and to forget our divine inheritance. My goodness, doesn’t that sound like what happens to all those people in the Bible? Wasn’t it nice of them to record their bad days, their failures, their struggles, their experiences in the wilderness, so that we would know how normal it is?

Our wilderness time—the time in the scorching heat of day and the bone-chilling emptiness of night in a barren wasteland—is a time of choice. Will we go back to the chaos of lives ordered by slavery, or move forward through the chaos of reordering our loves? I will let T.S. Eliot have the floor for a moment to speak to this:

*The dove descending breaks the air
With flame of incandescent terror
Of which the tongues declare
The one discharge from sin and error.
The only hope, or else despair
Lies in the choice of pyre or pyre—
To be redeemed from fire by fire.
Who then devised the torment? Love.
Love is the unfamiliar Name*

*Behind the hands that wove
The intolerable shirt of flame
Which human power cannot remove.
We only live, only suspire
Consumed by either fire or fire.**

It is possible to ignore Lent, or to encounter it at the level of “I’ll give up chocolate,” knowing we can indulge until our complexions break out by gorging on Easter candy forty days hence. We can make sure we give ourselves a good talking-to sometime in the next forty days. Regardless, we know that we look forward to the full assurance of the resurrection and a universe which has been brought into order, the hells conquered.

Because for us, the days of Lent that mimic Jesus’ time in the desert will lead us to Palm Sunday, Good Friday, and Easter. But for Jesus, his time in the desert led him into his ministry.

What would happen if, instead of looking forward to the end of Jesus’ ministry, we looked forward to the development of our own ministries—personally and together? What would Lent be like for us, personally and as a community of faith, if we assumed that at the end of this time we would have a clearer picture of what we were to do and say? Of how we were to treat each other? Of the way in which we could bring light to dark places? Of the part of God’s mission that is our mission? Our wilderness experience is a chance to bring new meaning to our lives.

A five-year-old undergoes a radical change in worldview and personal performance by becoming a six-year-old. Such a transformational opportunity is before each of us, too, both individually and as a church. During this season of Lent, let us seek deep intimacy with our faith and how it might express itself in our lives, separately and together. Let us learn to hunger for what Jesus desires, not for what beasts devour.

How will we do this? By letting the angels minister to us. By remembering that the newness of God’s order is not a better, cleaner, shinier, faster version of the old order. By remembering that Jesus’ teachings are counterintuitive: we know heaven is not a reward for

being good, we love our enemies, we let mean people kill us, we refuse to stay dead.

By keeping God at the center and making choices that harmonize with holiness, we embrace the troubles of the world like a loving parent, not a scolding one; we stick to each other with steadfast love, not repelled by passionate angst or defensiveness; we employ patience, not insistence. Only by this route can we deflate the power of the hells, the beasts of our empty wilderness places.

Once again, this year, like last year, like next year, let the spirit drive you into the Wilderness. Carry with you the baptismal promise of heaven and the commandments to love. Let the beasts bring you the gift of their challenge. Let the angels attend you. Each time we enter the annealing furnace of the desert place, each time we come out of the desert place, we refine Self in the fullness of God's purpose, preparing ourselves for heaven, transforming ourselves from wilderness to fruitful soil. Again, the voice of T.S. Eliot:

*With the drawing of this Love and the voice of this Calling
We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.**

** T. S. Eliot, "Little Gidding" from Four Quartets*

Ms. Eli Dale delivered this sermon
to the Elmwood New Church in
Elmwood, MA, on March 9, 2003.

Prayer:

Lord, be with me on my wilderness journeys, that your life might inspire my life, that looking to you might help me choose the life you created me to live. Guide my footsteps as I walk in freedom. Amen.



Daily Meditations

Monday, August 3

Then Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, which is opposite Jericho, and the Lord showed him the whole land. *Deuteronomy 34:1*

It is the good or the pleasure of these into which the person who is being regenerated is first of all initiated.
Arcana Coelestia 4117:2

Tuesday, August 4

The Lord said to him, "This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, saying, 'I will give it to your descendants'; I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there." *Deuteronomy 34:4*

What a physical and worldly person appropriates is his all; he knows nothing else but this; he thinks that he would die should he lose what he possesses. *Arcana Coelestia 141*

Wednesday, August 5

Then Moses, the servant of the Lord, died there in the land of Moab, at the Lord's command. He was buried in a valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth-peor, but no one knows his burial place to this day. *Deuteronomy 34:5-6*

It is a law of divine providence that we should put aside evils in our outer nature, regarding them as sins and doing so in apparent autonomy, and that this is the only way the Lord can put aside the evils in our inner nature and in our outer nature alike. *Divine Providence 100*

Thursday, August 6

Moses was one hundred twenty years old when he died; his sight was unimpaired and his vigor had not abated. The Israelites wept for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days; then the period of mourning for Moses was ended. *Deuteronomy 34:7-8*

No external religious activity cleanses us unless we examine ourselves, see our sins, admit them, accept responsibility for them, and repent by not committing them any more, doing all this apparently on our own but at heart acknowledging that it comes from the Lord. *Divine Providence 121*

Friday, August 7

Joshua son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom, because Moses had laid his hands on him; and the Israelites obeyed him, doing as the Lord had commanded Moses. Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face. *Deuteronomy 34:9-10*

It is very important to realize, however, that the only people who receive life from the Word are those who read it for two purposes: to draw divine truths from it because it is the fountain of truth; and to apply to their life the divine truths they have drawn. *True Christian Religion 191*

Saturday, August 8

He was unequaled for all the signs and wonders that the Lord sent him to perform in the land of Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his servants and his entire land, and for all the mighty deeds and all the terrifying displays of power that Moses performed in the sight of all Israel. *Deuteronomy 34:11-12*

The Word's literal meaning also provides association with angels in heaven because within the literal meaning there is a spiritual meaning and a heavenly meaning.

True Christian Religion 234

What is Sin?

The Reverend Kathy Speas

9 AUG

Psalm 51

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.

Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.

For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.

Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment.

Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me.

You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.

Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.

Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities.

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.

Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me.

Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit.

Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you.

Deliver me from bloodshed, O God, O God of my salvation, and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance.

O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise.

For you have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased.

The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

Romans 7:14-25

For we know that the law is spiritual; but I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin. I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, with my mind I am a slave to the law of God, but with my flesh I am a slave to the law of sin.

Romans 8:26-27

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

Sin. No matter what our beliefs, that's a loaded word.

Given the common association of sin with pleasure, maybe I should have titled this sermon, "What Isn't Sin?" I have never heard "sinfully delicious" used in reference to salad greens. "Sin City" is not a town known for its beautiful scenery.

