

MARCH 2010

SERMONS AND MEDITATIONS OF THE SWEDENBORGIAN CHURCH

OUR DAILY BREAD



WHOLENESS

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

Creator, Redeemer, and Savior God,
in you is the fullness of mercy, goodness, and gentleness.

You alone are just and holy, innocent and pure.

Only in you is all pardon, all grace, and all glory,
without beginning and without end.

- *St. Francis of Assisi (1182-1226)*

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From the Editors

Dear Readers,

Lent is among the oldest traditions of the Christian calendar. The observance of a season of preparation for Easter probably began during the first or second century CE. By the fourth century, Lent had been standardized to contain forty days (excluding Sundays, which are understood as weekly feasts of Christ's resurrection, "mini Easters," if you will).

It may seem odd that this issue of *Our Daily Bread* focuses on wholeness. After all, we often associate Lent with spiritual struggle and temptation, not to mention deprivation (ever given up a favorite food or a bad habit for the season?). But the season's daunting images and practices are not ends in themselves; there is a deeper, larger point to Lent. From the moment of our creation, the Lord wants us to be whole: fully realized as God's image and likeness, fully joyful, fully loving and wise, fully at peace one with another, fully ourselves. This is what it means to both *be* heaven and *be in* heaven.

But this holy end cannot happen without effort on our part. It is appropriate that the word "Lent" comes from the Anglo-Saxon word *lencten*, meaning "spring," because wholeness and growth go hand-in-hand. Just as our body's cells replace themselves continuously and plants grow new shoots toward the sun, so our souls must always explore new territory, encounter new terrain, reach forward into (or sometimes just cope with) the unknown. At the same time, we must remain open to God so that he can cleanse, shape, and renew us along the way. Not easy!

Then again, worthwhile things rarely are.

Many blessings,
Leah Goodwin & Kevin Baxter

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MAR 7 Bridging Opposites

Rev. F. Robert Tafel

Ezekiel 33:1-11

The word of the Lord came to me: O Mortal, speak to your people and say to them, If I bring the sword upon a land, and the people of the land take one of their number as their sentinel; and if the sentinel sees the sword coming upon the land and blows the trumpet and warns the people; then if any who hear the sound of the trumpet do not take warning, and the sword comes and takes them away, their blood shall be upon their own heads. They heard the sound of the trumpet and did not take warning; their blood shall be upon themselves. But if they had taken warning, they would have saved their lives.

But if the sentinel sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet, so that the people are not warned, and the sword comes and takes any of them, they are taken away in their iniquity, but their blood I will require at the sentinel's hand. So you, mortal, I have made a sentinel for the house of Israel; whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. If I say to the wicked, "O wicked ones, you shall surely die," and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from their ways, the wicked shall die in their iniquity, but their blood I will require at your hand. But if you warn the wicked to turn from their ways, and they do not turn from their ways, the wicked shall die in their iniquity, but you will have saved your life.

Now you, mortal, say to the house of Israel, Thus you have said: "Our transgressions and our sins weigh upon us, and we waste away because of them; how then can we live?" Say to them, As I live, says the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from their ways and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways; for why will you die, O house of Israel?

Matthew 18:15-20

“If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

“Moreover, if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that ‘by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.’ And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector. Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again I say to you that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there in the midst of them.”

The sinner—and the one sinned against. Listening—and refusing to listen. Being rejected (as “a heathen and tax collector”) versus being included (as “one of the fold”). Being bound (or loosed) on earth—and bound (or loosed) in heaven. Two (or three) agreeing on what to ask in prayer—and “it will be done.”

Jesus’ teaching stands in contrast to the usual way of acting and thinking. His lessons were designed to overcome the idea of retaliation—the idea of giving back to others in the same way that they give—“An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.” Jesus endeavored to “bridge opposites.” He asked his disciples then, and asks us now,

to think and do differently, to overcome our natural inclinations, to bridge differences and seek integration—a reconciliation of opposites.

On the literal level, Jesus provides sound practical advice about dealing with the problem of being wronged or “sinned against.” How much violence could be avoided, how many civil court cases would be resolved at the first and most basic level of human interaction—person-to-person—if Jesus’ advice were followed!

