

DECEMBER 2009

SERMONS AND MEDITATIONS OF THE SWEDENBORGIAN CHURCH

OUR DAILY BREAD



INNOCENCE

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

For we are fallen like the trees, our peace

Broken, and so we must

Love where we cannot trust,

Trust where we cannot know . . .

When what was made has been unmade

The Maker comes to His work.

- *Wendell Berry, A Timbered Choir, poem 1985.II*

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Leah Goodwin & Kevin Baxter, Editors

43 Hobart Square, Whitman, MA 02382

ourdailybreadmag@gmail.com • (781) 447-4901

www.odb-online.com

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From the Editors

Dear Readers,

The holidays are upon us. The season's frenetic pace can drag us down, making what should be a time of holiness, peace, and joy a mire of scheduling chaos and financial strain. For many of us, it is also a profoundly lonely, sad time, made worse by the surrounding social and financial whirlwinds.

It is easy to feel that Christmas has been besieged by less-than-noble cultural forces. But the consuming frenzy of the Christmas marketplace protects a deeper reality. Understanding that deeper reality does not require arcane knowledge or complicated rituals. It requires innocence.

Innocence has to do with how we engage the world. No matter what our age, no matter how much or what kind of life experience we may have had, we can be innocent. True innocence is marked by spiritual awareness, a receptivity to the possibility and beauty that surround us constantly, but too often disappear into the muck that is the business of living. Innocence is not about trying to control the things that are not in our control. It is about shifting our perspective.

Two thousand years of Christian tradition have rendered the improbable circumstances of Christ's birth and life comfortingly familiar—sometimes even old hat. But hearing the story again with innocent ears opens the door to deep comfort and even deeper wisdom. The Lord came to us as a little child so that we might know him and be one with him, so that the whole earth might "be filled with the knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea" (Isaiah 11:9). This is our prayer for you this Christmas season.

Many blessings,

Leah Goodwin & Kevin Baxter

In This Issue

<i>Humility and Prayer</i> by Rev. Kevin K. Baxter.....	2
<i>Loving the Lord</i> by Rev. Louis A. Dole.....	10
<i>Golden Opportunities</i> by Rev. Eric Hoffman.....	18
<i>Christmas Is a Box of Love</i> by Rev. Henry Korsten.....	26
<i>The Magic and the Mystery</i> by Rev. Ron Brugler.....	33

DEC 6 Humility and Prayer

—The Reverend Kevin K. Baxter

I Kings 3:3-14

Solomon loved the Lord, walking in the statutes of his father David; only, he sacrificed and offered incense at the high places. The king went to Gibeon to sacrifice there, for that was the principal high place; Solomon used to offer a thousand burnt offerings on that altar.

At Gibeon the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream by night; and God said, "Ask what I should give you."

And Solomon said, "You have shown great and steadfast love to your servant my father David, because he walked before you in faithfulness, in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart toward you; and you have kept for him this great and steadfast love, and have given him a son to sit on his throne today. And now, O Lord my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David, although I am only a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in. And your servant is in the midst of the people whom you have chosen, a great people, so numerous they cannot be numbered or counted. Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil; for who can govern this your great people?"

It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this. God said to him, "Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches, or for the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, I now do according to your word. Indeed I give you a wise and discerning mind; no one like you has been before you and no one like you shall arise after you. I give you also what you have not asked, both riches and honor all your life; no other king shall compare with you. If you will walk in my ways, keeping my statutes and my commandments, as your father David walked, then I will lengthen your life."

John 6:45-51, 53-58

[Jesus said,] "It is written in the prophets, 'And they shall all be taught by God.' Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me. Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father. Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.

"Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever."

I was listening to a lecture this year at Almont Summer School when the speaker mentioned our very own Reverend Gladys Wheaton in her talk. She mentioned something that I have heard Gladys say a thousand times without its meaning ever really sinking in for me. The speaker said that Gladys had the amazing gift of handing over compliments and important happenings to the Lord instantaneously by saying a quick three-word prayer: "Praise the Lord!" Immediately after this observation, of course, I felt obligated to shout out "Praise the Lord!" from the back of the chapel. It just seemed fitting.

I used to understand each "Praise the Lord" statement Gladys made more as an exclamation of goodness than as a conscious act of handing power over to God. Our church teaches, after all, that we are vessels or containers designed to be the embodiment of the Lord in the world—at least when things go according to the divine plan. Swedenborg tells us that adoration of the Lord consists in

“humiliation” (or, in contemporary English, “humility”), and that this humility consists in our being aware that we are simply shells and that our shells are animated by the love and goodness of God flowing into us.

When we hear verses like our reading from the Gospel today, we might ask, “What does that have to with humility? Our bodies, our shells, are animated. What does it mean to be animated?”

According to the dictionary, “animated” means:

1. Designed or constructed in the form of a moving cartoon.
2. Filled with activity, vigor, or spirit; lively.
3. Having life; alive.

Our physical forms have life through the Lord. Jesus said to his disciples, “Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.” In other words, unless we are uniting the love and wisdom of God (“of God” is the important part here) in ourselves, we are acting as other than God—which is other than animated. In other words, we are dead.

Jesus goes on to mention something that caught my eye as I was reading the passage. “This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died.” This comment caught my eye because Jesus is referring to the bread of affliction—the bread that did not have time to rise before the Israelites packed up and moved out of Egypt. Is this the bread that we are told corresponds to spiritual and heavenly things without impurities from

***Our physical forms
have life through the
Lord.***

the exodus? Well, yes and no. When we face times of temptation and struggle, the bread of affliction is the spiritual food that carries us through. But it is not the spiritual food that we are meant to eat all the time. In some ways, it is like the food at Almont Summer School—great while you’re there, but not the way most people eat at home.

The term “bread of affliction” doesn’t sound very tasty, understood either literally or spiritually. Spiritually speaking, the point of it is

to help us subdue and subjugate the evils and falsities that rise up through the external man into the rational. In other words, the point of this bread is to help us conquer our external and rational temptations. It is not appropriate for more regular sustenance than that. In fact, sometimes when we make a habit of living by the rules that help us get through tough times, we plunge into poverty and wretchedness, resulting in the renunciation of the enjoyments of the body—which, incidentally, is not the point. Asceticism is only effective as long as it promotes a notion of true humility. The danger of this type of life lies in the potential for feeling pride based on the intentional suffering one feels. Even the act of suffering can be taken into us as our own rather than God's. This is not to say that we must enjoy all the things we do. Acting in accord with what we know is right does not always make us immediately happy, but deep in our hearts we know we are closer to joy because of it.