Religion has been reduced to arguments over which acts are going to send us to the Fiery Place and which ones are going to win us a ticket to Cloud Nine. We want the definitive, ultimate list of Dos and

Don'ts. We struggle with deeper questions: What does it mean to violate divine law? What does it mean to be separate from God? Is sin something you do, or something you are? How, then, do we live to overcome sin and know God?

Where do we turn to understand what sin is? The Bible? Theologians? Which theologians? Mystics? Psychologists? Our parents? Judge Judy? Who can tell us the definitive truth about what sin really is? Ancient people who spoke from visions of God in the purifyingly hot desert—or modern people, who know what it means to live in today's technological world?

One thing is clear: regardless of whose truth you consider about the matter, sin is here to stay. Nobody has come up with a way to live a 100% guaranteed sin-free life. David's anguished lament, "For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me, against you and you only have I sinned, and done what was evil in your sight," and Paul's frustrated comment that "I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do" are more timeless and real than any list of Do's and Don'ts.

Somehow, though, we walk around with a vague distrust of our own God-given humanity in the name of guilt and repentance. Early desert monks sought total separation from earthly concerns by retreating to dark desert caves. Luther despaired over ever being worthy of God's grace, agonizing that no matter how hard he worked, he would never overcome sin. The fiery Puritan preacher Jonathan Edwards gives us a vision of God holding humanity between his extended thumb and forefinger over a lake of fire. Many Christian traditions tell us that we are doomed from the outset, and that God's only son Jesus had to die a horrible death just for us. And even as we reject Jonathan Edwards' and others notions of sin, we still feel guilty—about exercise, about choosing butter over Promise margarine, about that home improvement project we've been putting off, about how imperfect our kids are, about our feelings about certain people.

***One thing is clear:
regardless of whose
truth you consider
about the matter,
sin is here to stay.***

But on the other hand, in an effort to reclaim the humanity for which we were created in God's image, many in the postmodern world would advocate doing away with the whole notion of sin or wrongdoing altogether. God loves us all; don't worry, be happy; just try not to hurt anybody, but whatever you do is OK—as long as you're not judgmental.

***We are caught
between two
notions of sin.***

Clearly, we have come to a place where we are caught between two notions of sin, neither one of which seems to be leading humanity any closer to God. Neither view provides a satisfactory answer to the question, "How, then, shall we live, in order to know God?" Either we see ourselves as sinners who can never, ever achieve the perfection demanded of us by a vengeful God, doomed to repeated failure every day, or we forget about the role of divine grace, and focus on self-development toward our own fully achievable psycho-spiritual goals instead.

Swedenborg offers us a view of sin that frees us from loathing ourselves, yet holds us accountable for our lives in the eyes of God. Like Paul, Swedenborg sees humanity as suspended in equilibrium between good and evil. Unlike Paul, Swedenborg affirms our free will to choose either path. In Swedenborgian theology, sin is the willful appropriation of evil ("evil" being whatever is contrary to God's creative and loving good—not just Hitler-quality evil) into our intentionality, knowingly acting only for the sake of our own self-interest. We become what we do, and we shape our spirit by how we use it in our earthly life.

Swedenborg sees original sin as the denial that it is God alone who can guide us to goodness. We can't get there from here if we leave God out of our plans. We succumb to the serpent when we knowingly separate ourselves from the power of God, and try to control the world and our lives as if we were the ultimate source of love and grace. Swedenborg's concept of sin presumes that we are able to know and experience God, and yet act contrary to the divine order because of the motivating power of our own self-interest. It takes two to tango, us and God, and we've got to let God lead the dance.

How do we know what God's creative and loving good is, when it's all mystery? How can our sensual human experience be sinful, when it is only through our senses that the presence of God is known? It is through our sensual physical natures that we know loving friendship, kindness among strangers, the beauty of sunsets and forests, the beauty of music and architecture, harmony, mercy, creativity, justice, the "peace which passeth all understanding." The list goes on and on—think of all the expressions of God's love and wisdom, and then think of what it is that keeps us from manifesting these characteristics ourselves. How often do we crowd our lives with tasks in the name of responsibility, and then find that we don't have time for inner peace? How often do we worry so much about the future of our fortunes that we forget all about kindness or mercy or beauty? To what degree do we feel so guilty, and expect so much of ourselves, that we stay at work instead of coming home to paint or sing or dance or love? How often do we take on more than we can handle, and weaken ourselves in the attempt to take care of everyone?

From a Swedenborgian perspective, self-denial, guilt, worry, and workaholicism are sins to the extent that they ground us in our self-interest, instead of opening us up to the love of God and our neighbor. It is not what we do, but the spirit in which we do it, that makes for sin. As Swedenborgian theologian George Dole says, "The road to Hell is not paved with good intentions, it's paved with unexamined intentions." Philanthropy can be a sin if we are generous only to get our name in the newspaper. Ambition can manifest God's love if it is used in the service of faith and love. It is our task to open our hearts to God, so that our actions may make God's love visible, so that perhaps even our sins may be used by God to good ends.

*How do we know
what God's good is?*

You can't think about sin without thinking about redemption. In Swedenborgian terms, awareness of sin begins the cycle of repentance, reformation, and regeneration. Repentance begins with wanting to know something beyond the worldly desires that trap us in a vicious cycle of "looking for love in all the wrong places," as the song says. We are stung with the hot shame of realizing that we have done

something really boneheaded, and that our sarcastic remark or white lie is not just a social faux pas, but represents something we do not want to become, much less take on as our eternal spirit. Reformation begins with conscious attempts to act differently, to try repeatedly to be a different kind of person— someone that does divine things, not boneheaded things. Persistence in aligning our will with God's will leads us to take this renewal of life to heart, and we are regenerated as we act in harmony with God's will unconsciously, acting from faith because we love to do so, not for the material consequences.

And then we recognize another sin, and the cycle begins again. Sin and redemption, in the Swedenborgian world, are an ongoing, dynamic journey, not a destination or a state of achievement or failure.

Sin is evidence that God is reaching out to each of us.

This perspective on sin offers us a way to get up each morning and strive to be, with God's grace, more aware of and able to move away from our sins than we were yesterday. We know we can only overcome sin by accepting God, and God knows we can only overcome sin by choosing another way. Regeneration is not something that God does to us, it is something God does through us. Like the motion of a bicycle wheel, each cycle of repentance-reformation-regeneration moves us a little closer to having a "clean heart, and a new and right spirit within us," as the Psalmist says. God is the wind; we are the sails.

What a wondrous gift God has given us in our flawed humanity! Our sins—what an ingenious system of inviting us toward the divine presence! We could not take the steps required to approach God if it weren't for sin. Sin is the beginning of the process that leads us closer to God, if we so choose. Sin is evidence that God is reaching out to each of us, showing us each our very own individual way to God, the way that is right for us. God came to earth as Jesus to invite us to choose to be reborn in God. The urge to act from our own self-interest instead of the interest of the divine gives us the chance to choose God over and over again, sculpting our spirits as we journey in this world.

Sin is not something to fear or avoid in a cave. Sin is not something over which to despair, or a source of self-loathing. It is something

to welcome as a special invitation from God to choose God over yourself! The German poet Rilke gives us the image of continuing on a path by “being defeated by successively greater and greater opponents.” The Persian poet Rumi says, “An empty mirror and your worst destructive habits, that’s when the real making begins, that’s what art and crafting are . . . Don’t turn your head, keep looking at the bandaged place. That is where the light enters you.”

So it is with sin. Once we have overcome one tendency to cling to our self-interest, we are faced with another, subtler temptation. Yet as we overcome greater and greater temptations, we are led to greater and greater joys. And it never ends. According to Swedenborg, even the angels fall into the trap of self-interest, feel remorse, and have the chance to choose God over themselves yet again.

So what is sin? You know, in your heart of hearts, exactly what sin is for you. I can’t tell you what sin is, because I don’t live your life, and my path to God is not your path to God. Your sins will change as God coaxes you onward to master the claim that self (sin) has on you right now.

But you know what sin is. You know that you know what sin is. Perhaps the most eloquent theological observation on sin I ever heard was from an autistic and severely developmentally challenged woman I worked with at Project Open Hand, who would repeat phrases that she had heard from her grandmother that morning. One day, she came in saying, “What does this mean—‘You know better than that?’” No one has said it better—not Paul, not Luther, not Swedenborg.

*Even the angels
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choose God over
themselves yet
again.*

What does this mean—“You know better than that?” And how, then, shall we live in order to know God? Again, the most succinct insight comes not from an ivory-tower theologian, but from a man I befriended who had an IQ of around 35. He asked me to explain a button I was wearing that displayed Art Linkletter’s picture with the slogan “Art for Art’s Sake.” Knowing that someone with an IQ of 35

might not be capable of discerning irony, I merely read the slogan. And he responded, "Oh, heart for heart's sake." Yes.

What is sin? "You know better than that."

How do we live to overcome sin? "Heart for heart's sake."

The Rev. Kathy Speas is a chaplain at Hospice By the Bay. She preaches at Sonoma area churches and at the San Francisco Swedenborgian Church.



Prayer:

Holy Spirit, Source of all life, we are grateful for all the ways you appear to us, in the stunning epiphanies and in the small revelations. We thank you for your infinite, absolute, eternal love. Be with us as we go about our days; help us to see you in the faces around us. Help us to love you with our actions and words, as well as in our hearts and minds. Guide us away from our self-centered concerns and lead us into life eternal. In the name of the Risen Christ, may our sins and our failings be used in your service, and may all that is within us, not just our "good" parts, bless God's holy name. Amen.

Daily Meditations

Monday, August 10

For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest, until her vindication shines out like the dawn, and her salvation like a burning torch. *Isaiah 62:1*

The first of the goals toward which the Lord's divine providence works is that we should be engaged in what is good and what is true together. *Divine Providence 16*

Tuesday, August 11

The nations shall see your vindication, and all the kings your glory; and you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord will give. *Isaiah 62:2*

The reason everyone must be engaged in what is good and what is true together after death or in what is evil and what is false is that good and evil cannot be united.
Divine Providence 18

Wednesday, August 12

You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God. *Isaiah 62:3*

If our life has been governed by good love, then everything false we have picked up from what we have heard and read in the world without intentionally adopting it is taken away, and in its place we are given the truth that agrees with our good.
Divine Providence 17c

Thursday, August 13

You shall no more be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate; but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her, and your land Married; for the Lord delights in you, and your land shall be married. *Isaiah 62:4*

It is hard for us to attain union or unity (of what is good and what is true or of what is evil and what is false) in this world, because as long as we are living here we are kept in a state of reformation or rebirth. *Divine Providence 17a*

Friday, August 14

For as a young man marries a young woman, so shall your builder marry you, and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you. *Isaiah 62:5*

The Lord's divine providence is constantly working to unite what is true with what is good and what is good with what is true within us, because this union is the church and heaven. This union exists in the Lord and in everything that emanates from him. It is because of this union that heaven is called "a marriage." *Divine Providence 21*

Saturday, August 15

Upon your walls, O Jerusalem, I have posted sentinels; all day and all night they shall never be silent. You who remind the Lord, take no rest, and give him no rest until he establishes Jerusalem and makes it renowned throughout the earth.

Isaiah 62:6-7

Goodness is actually a matter of love, and truth is a matter of wisdom. We can see from this that the constant objective of divine providence is to unite what is good to what is true and what is true to what is good within us. *Divine Providence 21c*

Near, Oh So Near

The Reverend Dr. Jonathan Mitchell

16^{AUG}

Genesis 28:10-17

Jacob left Beersheba and went toward Haran. He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. And the Lord stood beside him and said, "I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."

Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, "Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!" And he was afraid, and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven."

Mark 1:14-15

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

Off and on over the years I have gotten addicted to various puzzles, computer games, and the like. If you're like me, I think you'll find that you get particularly hooked when you feel that you almost have one solved, but not quite. I find myself saying, "I'll try just one more thing, and then I'll quit." And when that doesn't quite work, "Just one more try, just one more try" . . . until it's three o'clock in the morning.

A sense of nearness can motivate us to keep trying. It can also be painful. It is much worse to lose a lottery by just one digit than by many, or to miss a train by just seconds, rather than by half an hour. Often in life we experience a sense of aching nearness. The more we want something and the closer it seems, the more we ache for it.

Jesus was overwhelmed by just such a sense of aching nearness. His utter conviction that the kingdom of heaven had drawn near inspired in him a burning desire to communicate that sense of nearness to others. This, I believe, is the source of the impatience and frustration that sometimes leaks out in the Gospel stories. "How foolish you are," Jesus says, "and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared!" I can imagine him thinking to himself, "It is so-o-o near, so near—why can't they wake up and see it?"

Today I am beginning a series of sermons on the sayings of Jesus, starting with Mark 1:15—"The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God has become near; repent and believe the good news." This is the first saying recorded in the Gospel of Mark, which most scholars consider the first of the Gospels to have been written. So it makes sense to start here. More importantly, this saying both begins and summarizes the teaching of Jesus.

A sense of nearness can motivate us to keep trying. It can also be painful.

The keynote of Jesus' teaching is precisely the nearness of the kingdom of God. What then is the kingdom of God, the reign of heaven on earth? It is based on reconciliation. It is a place of justice in peace. The kingdom of heaven on earth is a place where we need not

worry about or be suspicious of each other. In the kingdom of heaven on earth, all live in grateful service to God and useful service to each other. For Jesus, this way of life was so close he could taste it.