Humility is about finding our true joy.

Both the bread of life and humility are about finding our true joy. Practicing humility—i.e., letting the Lord act through us—means that we are able to achieve the highest possible degree of conjunction with the Lord's love and wisdom as we become agents of use in the world—or as we fit into our unique places in the whole of creation. That's kind of nice to think about, isn't it? We each have a room in the divine mansion of existence that is designed uniquely for us. When we fit into this place, we are so happy, and so blissfully unaware that what we are doing is work, that we are at our most humble.

This is also the theme of our reading from I Kings today. David has passed away and is sleeping with his ancestors, and Solomon has risen to ascend the throne of his father. He never had the chance to attend king school, or even knight school. He had no royal vocational school or college education. He is just a youth.

But just by virtue of being innocent and humble, Solomon has an advantage. He was raised to have respect for the power of the Lord, so his first act as king of Israel is not legislative, administrative, or judicial. Rather, his first act as king is to travel to Gibeon, the highest mountaintop altar at which he could worship, and pray. His first step is handing his kingdom over to God in prayer.

He starts by praising the great deeds the Lord had allowed his father to accomplish. He continues by describing his insufficiency and talking about how the task of being king was of such incredible magnitude that only God can lead God's people. Then Solomon asks the Lord for help in being the king that God wanted him to be. He does not ask for long life, great military victories, or riches; he simply asks for a wise and discerning mind, so that he might be just and act kindly. And because of the way in which he asks for these things, the Lord promises him life and riches. Because Solomon acknowledges his role and his place as an instrument of God—because he humbles himself before the Lord—he is given life. So are we, when we do the same.

This approach may have been a bit easier for Solomon than for us. When we look at the inner sense of scripture, David represents the Lord before his coming, while Solomon represents the Lord after his coming. Solomon has been given the “proper” foundation, which equipped him to act in accordance with God's fullest design. His father led the people of Israel for 40 years—the same length of time for which the people of Israel wandered. The numerology of the Swedenborgian tradition tells us that this parallel shows that David's kingship was one of severe struggle and temptation—and temptation always means growth. The phrase “he slept with his ancestors” could mean that David had found a place of tranquility and peace in an existence of external worship. He was king in Hebron for seven years, which symbolizes that he had a love of faith to his fullest capability. But his 33 years as king in Jerusalem means that one step toward

***Solomon
acknowledges his
role as an instrument
of God.***

completion remained: handing over the throne to his son.

Solomon's trip to Gibeon could also mean that the Lord's church with all people gives all who serve the Lord from charity (i.e., love of the neighbor) an abundance of rational truth (i.e., our perceived truth) joined to good. The result is worship from spiritual good.

Much like the message from our Gospel reading, David represented a love for the truth, which is the bread that the ancestors ate, the bread of affliction. The bread of life, Solomon's kingship, comes from a love

for loving. His inheritance of the kingdom of Israel signifies what happens in our own spiritual lives when we progress from acting according to what we know is right to acting out of a real love for what is right. When this happens—when we actually love what is right and good—a transformation of state from natural to spiritual has fully taken hold. In the end, a true sense of humility is at the heart of such a transformation. The humility of Solomon, as well as the humility of Christ on the cross (by the way, both of these moments of humility are marked by prayer), are both clear signs of the importance of humility in our spiritual process.

*When we actually
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taken hold.*

I want to add an important point. Humility toward the Lord on someone's part does not excuse others from showing appreciation to that person. A person who has given of themselves, whether they express a desire to be thanked or not, should be appreciated! Their care and talent are manifestations of God in our world. Receiving appreciation helps all of us, whether we are in a natural, spiritual, or celestial state, understand that we have been doing the Lord's work. Praise the Lord!

Prayer

Loving and merciful Lord, help me always to honor and live up to the effort, dedication, and responsibility of those who have gone before me, those who have made themselves holy in your sight with humble and willing hearts and hands. I offer myself up to you, that I might find my uniquely bright, productive, and useful place in your kingdom. Amen.

The Rev. Kevin K. Baxter is the pastor of the Cambridge Society of the New Jerusalem, director of Almont Summer School, and co-editor of *Our Daily Bread*.



Daily Meditations

Monday, December 7

And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. *Isaiah 11:1*

There are two inmost things of heaven: innocence and peace. They are called inmost things because they proceed immediately from the Lord. *Heaven and Hell 285b*

Tuesday, December 8

And the spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord. *Isaiah 11:2*

Innocence is that from which is all the good of heaven; hence it follows that innocence and peace proceed from the Lord's divine love, and affect the angels from the inmost.

Heaven and Hell 285b

Wednesday, December 9

And shall make him of quick understanding in the fear of the Lord: and he shall not judge after the sight of his eyes, neither reprove after the hearing of his ears. *Isaiah 11:3*

As innocence is the inmost in all the good of heaven, it so affects minds that he who feels it seems to himself to be no longer his own master; and thus to be carried away with such delight, that all the delight of the world is comparatively nothing.

Heaven and Hell 282.2

Thursday, December 10

But with righteousness shall he judge the poor, and reprove with equity for the meek of the earth: and he shall smite the earth: with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips shall he slay the wicked. *Isaiah 11:4*

Innocence is such that all things of heaven can be implanted in it; for innocence is the receptacle of the truth of faith and of the good of love. *Heaven and Hell 330e*

Friday, December 11

The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them. *Isaiah 11:5*

That innocence is the receptacle of all things of heaven may be evident from the fact that innocence is to want to be led by the Lord. *Heaven and Hell 341*

Saturday, December 12

And the sucking child shall play on the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the cockatrice den. *Isaiah 11:7*

They who are in a state of innocence attribute nothing of good to themselves...they want to be led by the Lord...they love all that is good, and are delighted with all that is true, because they know and perceive that to love good...is to love the Lord, and that to love truth is to love the neighbor...they live content with their own things, whether they are few, or whether they are many, because the Lord alone knows what is profitable for them; hence they are not solicitous about future things.

Heaven and Hell 278

DEC 13 Loving the Lord

The Reverend Louis Dole

Deuteronomy 6:1-19

Now this is the commandment—the statutes and the ordinances—that the Lord your God charged me to teach you to observe in the land that you are about to cross into and occupy, so that you and your children and your children’s children, may fear the Lord your God all the days of your life, and keep all his decrees and his commandments that I am commanding you, so that your days may be long. Hear therefore, O Israel, and observe them diligently, so that it may go well with you, and so that you may multiply greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, as the Lord, the God of your ancestors, has promised you.

Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. When the Lord your God has brought you into the land that he swore to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give you—a land with fine, large cities that you did not build, houses filled with all sorts of goods that you did not fill, hewn cisterns that you did not hew, vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant—and when you have eaten your fill, take care that you do not forget the Lord, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. The Lord your God you shall fear; him you shall serve, and by his name alone you shall swear. Do not follow other gods, any of the gods of the peoples who are all around you, because the Lord your God, who is present with you, is a jealous God. The anger of the Lord your God would be kindled against you and he would destroy you from the face of the earth. Do not put the Lord your God to the test, as you tested him at Massah.

You must diligently keep the commandments of the Lord your God, and his decrees, and his statutes that he has commanded you. Do what is right and good in the sight of the Lord, so that it may go well with you, and so that you may go in and occupy the good land that the Lord swore to your ancestors to give you, thrusting out all your enemies from before you, as the Lord has promised.

John 14:15-27

"If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you. I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them." Judas (not Iscariot) said to him, "Lord, how is it that you will reveal yourself to us, and not to the world?" Jesus answered him, "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. Whoever does not love me does not keep my words; and the word that you hear is not mine, but is from the Father who sent me.

"I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid."

In the opening chapter of the Bible we find the words, "And God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.'" The Bible story begins with man created and tells of his first state when he lived close to the Lord, of how he turned to self and lost his Paradise,

and of the continued efforts of the Lord to bring man back into close relationship with Himself. The means to this are the truths of the Word.

All the Lord's commandments are Divine truths. They have their origin in the Divine nature and their sanction in the immutable order of the Divine wisdom. Man becomes the image of God and is conjoined to Him in the degree in which he learns and lives the Lord's commandments.

Many of the Lord's commandments and precepts are prohibitions. This is because of our ignorance. We need to be told not to do those things which will injure us. But the form in which a principle is stated does not change its character. All the laws and statutes of the Word are given in the form best adapted to secure their recognition and obedience. They are laws inherent in the Divine nature, and so are the laws for our growth and development. They are the laws of the Divine life and the laws of true human life.

When the Lord commands us to love Him with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength, He is only stating in the form of a commandment a primary and fundamental law of our being. He Himself calls it the "first and greatest commandment of the law," that is, the first in importance and greatest in the goodness which comes through it. The good which comes by obedience to it is the highest end of life, the greatest attainment that anyone can procure.

It is a matter of common observation that all our happiness and all our misery flow from love, our happiness from the love of what is good and true, and our misery from the love of the evil and false. The higher the object of our love, the greater our happiness. He who loves only physical ease and comfort has a kind of negative, animal-like happiness which consists merely in not being miserable. He who loves knowledge for the sake of knowing finds a stimulus to activity and finds a reward which mere physical life cannot give. He who sincerely loves his fellow men and seeks to help them and do them good lives in a state of happiness far above that of those interested

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only in intellectual pursuits. The love of family and children is a more interior love and brings greater joys than can come from the delights of mere friendship. It is a universal truth that the higher our love is, the happier we are.

The command to love the Lord is not an arbitrary law. The Divine love is not the love of ruling or of receiving homage. This law is one given us by a Lord who knows what is best for us, and is the law which, if obeyed, will bring the greatest blessings.

***The Lord is the one
Divine and Perfect
Man...and we are
created in His image
and likeness.***

The question then arises, "How can we love the Lord?" and "How can we express our love for Him?" The Lord has given us a plain and direct answer in the words of our text: "He that hath my commandments and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me: and he that loveth me shall be loved of my Father, and I will love him, and will manifest myself to him."

This is, however, a general answer, and to bring it to practical application involves knowledge of the basic truths concerning the Lord. We cannot love a Being of whom we can form no idea. To know nothing about God is to be godless. Nor can we love a mere creative force. We cannot love an abstraction. It is therefore impossible to love the Lord without forming some distinct idea of His character and believing in Him as a real and personal Being—and throughout the Scriptures He is described as a personal Being. Nor can we love a Divine Being who is vengeful and arbitrary. We might fear such a God, but we could not love Him. The teachings of the New Church are clear and definite here. The Lord is the one Divine and perfect Man, infinite in love, wisdom, and power, and we are created in His image and likeness.

Love and wisdom are human qualities, and we can form an idea of them from their existence in us. Whatever genuine love and wisdom we may have are from the Lord. Though the Divine love and wisdom are infinitely above our love and wisdom both in degree and in quality, yet they are similar.

We are not to love the Lord as a Person apart from His character, as some parents love their children. If we will analyze our love for our fellow men, we shall see that we do not love them merely as persons but as the embodiment of certain qualities that are congenial to us. We love others according to the degree in which they possess qualities of mind and heart which are homogeneous to our own natures. Two

Love is not a form of words. It expresses itself in acts.

persons may be very similar in appearance, but we may like one and not the other. Also, it is not uncommon for us to meet people whom we do not like at first, but come to love when we learn their true character. If it were the person we loved and not the qualities in the person, one might love a statue!

It is the Divine qualities or attributes in the Lord that we are to love. If we love those qualities wherever they are found, we love Him who is their embodiment and source. If we love innocence and purity of heart, if we love obedience to truths, if we love unselfish devotion to the welfare of others, if we love goodness and truth in others, provided also that we seek to develop these qualities in ourselves, we love the Lord—for these are Divine qualities, and to love the quality and character of anyone is to love him who possesses it. Those who love to do the commandments of the Lord love the Lord.

We do not have to know people personally to love them. There are those we know through their writings and the record of their deeds. There are many long gone before us to whom we owe much who are a constant inspiration to us, and for whom we feel a strong degree of affection. In the same way we can love the Lord. Though we cannot see Him with our physical eyes, we may know that He is perpetually present with us, giving us life, guiding and protecting us at every moment.

We should be careful to distinguish between love and mere feelings or emotions. There are those who make the loudest professions of affection for others, yet who will do nothing for those whom they pretend to love. Love which does not express itself in actions is not love. One may say "Lord, Lord," but not do the things which the Lord commands. Some think that the Lord does not need our help. And

indeed, "the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein." We cannot give anything to the Lord which He does not already possess. Yet He needs us, for He created us to be the means of receiving love and wisdom from Him and using these gifts in the service of others. Each one of us has relations to others, and opportunities for doing good which no one else possesses the power to do. If we do our tasks faithfully, we are helping the Lord.