This short saying is so central to the understanding of the Gospel that it is helpful to examine it almost word by word.

“The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God has become near.” The verbs in the Greek are present perfect, a fact that is obscured to a greater or lesser degree in English translations. A closer translation would be “the time has been fulfilled, the kingdom of God has neared.” Note the subtle difference between this and saying “the time is fulfilled, the kingdom is near.” The present perfects are more dynamic. They suggest that the time has grown more and more full, that the kingdom has grown nearer and nearer.

“Repent!” In contemporary English, this word implies regret. Repentance usually implies feeling bad about something you are doing or have done, and resolving not to do it anymore. This is an essential part of repentance, but the biblical concept goes far beyond this narrow focus. The word “repentance” comes from Latin and means “to think again, to rethink.” In a similar but deeper vein, the Greek word is “metanoia.” “Meta” implies transformation as in metaphor or metamorphosis. “Noia” refers to our thought structure, the way we conceptualize the world and our place in it. It is not just to regret or to rethink, but to transform our minds, to change our world view. In the Hebrew Scriptures, the usual equivalent for repentance is “teshuva.” This comes from a verb meaning “to turn around.” When we realize we have gone down the wrong path, what do we do? We turn around. Jesus bids us to transform our thinking and turn our lives around accordingly. Ultimately, repentance is a matter of acknowledging what is holding us back from living the life of heaven on earth, and resolving to overcome those obstacles.

Repentance is acknowledging what is holding us back from living the life of heaven on earth, and resolving to overcome those obstacles.

“Believe.” In our present usage, believing is often construed as having an opinion. Belief, in the biblical sense, is much more active.

The Greek verb is related to a noun which means “to trust”; to believe is to put your trust in something. The vogue for fire-walking a few years ago can serve as an illustration. Thinking that a person can walk on live coals without getting burned is having an opinion. Those who confidently stepped out and onto the hot coals believed.

“The good news.” This is what the word “Gospel” means if you take it back to Old English: “God,” which means “good,” plus “spell,” which means “news.”

Taken all together, we hear in this saying an accelerating sense of nearness and promising possibility, as well as a call to personal transformation.

The kingdom of heaven on earth is within our grasp. It is that near. This is the good news. In our story from Genesis, Jacob, in the midst of a dangerous journey, lies down to sleep and sees in a dream angels ascending and descending a ladder to heaven. Upon awaking he says, “Truly God is in this place and I never knew it!” Jacob had the wake-up experience that Jesus is urging upon all of us. How joyfully blessed are the moments when we realize that God has been with us all along, when we too say “God is in this place and I never knew it!” How great the benefit to our spiritual lives when we hold on to that sense of nearness!

What is your Promised Land?

I ask you to reflect: What does the deepest, the purest, the most truly loving part of your heart long for? How would you most love to live on this earth with your fellow human beings? What is your Promised Land? What is the kingdom of heaven on earth?

And furthermore, can you discern what holds you back from leading this life? Can you see what “repentance”—that is, what personal transformation—you are being called to undertake?

What is the life your heart most deeply longs for? If you think that life is far, far away, you have no reason to get off the couch. But if you can hold on to a sense of its aching nearness, nothing will hold you back. The time for waiting has been filled up. The kingdom of God has neared. Repent, and put your trust in the good news!

The Reverend Dr. Jonathan Mitchell is a chapel minister at the Wayfarer's Chapel in Rancho Palos Verdes, CA.



Prayer:

O Lord, as you order the steps of all who look to you, guide my feet that they may lead me closer to you. Help me, O God, to reach out to you, that I might embrace your love and your truth in my heart. Amen.

A labyrinth is a meditative tool, a physical and spiritual journey along a path that leads to a center point. Labyrinths can be traversed in any number of ways: on foot, with a finger (see below), or even in one's mind. After prayer and meditation, the traveler traces the path back and rejoins the world, refreshed by new peace and understanding.



Daily Meditations

Monday, August 17

These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. *Matthew 10:5-6*

Falsities of religion are not imputed to those who are in good, but to those who are in evil. Every falsity may be confirmed, and then it appears like truth.

New Jerusalem and Its Heavenly Doctrine 171

Tuesday, August 18

As you go, proclaim the good news, "The kingdom of heaven has come near." Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment. *Matthew 10:7-8*

That natural death, which is a rejection of the unclean things of the body, and spiritual death, which is a removal of the unclean things of the spirit, signify resurrection.

Apocalypse Explained 899:13

Wednesday, August 19

Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff; for laborers deserve their food. *Matthew 10:9-10*

Charity and faith act as one and enter together into man, thus that man is so far in faith as he is in charity, since faith as to its essence is charity, just as truth as to its essence is good; for good, when it exists in shape or in form is truth.

Apocalypse Revealed 242.6

Thursday, August 20

Whatever town or village you enter, find out who in it is worthy, and stay there until you leave. *Matthew 10:11*

Faith is not faith with a man, unless it becomes spiritual; and it does not become spiritual unless it becomes the subject of his love; and it becomes the subject of a man's love when he loves to live the truth and the good, that is, when he loves to live according to those things which are commanded in the Word. *New Jerusalem and Its Heavenly Doctrine 111*

Friday, August 21

As you enter the house, greet it. If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it; but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. *Matthew 10:12-13*

Innocence and peace are the two inmost things of heaven. They are called inmost because they proceed immediately from the Lord, the Lord being Innocence and Peace itself. *Conjugal Love 349*

Saturday, August 22

If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town. Truly I tell you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town. *Matthew 10:15*

That the love of dominating from self-love, and the love of ruling from the pride of one's own intelligence, are the heads of all the loves of hell. *Apocalypse Revealed 502*

AUG **23**

The Conflicted Path Toward Peace

Rev. Kimberly Hinrichs

Joel 3:9-11

Proclaim this among the nations: Prepare war, stir up the warriors. Let all the soldiers draw near, let them come up. Beat your plowshares into swords, and your pruning hooks into spears; let the weakling say, "I am a warrior." Come quickly, all you nations all around, gather yourselves there. Bring down your warriors, O Lord

Luke 12:49-53

"I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided: father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law."

A couple of weeks ago our family was on vacation in northern Wisconsin. It was beautiful and relaxing. We enjoyed the sun, went boating on the lake, roasted marshmallows, and enjoyed the pleasures of summer in North America. One evening, I sat out on a dock with my legs dangling over Lake Superior, and as I gazed at the expansive sky covering our earth, I became aware of a certain irony that I imagine many of us are feeling this summer. For as much as I appreciated the peaceful setting I found myself in, I was also aware that I was on an island—literally—in the midst of tremendous conflict in our world right now.

We encounter conflict everywhere—inside ourselves, in our relationships, in our places of work. In this presidential election season, our country is experiencing a heated political conflict. And then, too, there is more ominous conflict. We live with the continual threat of further terrorist attacks in our country. The war in Iraq continues, bringing anguish and fear and uncertainty to all sides. Many of us are feeling anxiety and fear, and along with these feelings tends to come a perception that the world is spiraling downward into ever more destructive states.

Against this background comes our scripture reading for today. You might think that we would turn to Jesus in times of war and conflict for words of assurance and peace. But in this passage we find the exact opposite! “I have come to bring fire to the earth”? “I have not come to bring peace, but division”? Family members will be divided one against another? Is this the Jesus we know? What on earth could this passage mean?

First, let’s situate this passage in its context in the Gospel of Luke, and then let’s see what Swedenborg can tell us about it. Jesus’ words about division come during a speech to a crowd of thousands in which he delivers several warnings. These warnings are given against the backdrop of the common world view of the time, which was that a savior would come to bring about the end of the present world and usher in a new one. The early Christians believed that Jesus was this long-awaited savior, and that the end of the world was imminent. Jesus’ words in his long series of warnings carry particular urgency because they were thought to apply to the last remaining days of the current world. When Jesus speaks of the division about to come, he is talking about the division between believers and nonbelievers that would be evident at the eschatos, or end of time. This end was coming so quickly, in fact, that there would be no time for painstaking reconciliation and consensus-building. Jesus brings division because he brings assurance of a new spiritual reality founded on love and compassion—a vision that some were ripe to accept, and others rejected. Family members would be divided one against another as some adopted the new faith professed by Jesus and others did not.

On this level of meaning, Jesus seems to be saying that the time has come to make a decision about believing in God. A Swedenborgian reading of the passage can illuminate yet another layer of meaning.

Our conventional understanding of fire is sometimes associated with destruction, but in this instance, the “fire” that Jesus brings to the earth is associated with the warmth and light that corresponds to divine love and wisdom. So when Jesus says he has come to bring fire to the earth, we can see that the Lord came into the world to bring divine love. What at first glance appears to be a destructive image is actually a redemptive one. Jesus doesn’t bring peace, because true peace cannot simply be delivered. God has given us free will, and that freedom requires that we struggle through conflict on our own in order to learn and grow into higher spiritual awareness.

The division that Jesus brings is spiritual combat, which is the only means to arrive at peace. The division is the awareness between self-centeredness and self-giving love, between seeing the way things are and knowing how they ought to be. This combat occurs on an internal level within each person and on an external level in our world, and it is a necessary part of growth. We all must go through it in order to reach toward peace. If peace were simply delivered to us on a platter, we would not understand it. Swedenborg said that after humanity goes through spiritual combat, internal spiritual truths are opened to us. In this way, the conflict is actually a vehicle for greater understanding—a vehicle for enlightenment.

I’d like to propose that the struggle and pain our world now finds itself in is an opportunity for growth. I know this may be a hard idea

Jesus doesn’t bring peace, because true peace cannot simply be delivered.

to swallow given the enormous tragedy of September 11th, all the events that led up to the war in Iraq, and the number of casualties that have occurred there since the war began. It’s hard to believe that the flooding in Bangladesh or the civil war in the Sudan or

the conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians could be signs of progress. But I believe that time and again, human consciousness has evolved as a result of great conflict.

A survey of the last several hundred years of human history could show us many examples in which humanitarian efforts were strengthened by learning from tragic circumstances. Examples include the abolition of slavery, improved access around the world to clean drinking water and food supplies, the improvement of the status of women in most of the world's countries, and our raised consciousness about our effect on the environment, along with our efforts to mitigate those effects.

Another clear example is the United Nations, which was formed in 1948 as a direct consequence of World War II. The UN represents what at one time was only a philosopher's dream: that countries would

*The divine is
present in conflict
in the power to
transform.*

set aside their own self-interest in order to form an international council whose purpose was to keep the peace for the greater good of the planet. Today the UN has 191 member countries and operates throughout the world with the purpose of promoting respect for human rights, facilitating nonviolent conflict resolution, protecting the environment, fighting disease, reducing poverty, defining standards for safe air travel, improving telecommunications, fighting drug trafficking, combating terrorism, assisting refugees, setting up programs to clear landmines, helping to expand food production, and fighting the AIDS epidemic—to name just a few of its goals. All of these remarkable programs were set in motion because human beings went through terrible conflict. Through that conflict, they understood the imperative to change the world.

The divine is present in conflict in the power to transform. Some who experience great pain are able to turn it into goodness and unleash it into the world in a way that helps create a brand new reality.

John Titus is a member of our denomination who lives in Dexter, Michigan. His daughter Alicia died on September 11, 2001. She was a flight attendant on one of the planes that flew into the World Trade Center. In the aftermath of such a monumental loss, one might understand if John had become filled with rage and a desire for vengeance. But his response was the opposite. He knew immediately that he never wanted anyone else to suffer as he had. His experience

taught him, in fact, that peace was even more important than he had ever known. He committed himself to ending the cycle of hatred and violence that only brings more destruction. Through an organization called Peaceful Tomorrows, he has worked with thousands of others seeking a peaceful resolution to the war in Iraq, and many other world conflicts as well.

It is an active peace, wizened and scarred and probably screaming. It is the divine at work.

John has moved me immensely over these past three years because he has been an agent of transformation. With an open, anguished heart, he has let grief tear through him, and at the same time he has turned that energy into goodness for the world.

John has written an essay containing some of his reflections. Here are a few of his words: "Somehow, through it all, I have been given many gifts, including the gift of heartfelt compassion and the blessing of forgiveness. I realized immediately after Alicia's death that I must learn to forgive those responsible or the anger would consume me like a cancer. Forgiveness is a gift that one gives himself and in no way implies sanction of the other's action. Forgiveness is a letting go of those feelings that long to consume you with a twisted grief filled with hate and revenge. I could not allow that to happen! That is not who I am and it would not bring my Alicia back. It would only destroy me in the end.

"Throughout my journey of grief, true compassion has come into my heart with a longing for expression. Through compassion I have a renewed sense of purpose toward peace; a peace that recognizes the oneness of life and is beyond the false sense of peace attained by the mere absence of war. Working for peace and justice in a world that seems so inept at both has given new meaning to my life. For this is what my dear sweet Alicia was all about. And, this is what the Divine would have for us."