We do not show our love just by telling a person that we love him. In fact, the more we love others, the less we are inclined to talk about it. Love is not a form of words. It expresses itself in acts. We can show our love to the Lord in every field of human activity. We can show it in seeking the material welfare of mankind, in doing our tasks well in the service of the community in which we live, in seeking the political welfare and freedom of the state and of the nation, and especially in seeking to know the Divine purposes for us and carry them out.

If we do these things, we love the Lord, praise Him in every daily task, and worship Him in every deed. To love the Lord with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength is to seek to learn of Him, to know His will, and to do His commandments in all the uses of our daily lives. Amen.

Prayer

O Lord, make us according to your heart. Amen.

- Brother Lawrence, 1611-91

The late Rev. Louis A. Dole
served as pastor of the
New Jerusalem Churches
in Fryeburg and Bath, Maine.



Daily Meditations

Monday, December 14

They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain: for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea. *Isaiah 11:9*

Genuine innocence is wisdom; for in proportion as anyone is wise, he loves to be led by the Lord. *Heaven and Hell 341*

Tuesday, December 15

And in that day there shall be a root of Jesse, which shall stand for an ensign of the people; to it shall the Gentiles seek: and his rest shall be glorious. *Isaiah 11:10*

The innocence of wisdom is genuine innocence, because it is internal; for it is of the mind itself; thus of the will and thence of the understanding itself; and when there is innocence in these, there is also wisdom. *Heaven and Hell 278*

Wednesday, December 16

And it shall come to pass in that day, that the Lord shall set his hand again the second time to recover the remnant of his people, which shall be left, from Assyria, and from Egypt, and from Pathros, and from Cush, and from Elam, and from Shinar, and from Hamath, and from the islands of the sea. *Isaiah 11:11*

Man is so created that when he grows old and becomes like a little child, the innocence of wisdom conjoins itself with the innocence of ignorance which he had in infancy, and so he passes into the other life as a true infant. *Arcana Coelestia 5608:9*

Thursday, December 17

And he shall set up an ensign for the nations, and shall assemble the outcasts of Israel, and gather together the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth. *Isaiah 11:12*

Since innocence is being led by the Lord and not by ourselves, all the people who are in heaven are in innocence, since all the people who are there love to be led by the Lord. They know that to be led by oneself is to be led by one's self-centeredness, and self-centeredness is loving oneself. *Heaven and Hell 280*

Friday, December 18

And the Lord shall utterly destroy the tongue of the Egyptian sea; and with his mighty wind shall he shake his hand over the river, and shall smite it in the seven streams, and make men go over dryshod. *Isaiah 11:15*

... Angels are in heaven to the extent that they are in innocence; that is, to the extent they are absorbed in divine good and divine truth, for being absorbed in these is being in heaven. Consequently, the heavens are differentiated according to their innocence. *Ibid.*

Saturday, December 19

And there shall be an highway for the remnant of his people, which shall be left, from Assyria; like as it was to Israel in the day that he came up out of the land of Egypt. *Isaiah 11:16*

This is why angels of the uppermost heaven have so much more wisdom than angels of the lower heavens. Because this is the nature of these angels, they are closest to the Lord, who is the source of their innocence, and they are also distanced from their self-centeredness so much that they seem to live in the Lord. In outward form they look simple, even like infants or little children, in the eyes of angels of the lower heavens. *Ibid.*

DEC 20 Golden Opportunities

_____ The Reverend Eric Hoffman

Exodus 15:22-27

Then Moses ordered Israel to set out from the Red Sea, and they went into the wilderness of Shur. They went three days in the wilderness and found no water. When they came to Marah, they could not drink the water of Marah because it was bitter. That is why it was called Marah.

And the people complained against Moses, saying, "What shall we drink?" He cried out to the Lord; and the Lord showed him a piece of wood; he threw it into the water, and the water became sweet.

There the Lord made for them a statute and an ordinance and there he put them to the test. He said, "If you will listen carefully to the voice of the Lord your God, and do what is right in his sight, and give heed to his commandments and keep all his statutes, I will not bring upon you any of the diseases that I brought upon the Egyptians; for I am the Lord who heals you." Then they came to Elim, where there were twelve springs of water and seventy palm trees; and they camped there by the water.

Luke 2:25-40

Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to

his mother Mary, “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple, but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem. When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.

In his magnum opus, the *Arcana Coelestia*, Swedenborg wrote:

Our external things have been formed according to the image of the world, and our internal things according to the image of heaven. It follows that our external things are sensitive to that which is of the world, and our internal things to that which is of heaven. The external things which are of the world are opened in us successively from infancy into adulthood, and in like manner the internal things. But the external things are opened by means of worldly phenomena, whereas the internal things are opened by means of heavenly action. That which is opened in us is twofold: our understanding and our will. Our understanding is opened by those things that bear relation to truth, and our will is opened by those things that bear relation to good. All the things of the universe, both physical and spiritual, bear relation to truth and good. Those things which bear relation to truth are called knowledges, and those things which bear relation to good are called loves and affections... [paraphrased from Arcana Coelestia, paragraph 9279.2]

This, in a nutshell, is Swedenborg’s explanation of how humans learn, not only about the world around us but also about our internal processes. Personally, I think it a refreshing image to picture our education as a gradual “opening,” like a flower that grows from a

bud into its full potential. Too often our education feels more like a “stuffing,” like someone opening up the lid to our brain case and seeing how many facts and experiences they can cram in there. The idea of “opening” feels more loving to me, as if someone were gently coaxing me into my full potential as a human being.

Swedenborg also addresses where our teaching comes from—namely, that our understanding is taught by what we perceive in the world around us, and our will is taught by our connection to spiritual reality. It seems to me that since our will and understanding are conjoined within us, even to the point where we have trouble distinguishing one from the other sometimes, the source of our teaching needs to be conjoined as well. This is a drawn-out way of saying that the Lord teaches us in part through what we experience in the world, and not only about factual things, but also about deeper and more personal things. The Lord uses the world to teach us about ourselves.

I find in my life that I learn best from that which I love most, and I think that most people can probably say the same thing. For myself, I find that spending time in nature can be an incredibly revealing experience. Watching animals in particular can reveal a multitude of things about how humans operate, both as individuals and as societies. For example, I remember a visit to the St. Louis Zoo many years back. I’ve visited quite a few zoos, and sometimes I can get into a mood where I think I’ve seen it all before. But on this particular visit, it seemed that whenever I turned around, there was something happening that was new and worth watching.