Would we say that John has arrived at that desirable state of being we call peace? It is certainly not the kind of peace that is calm and happy. But amazingly, he seems to have found a kind of peace from working to make the world a better place. It is an active peace, wizened and scarred and probably screaming. It is the divine at work. John's

actions, and the actions of thousands of others like him, witness to the hand of God that is bringing about divine providence. We are meant to live in peace—even if the path leading to it is full of struggle, even if peace and conflict go hand in hand each step of the way.

It's hard to discern what good has come into the world since September 11th. We don't know yet how our common history will be written and how these present events will influence our future. And yet I am convinced that the present circumstances of our world offer us many opportunities to contribute to a growth in human consciousness.

Swedenborg believed that humanity was evolving into ever more enlightened states of being. He believed that our world was in the midst of the long and painstaking process of removing all of those things that separate us from God—that the world was gradually turning into one that reflects the goodness and truth from which it is made. It's a process that naturally involves conflict.

The Baha'i religion shares this view of our future. They suggest that the issue is how much pain can be experienced by humanity "before we wholeheartedly accept the spiritual nature that makes us a single people, and gather the courage to plan our future in the light of what has been so painfully learned. Whether in the life of the individual or that of society, profound change occurs more often than not in response to intense suffering and to unendurable difficulties that can be overcome in no other way. Just so great a testing experience [...] is needed to weld the earth's diverse peoples into a single people."

***Faith is the belief
that we are on the
path of providence.***

After thinking about all of this, perhaps we are not so surprised after all by Jesus' statement that he brings fire and division to the earth. Perhaps we can see that when we talk about peace, the issue is really not so much how to eradicate conflict, but how to welcome it in wise and loving ways, and how to learn from it as part of our evolution.

For this is what faith comes down to, after all: the belief that we are on the path of divine providence. My hope is that we will not

be discouraged by the darkness that surrounds us, but that we will remember to take the long view, to have hope in our evolving spiritual destiny, and to remember our own roles in its unfolding. Amen.

The Rev. Kim Hinrichs is the
Director of Outreach for the
Swedenborgian House of Studies
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Prayer:

Because we love the world, we pray now, O God,
for grace to quarrel with it,
O Thou whose lover's quarrel with the world is the history of the world...
Lord, grant us grace to quarrel with the worship of success and power...
To quarrel with all that profanes and trivializes people
and separates them...
Number us, we beseech Thee,
in the ranks of those who went forth from this place
longing only for those things for which Thou dost make us long,
those for whom the complexity of the issues
only served to renew their zeal to deal with them,
those who alleviated pain by sharing it;
and those who were always willing to risk something big
for something good...
O God, take our minds and think through them,
Take our lips and speak through them.
Take our hearts, Lord, and set them on fire,
and all for your love's sake.
Amen.

William Sloane Coffin

Daily Meditations

Monday, August 24

In your strength the king rejoices, O Lord, and in your help how greatly he exults!
You have given him his heart's desire, and have not withheld the request of his lips. *Psalm 21:1-2*

The divine nature that emanates from the Lord is the good intrinsic to love and the truth intrinsic to faith. The amount angels accept from the Lord of what is good and what is true determines the extent to which they are angels and are heavens.
Heaven and Hell 7b

Tuesday, August 25

For you meet him with rich blessings; you set a crown of fine gold on his head. *Psalm 21:3*

Everyone in the heavens knows, believes, and even perceives that nothing good is intended and done by the self and that nothing true is thought and believed by the self. Everything comes from the Divine, which means from the Lord. *Heaven and Hell 8*

Wednesday, August 26

He asked you for life; you gave it to him—length of days forever and ever. *Psalm 21:4*

Anything good and true from the self is not good or true, because there is no life from the Divine within it.
Heaven and Hell 8a

Thursday, August 27

His glory is great through your help; splendor and majesty you bestow on him.

You bestow on him blessings forever; you make him glad with the joy of your presence. *Psalm 21:3&6*

Because angels believe this, they decline any thanks offered them for the good they do. In fact they feel hurt and withdraw if anyone gives them credit for anything good. It bewilders them to discover that people can believe they are wise on their own or do good on their own. *Heaven and Hell 9.3*

Friday, August 28

For the king trusts in the Lord, and through the steadfast love of the Most High he shall not be moved.

Your hand will find out all your enemies; your right hand will find out those who hate you. *Psalm 21:7-8*

Spirits who during their earthly lives had convinced themselves that they were the sources of the good they did and the truth they believed, or who had claimed these virtues as their own, are not accepted into heaven. Angels avoid them. *Heaven and Hell 10*

Saturday, August 29

You will make them like a fiery furnace when you appear.

The Lord will swallow them up in his wrath, and fire will consume them.

You will destroy their offspring from the earth, and their children from among humankind. *Psalm 21:9-10*

Divine love and the divine truth that derives from it are like the sun's fire and the light that comes from it in our world. The love is like the sun's fire, and the derivative truth is like the light from the sun. *Heaven and Hell:13a*

Traveling Lightly

Ms. Leah Goodwin

30 AUG

Micah 6:1-8

Hear what the LORD says: Rise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice. Hear, you mountains, the controversy of the LORD, and you enduring foundations of the earth; for the LORD has a controversy with his people, and he will contend with Israel.

“O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me!

For I brought you up from the land of Egypt, and redeemed you from the house of slavery; and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. O my people, remember now what King Balak of Moab devised, what Balaam son of Beor answered him, and what happened from Shittim to Gilgal, that you may know the saving acts of the LORD.”

“With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”

He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

Matthew 4:23 - 5:1-12

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people. So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought to him all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains,

demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and he cured them. And great crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan.

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Apocalypse Explained 118

To be spiritually poor, and yet to be rich, is to acknowledge at heart that no one knows, understands, and is wise, at all from self; but that a person knows, understands, and is wise, is all from the Lord.

Heaven and Hell 267

We may gather how great angels’ wisdom is from the fact that in heaven there is a communication that involves everyone. The intelligence and wisdom of one individual is shared with another: heaven is where everyone shares everything of value. This is because the very nature of heavenly love is to want what is one’s own to belong to another; so no one in heaven regards his or her good as authentically good unless it is someone else’s as well. This is also the basis of heaven’s happiness. Angels are led into it by the Lord, whose divine love has this same quality.

In the world of transportation, of movement between places, two types of people exist: those who travel lightly, and those who fairly emphatically do not.

I make this claim as an unashamed member of the latter camp, part of that group of reluctant nomads whose tents are pitched swiftly and nests feathered thoroughly, who break camp with heavy hearts and heavier bags.

Not much mind-meeting is to be had between those who travel unencumbered and those who labor in their journeying. For the latter, travel is a process to be endured and a skill-set to be mastered.

Traveling lightly, on the other hand, is an art. It is an art, and not just an area of competence, because two quite separate aspects—the technical and the stylistic, or put another way, the strategic and the attitudinal— must come together in its successful execution.

There is the technical aspect of such travel: the miniature bottles of shampoo and Lilliputian toothpaste tube; the careful selection of clothing, shoes, ties or jewelry such that a few items combine into surprisingly many, and at least passably interesting, outfits; the clever use of suitcase space for layering, rolling, folding, and (very rarely) squashing said items.

And then there is style—the attitude with which one's peregrinations are conducted. When it comes down to it, traveling lightly has less to do with mechanics—with the poundage of one's suitcase—and more to do with a person's spirit. Anticipation at setting forth, forward impulse at the road's bend, joy in serendipitous encounter, serenity amid frantic rush and patience during delay, confidence in safe arrival—all these are the marks of one who travels with easy yoke and light burden. Those who travel lightly enjoy being in transit. Those who do not, regardless of the weight of their baggage or the promptness of their flights, in their deepest hearts just want to go home.

*Traveling lightly
has less to do with
mechanics than
with spirit.*

Magic dwells in light travel. Alchemy resides there, transmuting struggle into high adventure and folly into revelation. If you want to be religious about it, traveling lightly is a gift. It is a state of grace.

The other day, a new and already dear friend told me a Sufi tale about this gift of traveling lightly. He was generous enough to share it with me, and now I will pass it on to you:

Many years ago, a people were driven from their beautiful island home. They migrated to another island, poor and sparse by comparison to the home for which they longed. Someday, they were promised, they would be able to return to their homeland, but that day would be centuries in the coming.

Remembering their homeland made life in exile more miserable, and so the islanders tried to forget.

Hundreds of years passed, and the people's collective memory dimmed. Many now claimed that there had never been a homeland. But a few people believed the myth of their origin, cherished the dream of return, and passed that belief down through the generations.

One day the swimming instructors, who were the only ones who had preserved the old ideas, announced that it was time to swim home. Most of the islanders by now had never even heard the story of their homeland. They looked at the swimmers with curiosity (and no small degree of pity), shook their heads, and then went on with their lives.

***Magic dwells
in light travel.
Traveling lightly is a
gift, a state of grace.***

The swimming instructors, meanwhile, told anyone who would listen about the paradise that was their true home. Most thought the swimmers were one card short of a full deck, but a few people here and there believed them. These believers presented themselves for swimming lessons so that they might make the great journey.

Such a person would come up to a swimming instructor and say, "I want to learn how to swim."

"All right," the instructor would reply, "But what's the deal with the bushel of cabbages you're dragging behind you?"

"I'll need them for food when I finally arrive in the homeland."

"Ah. But the foods of the homeland are far tastier and more nourishing than cabbage, so you don't need to carry all of that with you."

"You don't understand; I need this cabbage or I'll starve. How can you expect me to voyage out into the unknown without any food supply?"

"But it will be impossible for you to swim if you're dragging those cabbages along with you. They will tire you long before you reach home; then they will drag you under, and you will drown."

"Well, in that case, I suppose I can't go. You call my cabbages a hindrance, but I need them to survive."

Since so many conversations with the swimming instructors ended like this, very few ever managed to make it back to their homeland.

There were a few, however, who looked up at their instructor and said, "You know, cabbage is really pretty tasty. Care to join me for supper?"

Letting go of the cabbage. Silly though the image may seem, this ability to let go, to trust in the journey itself, to realize one's own dependence and fragility and yet believe in the reality and worth of one's journey—this ability lies at the heart of traveling lightly, whether a person is on the way to Kansas City or the Kingdom of God. It is strength in weakness, foolish wisdom. Letting go of the cabbage is possibly the truest gift we have.

Jesus knew a thing or two about traveling lightly. He had the technical part down pat—after all, he wasn't much for baggage or property. "Consider the lilies of the field," he said; "they toil not, neither do they spin, and yet I tell you Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like these!" He sent the disciples out with a cloak, a pair of sandals, and a staff—and instructions to give all these things away should someone have need of it.

*The ability to trust
in the journey itself
is possibly the
truest gift we have.*

And our Lord knew a little something about the spirit of traveling lightly, too. He lived for the journey. He took on his own humanity, in fact, so that he might travel the road we travel—which brings us to this morning, and our Lord's journey up a mountainside to give a sermon.

***The Beatitudes
leave space for
meaning, "space for
the Kingdom."***

The message of the Sermon on the Mount, and particularly of the Beatitudes that appear in its opening chapter, is often read as The Ten Commandments Part Two, the "newly revised and expanded edition" of the rulebook Moses was given by God. They are the "new law," the authorized handbook to a soul-making life given to us by the Big Kahuna Himself, the word of God direct from the Divine Human source without fire or cloud or special effects, at least as far as their delivery goes.

The problem with this interpretation arises when we domesticate that new law, when we fail to see just what claims Jesus makes with his litany of blessings.

The Beatitudes, like the Ten Commandments, are strikingly well-crafted. They are short and incisive, brief and powerful, punchy and packed to the gills with implications. And they carry empty space within them, space for meaning—"space for the Kingdom," as Willie VanDoren put it last week in this pulpit.

I invite you to hear the Beatitudes again as though for the first time, to let them fall on your ears not as familiar platitude or doctrines, but as though you were hearing them hollered from a mountainside by an itinerant rabbi named Yeshua:

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

If the Beatitudes shock us or seem ridiculous, it is because they tell the story of a world that is foreign to us—as foreign to us, some twenty centuries later, as it was to the crowds who listened to the Lord in his own mortal day. They are, in the words of Patricia Farris, “more description than instruction, more report than directive. They compose a litany in which all the promises point to the same reality... the Beatitudes turn the world upside down with their shocking promise of hope to the hopeless, comfort to the bereaved, power to the powerless.”

The language of the Beatitudes is not the vocabulary of the law court, but rather the language of storytelling, of epic, of fairy tale. The Greek here is in the indicative rather than the imperative; until the final beatitude, the sentences are statements of reality as opposed to commands. Jesus does not exhort us to do, or to be, these qualities for the sake of reward. He is not telling us that we ought to do these things—be spiritually destitute, mourn, suffer oppression, hunger and thirst—in order that we might be blessed.

No, with these blessings the Lord speaks something far more radical. He is, actually, “calling it as he sees it.” He is speaking of something deeper and truer than the very real afflictions, spiritual and physical, that he sees in the crowd before him: desolation, mourning, hunger and thirst. He is teaching the crowds, teaching the disciples, teaching us, about the way things really are. Jesus is telling the story of our origin, which too few of us remember and even fewer really believe. He is telling us about life on our own beautiful island across the sea, our own nearly-forgotten homeland.

***In the Beatitudes,
Jesus teaches us
about the way
things really are.***

He is telling us, my fellow children, about the kingdom of heaven. And he tells us this story not in riddles (which is what divine love looks like to world-weary eyes) but in our mother tongue, the language of blessing.