The Lord uses the world to teach us about ourselves.

I watched a rhinoceros pacing back and forth at the edge of his enclosure. Sometimes this sort of behavior indicates that an animal is bored and needs some sort of enrichment, but in this case, the rhino was extremely motivated. Just on the other side of the barrier, there was a groundskeeper raking grass. It seemed obvious that the rhino really wanted to let that guy know that he was trespassing into rhino territory, but the guy was just out of reach. The scene brought to mind some people I’ve known

who have a very guarded mood about them; they are always on the lookout for anyone who violates their boundaries, and are just looking for an excuse to get angry. Very often a person won't tell you where the boundaries are, and part of them just hopes you'll cross them so they'll feel their anger is justified. It's amazing how many rhinos are out there, and it's also amazing how many of them have driver's licenses. I don't think it's a mistake that both rhinos and drivers have horns at their disposal, and that they're used in pretty much the same way.

More to the point, though, I can identify days on which I've been the rhino. I confess that there have been times when getting angry feels pretty good, and I have gone looking for any target that presented itself. Then it's all huffing and puffing and telling the world that if it crosses the line, it's going to get trampled. But when we look deeper, we know it's not that one particular groundskeeper that's ticking off the rhino. That rhino is just looking to protect what he thinks is his. Likewise, it's really a deeper sense of insecurity and fear that makes us so territorial and combative.

*We learn best from
that which we
love the most.*

In another part of the zoo I found a smaller dirt-filled enclosure that contained a small colony of prairie dogs. I noticed that one in particular had lost some of the fur on her underside, so I figured she had a litter of pups in one of the burrows. Sure enough, out of one burrow walked three baby prairie dogs, no bigger than the palm of your hand, taking what seemed to be their first steps on shaky legs into a new and sun-filled world. It reminded me of how many times I've been in that same position, stepping into a new situation, a new job, a new church, feeling unsteady and looking for something familiar—something that would help me to feel more at home. In the prairie dogs' case, it was a morsel of food—a chunk of carrot that was about as big as a pup's head. Food has served well as a comforter for me, too.

I also went into the herpetology building that day to look at all the reptiles and amphibians. Many people don't enjoy the reptile house, which is difficult for me to understand. What could be more

We are always in communication with God, receiving signals from the Spirit every single moment of our lives.

fascinating that being close to these huge, venomous reptiles with only a thin sheet of glass between you? It's invigorating! It's true that many reptiles and amphibians are rather drably colored to provide them with some natural camouflage, but that place was also filled with just as much color, grace, and beauty as you might find in a bird display. There were snakes that looked like they were covered in emeralds, each scale a small, reflective jewel. There were alligators and crocodiles that were ungainly on land, but in the water were as graceful and precise as a dancer. There were salamanders and toads, regarded by some as repulsive creatures, that were found in all the colors of the rainbow, or had bellies the exact color of a campfire.

Perhaps this illustrates best the point I would like to make this morning. Just as God's magnificence is expressed even in snakes and toads, the most fundamental things in this world carry in them a message that we may perceive and put to use. In this light, we are always in communication with God, receiving signals from the Spirit every single moment of our lives. Life is fundamentally an invigorating experience! Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote, "Earth's crammed with heaven, and every common bush is afire with God." On one level, the earth is only the external environment in which we live, but it is also an expression of the Divine, reflecting an abundance of insights into what's going on inside of us.

God is always speaking to us, in ways that we are fully capable of understanding, but it is up to us whether or not we listen. That day in the zoo was incredibly insightful for me, but not because of anything special the zoo was doing. Those animals behave like that every day. It was insightful because I was looking for insight. I was listening for God.

So few people really know how to listen! Simeon and Anna knew how to listen, and it helped them to recognize the presence of God when the infant Jesus was brought to them. But many of us wear blinders to all the exciting things going on around us and live life moving from one immediate external concern to the next. How

would our gospel story have been different if Simeon had been fixated on some mundane concern and was merely going through the motions in the temple that day? What if Anna had been so consumed by prayer that she didn't notice who came in and went out around her? How many of us here have had the experience where you are so focused on a book you are reading that you didn't hear the ruckus that was going on in the next room, or right beside you? Every healthy person possesses the ability to expand or contract our field of attention—which is a good and useful thing, except that many of us are more comfortable keeping our attention fairly narrow and focused on self-centered things. If we never allow ourselves to expand our awareness—at least every once in a while—then we will miss out on the inspiration that reaches out to us from our environment.

When we are able to see God's hand in everything, then our lives become enriching. God's presence is like the wood thrown into Marah's bitter waters, making them sweet and nourishing. As a result, we too will come to a place in our life's journey where twelve springs of water and seventy palm trees, representing an abundance of opportunities for us to grow, can be found.

We are truly blessed in this day and age. Thanks to places like zoos and museums and newspapers and magazines, we have access to far more of the external world than Swedenborg ever did. We can draw upon more examples and images than ever before. Participating in the Lord's Church means that we are open to all the teaching aids God utilizes, and can recognize them as golden opportunities to understand more fully how the universe operates. The next time we go out into the world—and it may even be today—let us open our eyes, hearts, and minds to the wondrous things going on around us and ask ourselves, "What is God teaching me here?" We can treat everything that happens as a divine lesson in life. We can see every traffic jam as an exercise in patience, every child as an example of innocence and un-self-conscious joy, every snowdrift as an example of how the Lord protects the coming spring, and every bare tree as a reminder of the continuing cycles of life.

*When we are able
to see God's hand
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The Lord is truly at hand—at our very fingertips—wanting more than anything to teach us to love.

Prayer

O Heavenly Creator, we understand that your light and life are in every thing and every event and every person we encounter. We thank you for the opportunities we receive in each and every moment of our lives to know our creator and to participate in the never-ending cycle of creation. Please help us to keep our eyes open, our senses alert, and our minds receptive to the rhythms and workings of the earth. May your inspirations guide us into a life of putting your love into action, bringing your joy and peace into the world. Amen.

The Rev. Eric Hoffman is the pastor of the Virginia Street Church in St. Paul, Minnesota.



Daily Meditations

Monday, December 21

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. *John 1:1-2*

Innocence is the primary thing in the Lord's kingdom, and is the celestial itself there. *Arcana Coelestia 3994.7*

Tuesday, December 22

All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made.
In him was life; and the life was the light of men. *John 1:3-4*

When the Lord was in the world He was innocence itself in respect to His Human, and consequently everything that belongs to innocence proceeds from Him.