God guards and guides us whether we notice it or not.

“Blessed,” or to use another translation, “honored,” are the outcasts and the miserable and the persecuted. The damaged are made whole; the afflicted are healed. This is Jesus’ claim: that somewhere that seems unimaginably far over the horizon but is really already in our own hearts, in some time that seems a long way off but is really already here, the kingdom of heaven waits. This is the kingdom that Swedenborg described for us this morning—the one in which “the intelligence and wisdom of one individual is shared with another . . . where everyone shares everything of value . . . where the very nature of love is to want what is one’s own to belong to another,” where no one is left out and no one is powerless, and above all no one is ever forsaken.

As our reading from Micah rather fiercely reminds us, God does not abandon his children. God guards and guides us, says Micah, whether we notice it or not. God is present at the start and the end, from one stretch of the journey to another. God turned Balak’s curse against Israel into Balaam’s blessing; God brought the Israelites out of Egypt; and just as surely, God turns shame into honor and isolation into embrace. And, in God’s shelter and protection, in our complete dependence on the Lord’s wisdom and love, we are each one of us empowered, loved, and made whole. To know God’s shelter and blessing is to admit our own utter poverty of spirit, and at the same time to claim our high calling and great worth. To know that God cradles us through our journeys is, in short, to inherit the Kingdom.

In the shelter of the divine, made whole in our poverty and girded with God’s wisdom, we are each summoned. We are called, brothers and sisters, not to bring the kingdom, which is already here, but to reveal the kingdom. We are to live so that the kingdom of heaven shines forth. We are to act so that the shocking promises of the Beatitudes cease to be shocking, so that the beauty promised in that

litany no longer turns the world upside down, but describes it as it is, right side up, blessings and all.

The road to the kingdom of God may not cross land or sea, but it is a road nonetheless, and all of us have journeys to make to get there. And it's not an easy journey—not even one we can imagine with our mortal minds, really. After all, “the nature of the wisdom of heaven’s angels is almost beyond comprehension because it so transcends human wisdom that there are no means of comparison—and anything transcendent seems to be nothing at all.” The glory of the kingdom makes it hard to see, at least at first.

So how are we to make our journeys toward the Kingdom? How are we to transfigure ourselves and the world so that the real world, the heavenly world, might come to be? And what supplies do we take with us on our journey home?

It's simple, really. Simple to say, and probably shockingly simple to do, if we can just convince ourselves of who we really are, and where we really are.

Put down the cabbages. You won't need them.

Put down your protections, your cynicism, your stratagems and darkness and doubt and self-blame. Put down the selfishness, the fear, the apathy. Lay them all down.

And then remember the blessings.

Remember the story of your homeland. Listen to the origin myth, and know that it is true.

Open your soul's eyes to the Kingdom.

Because, really, knowing that heaven is already here is all the baggage you will need. So travel lightly.

And start moving.

Leah Goodwin is an editor of *Our Daily Bread* and served the Cambridge Society of the New Jerusalem as a ministry intern and Director of Parish Ministries.



Daily Meditations

Monday, August 31

O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water. *Psalm 63:1*

To be spiritually poor, and yet to be rich, is to acknowledge at heart that no one knows, understands, and is wise, at all from self; but that a person knows, understands, and is wise, is all from the Lord. *Apocalypse Explained 118*

Tuesday, September 1

So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory.
Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you. *Psalm 63:2-3*

In such acknowledgment are all the angels of heaven, and because of this they are also intelligent and wise, and this in the same degree in which they are in the acknowledgment and perception that this is the case. *Apocalypse Explained 118*

Wednesday, September 2

So I will bless you as long as I live; I will lift up my hands and call on your name. *Psalm 63:4*

For they know and perceive that nothing of the truth that is called the truth of faith, and nothing of the good that is called the good of love, is from themselves, but that these are from the Lord... And because they know and acknowledge this, and also wish and love it to be so, Divine truth from which are all intelligence and wisdom continually flows in from the Lord, and this they receive in the measure in which they are affected by it, that is, love it... *Apocalypse Explained 118*

Thursday, September 3

My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast, and my mouth praises you with joyful lips when I think of you on my bed, and meditate on you in the watches of the night. For you have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy. *Psalm 63:5-7*

The nature of the wisdom of heaven's angels is almost beyond comprehension because it so transcends human wisdom that there are no means of comparison, and anything transcendent seems to be nothing at all. *Heaven and Hell 265*

Friday, September 4

My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me.

Psalm 63:8

We may gather how great angels' wisdom is from the fact that in heaven there is a communication that involves everyone. The intelligence and wisdom of one individual is shared with another: heaven is where everyone shares everything of value. *Heaven and Hell 267*

Saturday, September 5

Those who seek to destroy my life shall go down into the depths of the earth... But the king shall rejoice in God; all who swear by him shall exult, for the mouths of liars will be stopped. *Psalm 63:9&11*

The very nature of heavenly love is to want what is one's own to belong to another; so no one in heaven regards his or her good as authentically good unless it is someone else's as well. This is also the basis of heaven's happiness. Angels are led into it by the Lord, whose divine love has this same quality. *Heaven and Hell 267*

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The Swedenborgian Church bases its teachings on the Bible as illuminated by the works of Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772), a Swedish scientist and theologian. Swedenborg envisioned a new Christianity coming into being that was revitalized by the Spirit of the Lord.

We believe that there is one God, known by many names. We worship Jesus Christ as our Lord and our God, who made himself known to us through his life as the divine human Jesus of Nazareth, and whom we continue to know through his Holy Spirit, which operates through and around us.

We believe the Bible is the inspired Word of God, and that in its pages we find two parallel stories: the account of people, places, and events; and within that account a spiritual reflection of our individual and corporate journeys. The Bible, with its infinite depth of meaning, is truly a living Word, guiding us as we strive to make ourselves temples for the Lord by loving and serving others. We believe that, above all, "all religion relates to life, and the life of religion is to do good." The Swedenborgian Church exists to help people be open to the Lord's presence and leading, and to facilitate their spiritual well-being. We invite you to participate with others who are seeking to deepen their inner life and pursue their spiritual journey.



The Expulsion from Paradise

This window adorns the wall above the balcony at the Church of the Holy City in Washington, D.C. It depicts the start of our journey from the Garden of Eden to the New Jerusalem.

***Our Daily Bread* is a ministry of the Swedenborgian Church**

Our Beliefs in Brief:

- God is pure love, pure wisdom, and pure creative power.
- God became human in Jesus Christ and dwells with us.
- The Bible is God's Word, and has many levels of meaning.
- God loves and saves people of all religions.

*All Returns to:
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