Arcana Coelestia 10132

Wednesday, December 23

And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not.
He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not. *John 1:5, 10*

[In Heaven], the most deceitful sometimes appear high above the head, but their hell is deep under the heel of the foot. They are the modern antediluvians. They ensnare by pretense of innocence, of pity, and of various good affections, with persuasion. *Arcana Coelestia 2754*

Christmas Sermon

CHRISTMAS IS A BOX OF LOVE

The Reverend Henry Korsten

Luke 2:1-20

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Matthew 2:1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'" Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage."

When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 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.

John 3:16

For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

I would like to share a story with you about a little girl who helped her mother prepare for Christmas.

While in the kitchen baking cookies and cakes, she asked her mother about the meaning of the holiday. Her mother told her that Christmas was the time of the year during which we celebrate the birthday of Jesus, God's son. The little girl asked her mother why Jesus

didn't get the presents if it was his birthday. The mother explained to her little girl the tradition of the gift exchange as a way of showing love for one another, and then the matter was dropped.

The evening before Christmas, the little girl brought a gift-wrapped package from her room and placed it under the tree.

"What's in the box?" her mother asked.

***Love was all the
little girl had, but
O! how meaningful
she made it!***

"A gift for Jesus. I am leaving it under the tree so he can open it tonight while I am asleep."

The mother didn't want her daughter to be disappointed, so during the night she opened the package. There was nothing in it!

The next morning her daughter raced into the living room to see if her package had been opened. It had!

She shouted to her mother, "Jesus opened His present last night!"

The mystified mother walked over to her daughter and asked what she had given Jesus.

The little girl explained, "I figured that Jesus has just about everything he needs, and I can't give him much because I'm just a little girl. But there is one thing I can give him. So I thought to give him a box of love."

The little girl has the right idea. Love was all she had, but O! how meaningful she made it! She gave the idea form and shape by wrapping a box filled with invisible love—love that came from her heart. She felt she had to do something to express it.

That little girl reminds me of the shepherds who were told by the angels about Jesus' birth. The shepherds in Israel at that time were often the youngest males in the family. Older shepherds taught these young kids the skills of the trade. The young fellows had to love their sheep. They also had to have confidence in themselves; as well, they had to have the courage to fight off wild animals that preyed on the sheep.

Since they apprenticed under a chief shepherd, and being the youngest males in the family, the shepherds weren't paid much money and didn't have many possessions. Even so, they looked after the sheep, which were part of their family's wealth. They themselves had barely enough to eat on their long journeys. On many a night they took turns sleeping under the stars and standing guard over the flock when they were too far away from their usual shelters, which often were nothing more than caves in the mountains. Shepherds were plain and unpretentious in their approach to nature and life. They had to be, in order to deal with the vagaries of the weather.

The angels specifically told the shepherds about the birth of the Lord Jesus. We might safely assume that shepherds would have been more accepting of the message of the angels and the birth of Jesus than many other people in the Holy Land at that time. Why? Because the shepherds had a childlike, unspoiled, and innocent attitude about life, because of the way they lived with nature. In that attitude, the shepherds went to see the Lord Jesus, and they paid him homage.

This is the heart of the similarity between the shepherds and that little girl whose mother told her about Jesus' birthday. The little girl too, because of her age, had an unspoiled and innocent attitude towards Jesus when she wrapped the box of love and put it under the tree.

The story of that little girl and her box of love made a great impact on me, and, I believe, on many other people as well. Love is the greatest of all motivators to do good things in life.

I think it is good to think about Christmas as a celebration of love. I suppose many of us have gone through the more sophisticated preparations for Christmas by now. But I don't think that any one of us has wrapped and decorated an empty box containing invisible love. We have most likely instead put something visible in a box and placed it under the tree to express our love. Modern adults are not shepherds, nor do they have the simple, unspoiled, and innocent attitude of the little girl.

***Love is the greatest
of all motivators.***

But no matter what the gift in the box might be, it will be motivated by love, I am sure. God's gift of love to mankind was his becoming visible as the little baby Jesus amongst us, and thus we, too, tend to make our love visible.

The Wise Men teach us to commit the powers of our love, our minds, and our thoughts to good.

In contrast to the poor shepherds who paid homage to Jesus by just being there at the stable, the Wise Men brought expensive gifts to the newborn baby Jesus. We might want to look at what motivated them to bring such gifts and what possible use those gifts might have.

Gold translates into power—a considerable amount of it, because an ounce of gold is worth a whole lot of money. In this world, we know that money is power. Indeed, in our modern-day society we need the power of money, both to buy life essentials and also to acquire and provide the good things in life.

Our gifts of money to the Christmas Bureau, the food bank, or other charitable institutions could be considered boxes of visible love. These gifts of money come from a loving heart—a loving heart that expresses itself in the form of money. In fact, by giving money away, we give away a certain amount of our own power.

The Wise Man who brought gold as a gift to the Lord Jesus was motivated in an inner sense to give him the power to love in service to the Lord Jesus. It is a godly gift, and the first gift that was given.

The next gift was frankincense. Because by itself it has a pungent odor, it is mixed with other fragrances. It was used in Jesus' time as a fixative for ingredients that produce pleasant-smelling odors.

The third gift, myrrh, was often used as a mixing agent because of its pleasing scent. Once the frankincense was mixed with the myrrh, it was then slowly burned to generate a pleasant-smelling, smoky perfume. Many presents under the tree will be boxes of perfume that show love on the part of the giver.

The mind carries thoughts, much as frankincense carries the pleasant-smelling odors of the myrrh. The mind works on an inner spiritual level, which produces thoughts. It takes thoughts to bring

about actions. When we come to think of it, deeds are a result of thoughts and thoughts are the results of the mind being inspired by love.

I believe that the visit of the three Wise Men is more than a story about people visiting the Baby Jesus. I believe that the visit of the Wise Men is an example for us in how to approach the Lord God. The Wise Men teach us to commit the power of our love, our mind, and thoughts, which together manifest as doing good things in life.

This Christmas, we might want to wrap a virtual box of love that includes all the things we can do all during the year to show our commitment of love, both to the Lord God and to one another. We might want to look at our boxes of love as blank cheques of love that we honor when someone needs our loving care.

A Christmas Prayer

Dear Lord, may all who work for a world of peace and reason be granted the gifts of strength and courage. May the good that dwells within every human heart be magnified. May the blessings of truth and understanding be ours. May the joys of the Christmas season dwell within all of us, and as we grow and build for tomorrow, may we live in sympathy with all others. Amen.

The Rev. Henry Korsten was pastor of the Church of the Holy City in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. This Christmas reflection appeared in the *Edmonton Newsletter* in December 1999.



Thursday, December 24

He came unto his own, and his own received him not.
But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become
the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name:

John 1:11-12

Indeed Gentiles are so disposed as to listen readily, when taught by angels about the truths of faith, and that the Lord rules the universe, and to be easily imbued with faith and thus to reject their idols. For this reason Gentiles who have lived a moral life and in mutual charity and innocence, are regenerated in the other life. *Arcana Coelestia 1032.3*

Friday, December 25

Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. *John 1:13*

While they live in the world the Lord is present with them in charity and innocence, for there is nothing of charity and innocence except from the Lord. The Lord also gives them a conscience of what is right and good according to their religion, and insinuates innocence and charity into that conscience; and when there is innocence and charity in the conscience, they easily suffer themselves to be imbued with the truth of faith from good. *Ibid.*

Saturday, December 26

And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth. *John 1:14*

When a human is being regenerated, he is conceived anew, is born, becomes an infant, and grows up to maturity, which is effected by means of truth implanted in good; and insofar as he then comes into genuine good, so far he comes into the good of internal innocence, which innocence dwells in wisdom.

Arcana Coelestia 10021.2

The Magic and the Mystery

The Reverend Ron Brugler

27 DEC

Isaiah 7:13-16

And he said, Hear ye now, O house of David; Is it a small thing for you to weary men, but will ye weary my God also?

Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.

Butter and honey shall he eat, that he may know to refuse the evil, and choose the good.

For before the child shall know to refuse the evil, and choose the good, the land that thou abhorrest shall be forsaken of both her kings.

Matthew 1:18-25

Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise: When as his mother Mary was espoused to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Ghost.

Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not willing to make her a publick example, was minded to put her away privily.

But while he thought on these things, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a dream, saying, Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost.

And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name Jesus: for he shall save his people from their sins.

Now all this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying,

Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us.

Then Joseph being raised from sleep did as the angel of the Lord had bidden him, and took unto him his wife:

And knew her not till she had brought forth her firstborn son: and he called his name Jesus.

I have been asked several times recently whether or not I really believe in the virgin birth. It seems that every year at this time people want some straight answers about the birth of Jesus.

First, I should say that, as a rule, the church as a whole does not insist that we believe in this doctrine. There are good reasons for both accepting and rejecting it. First of all, the text tells us that Jesus was to be born without a human father. It is only logical that if Jesus was,

***If God created
the universe, is
arranging a virgin
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deal?***

as we believe, a very special person, he would have had a very special entry into this world. On the other hand, the genealogies given in Matthew and Luke trace Jesus through Joseph, which would be somewhat strange if Joseph was not his real father. As well,

when Jesus stayed behind at the Temple, Mary said to Jesus, "Your father and I have been looking anxiously for you." It is also significant that the virgin birth is not mentioned in any other part of the New Testament except Luke and Matthew.

Jewish tradition has it that in the birth of every child there are three partners—the father, the mother, and the spirit of God. It is believed that no child could ever be born without the Spirit. So, could we say that the story of the birth of Jesus was just a lovely, poetic way of saying that even if he had a human father, the Holy Spirit of God was operative in his birth in a unique way? I don't think so. To me it is making a mountain out of a molehill. If you believe that God created the universe, is arranging a virgin birth that big of a deal?

What is life's biggest temptation? What is it that pulls us away from being who we are called to be? I think more than anything else, it that after very little or no investigation, we make conclusions about some of life's greatest mysteries and truly believe that our opinion is right. We may even argue with others about it. I'm sure we have all been guilty of making up our minds about little things, or about people, believing them to be good or bad, smart or not so smart, and therefore not allowing them to be anything else in our eyes besides what we see. We make up our minds about ourselves, about what can or cannot be; and we make up our minds about God, about what is and what can be, and about what God can do for us or the world.

Who gave us that right? GOD DID!

How many times have you thought something through, only to discover that it was wrong? So maybe the greatest temptation in life is to believe we are right—to refuse to explore any other options or possibilities and instead believe something just because we believe it.

I remember during theological school arguing with another student about some particularly hot-button issue. He became very angry and said, “I’m going to believe it, even if I know it’s wrong!”

Sometimes we hang onto believing in something we shouldn’t, but sometimes we also stop ourselves from believing in something we should. We live in a time that teaches us to believe that with enough information we can know all the answers. This belief allows a destructive “know-it-all” kind of pride to emerge. At the local Interfaith Counseling Centre there is a sign in the office that says, “Attention, all teens and young adults: Now is the time to quit school, leave home and support yourself, while you still know everything.” We can laugh at that, but we can’t blame our teens for having that kind of attitude. We carry a lot of arrogance with us throughout our lives in the way we think about and evaluate things. This is of tremendous concern to me because this way of thinking gets in the way of faith.

I want to point out that I don’t think we have to believe everything the churches teach, or that one hundred percent of everything in the Bible is factual or prescriptive. Jesus died to take away our sins, not our minds. But there are mysteries in life that don’t need explanation. While we should enter intellectually into the mysteries of faith, we should not enter the mysteries of faith with our intellect alone. Thirteenth-century theologian Thomas Aquinas said that some matters of faith cannot be completely explained so that they are believable, but that if you do believe them they make sense.

Maybe the greatest temptation in life is to believe we are right.

I have no trouble believing in the virgin birth—and yes, I know about the birds and the bees! Some aspects of life are magical and mysterious, qualities that make them all the more beautiful. During Swedenborg’s scientific [pre-Illumination] period, he wrote a book detailing how he thought creation had taken place—and he wrote

from a scientific point of view. If his or anyone else's explanation of creation or the theory of evolution is true down to the last detail, that accuracy does not take God out of the picture; it merely outlines God's divine process of creation. I think science has given us more reason to feel awe and wonder at what God has done. There is an ever-increasing list of eminent scientists who say that their discoveries have strengthened their faith. If it turns out that the virgin birth

***Some realities
we can only
comprehend through
eyes that want to
know holiness.***

isn't true, so what? Mystery still abounds. Astronaut James Irwin said of his 1971 Apollo 15 trip to the moon that "the earth reminded us of a Christmas tree ornament moving in the blackness of space. As we got farther and farther away it diminished in size; finally it shrank to the size of a marble . . . the most

beautiful marble you can imagine. That beautiful, warm, living object looked so fragile, so delicate, that if you touched it with a finger it would crumble and fall apart." Seeing this has to change a man, has to make a man appreciate God's creativity and love.

Let's return to the text. Mary was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. The term "Holy Spirit" is used several times in Mathew, so that the reader has no doubt it was the Holy Spirit that got Mary pregnant. Some would look at this statement and say, "Well, it's to emphasize the virgin birth." A closer look reveals that the story is not trying to convince us of the virgin birth; rather, it is underlining the involvement of the Holy Spirit. It doesn't labor over the issue.

In biblical Jewish thought, the Holy Spirit had very definite functions. In essence, it brought God's truth to humanity. It was the Holy Spirit who told the prophets what to say. So, then, Jesus was to be *the one* to bring *the truth*. In other words, Jesus was the one to tell us what God is like and what God wants us to be. In Jesus alone can we see the perfect example of what God is and what we ought to be.

The Jewish biblical-era belief was that the Holy Spirit not only brought God's truth to us, but also enabled us to recognize the truth when we see it. Jesus opens our eyes to see that truth. The amazing paradox is that, if we cannot put our own prejudices, our own notions, our own limited beliefs aside and accept that Jesus was born of the

Holy Spirit, we are closing our eyes and not seeing the Truth that is before us. The paradox is that the story is not really about the virgin birth; it is about the Holy Spirit being in Jesus. If you look only at the virgin birth, you miss the truth that is before your eyes.

There are magical and mysterious realities we can only comprehend if we look with eyes that want to know holiness. The only ones who go away from God empty are those who are full of themselves. Just as Christmas can be a time of hassles and stress, so too can it be a sacred time. How we perceive the truths before us is up to us. Is a sunset just light filtered through particles of water, or is it a gift from God? Are lovers just two nervous systems reacting to each other, or are they a divine present to each other? Is a baby's laughter simply a conditioned response, or is it God laughing with us? Is the story of the birth of Christ just a story, or is it a record of God's unquenchable love for his children?

Reason and logic cannot answer these questions. They are mysteries of faith to be enjoyed when we allow the Holy Spirit to answer them for us.

Prayer

O Loving Lord, let the mystery of your being illuminate my mind and heart, from this time forth and ever more. Amen.

The Rev. Ron Brugler is a former president of the Swedenborgian Church. He has served several parishes throughout his career.



Daily Meditations

Monday, December 28

For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace. *Isaiah 9:6*

The Lord from His own power conjoined His external man with His internal man, and filled His knowledges with celestial things, and implanted them in the celestial things, and this in fact according to Divine order . . . *Arcana Coelestia 1616.5*

Tuesday, December 29

Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even for ever. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this. *Isaiah 9:7*

. . . first in the celestial things of His childhood, next in the celestial things of the age between childhood and infancy; and finally in the celestial things of His infancy. *Ibid.*

Wednesday, December 30

And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.

And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid.

Luke 2:8-9

And thus at the same time He became, as to the Human Essence, innocence itself and love itself, from which are all innocence and all love in the heavens and on earth. Such innocence is true infancy, because it is at the same time wisdom.

Ibid.

Monday, December 31

And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord. *Luke 2:10-11*

While man is in the womb he is in a state of innocence; therefore his first state after birth is a state of innocence; and the Lord dwells in man only in his innocence; consequently He especially dwells in him when he is as it were Innocence. *Divine Love and Wisdom 3*

Tuesday, January 1

And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, that the shepherds said one to another, "Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us." *Luke 2:15*

They who are merciful and innocent invite all the good who are in their society to love them, and so move them that they wish better to them than to themselves and love them from all their heart and all their soul. For innocence and mercy is the Lord, and the Lord inspires from Himself, in endless variety, all the good, thus good spirits and angels. *Spiritual Experiences 2416*

Wednesday, January 2

And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. *Luke 2:16*

Infants in heaven are led from external innocence, which is called the innocence of infancy, to internal innocence, which is the innocence of wisdom. *Heaven and Hell 341*

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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.

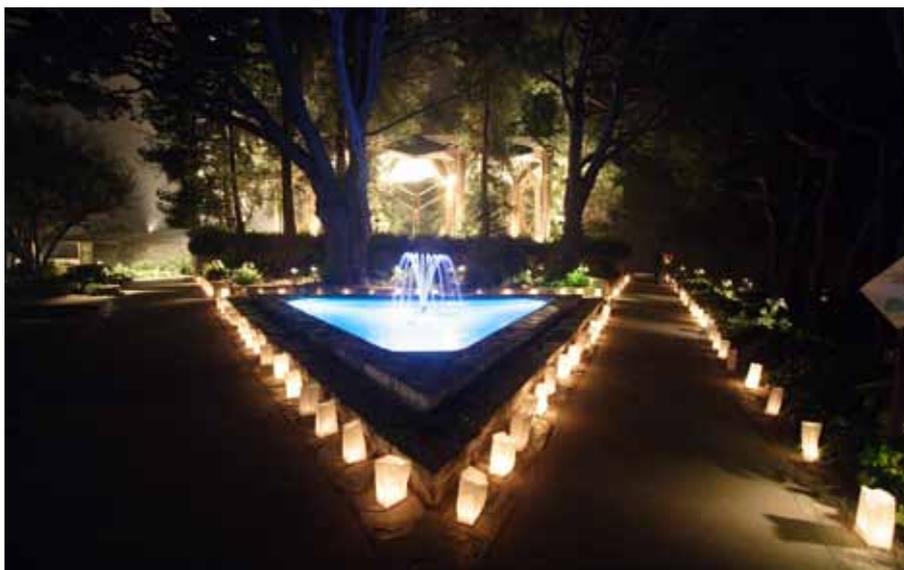
We believe the Bible is the inspired Word of God, and that in its pages we find two parallel stories: the account of people, places, and events; and within that account a spiritual reflection of our individual and corporate journeys. The Bible, with its infinite depth of meaning, is truly a living Word, 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.



Wayfarers Chapel at Christmastime

Above: The interior of the Chapel during the candlelight service.

Below: The luminaria lighting the walkway from the Visitor's Center to the Chapel.



***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:
Leah Goodwin, Editor
43 Hobart Square
Whitman, MA 02382*