The Lord asks us to deal with our fellow men and women in a similar way, a way that echoes his dealings with us. We are first to go alone to our offender in the power and strength of kind affection. It might be that the person causing offense did so unknowingly. Certainly we know of times when we have said or done something that caused unintended hurt in another. Moving first in love can build a bridge to opposition and heal hurt. This is the way the Lord approaches us with his love. If love is rejected, there is a second step, the bringing of two or three witnesses—that is, an appeal to truth for instruction. Perspectives can be changed and insights gained when several minds are brought together to solve a problem. The one who has caused offense may see things differently when there is agreement

***Jesus asks us to
bridge differences
and seek integration.***

among several others. So if people reject the Lord’s love, he seeks to appeal to reason by his truth. Lastly, there is appeal to external authority, “the whole church.” Besides appealing to people through love and wisdom, the Lord also appeals to one’s external knowledge of what is right. If that appeal also is not heard, the Lord still does not exclude people from heaven. They exclude themselves.

On the literal level alone, today’s Bible story contains a powerful and clear message about how we can deal constructively with the problem of sin and evil in human interaction. But this is just the first part of the story’s meaning.

We also have a conviction in our church that the Bible speaks to the spiritual conditions of men and women in every time by means of its inner spiritual sense, in what Emanuel Swedenborg called “the language of correspondences.”

The bridging of opposites within each of us is one spiritual message in our Bible story today. This is of such great concern that Jesus declares: "Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." There is nothing more foreign or opposite to the ways of heaven than that of our own natural human inclination and affections, referred to in the Bible as "the earth." "Behold, I create new heavens and a new earth," says our Lord. The central teaching of our church is that there is a purpose to life, and that purpose is the Lord's making a heaven from the human race. The life of heaven is formed in people in freedom according to reason, through a lifelong process of regeneration. In this process, the higher and lower regions of our mind or spirit are developed and brought into accord so that we may ultimately be "of one mind." This is one meaning of being bound on earth and also being bound in heaven: if we were to let the two remain in opposition within ourselves, they would be "loosed on earth," meaning neither integrated into nor made a part of our heavenly life. "The 'heavens and earth' signify the church as to its internal or spiritual things and its external or natural things (Arcana Coelestia #1057)."

Your life matters.

Swedenborg continues on the subject of regeneration with these thoughts:

"The work of regeneration is chiefly about this: that the natural mind may correspond to the rational mind; not only in general, but also in particular; and the natural mind is reduced into correspondence by the Lord through the rational; namely, that good is insinuated into the rational, and in this good as ground truths are implanted; and then through rational truths the natural is reduced to obedience; and, when it obeys, it corresponds; and, in proportion as it corresponds, one is regenerated."

Arcana Coelestia #3286.2

A second spiritual principle concerns "our brethren"; should our brother or sister trespass against us, Jesus offers practical, specific advice that is well worth practicing. Again, there is a spiritual

meaning contained in correspondences. In the scriptures, “brothers” represent qualities of the same household, our inner household—namely, our will and our understanding. To be “reconciled” is to be of one mind. We are of one mind when we will what we understand to be true and right behavior and discover insights into truth from genuine, charitable love. On the occasions when our love offends our true understanding or our understanding is unable to grasp an insight of genuine love, we need to practice the principles Jesus taught. If our will acts against our understanding, we are to employ our understanding to convince and “gain the offending brother.” If our understanding gives way to doubt or error, we are to employ our will to correct our understanding.

Today’s Bible reading tells us that our life matters: what we bind on earth will be bound in heaven. The Lord promises that when there is internal agreement, when two together agree to ask the same thing of the Lord, it will be done. What is asked of us is active engagement in a life that leads to heaven, and this is possible with the Lord’s help.

This means cooperating with the Lord in maintaining a loving, trusting, spiritual state of mind; resisting the call of this world and natural-mindedness that trusts and believes only in what can be seen and felt; cutting off the influences of the demonic (whether found in the TV, the Xbox, drinking too much caffeine, or anywhere else) that incite violent emotions and lead to unkind acts and words; and affirming the spiritual dimension of life.

How we live is the stuff out of which heaven is made.

Our life—what we think, feel, believe, love, and do—matters very much, for it is the stuff out of which heaven is made. Let us therefore, with the Lord’s help, bind our hearts and minds together by resisting temptations, that we may find wholeness and integrity.

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Prayer

Forgive us, O God,
when we have turned perversely to the dark
or wounded another on our journey;
when we have marred your image within us
or brought tears to those we love;
and forgive us
when we have murmured against your will
and rebelled against the light.

- *F. B. Meyer (1847-1929)*

Daily Meditations

Monday, March 8

Thus says the Lord: Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals and make mere flesh their strength, whose hearts turn away from the Lord. *Jeremiah 17:5*

There are two loves that are at the head of all the rest, and two loves that lie behind all the rest. The head of all heavenly loves, the love basic to them all, is love for the Lord. The head of all hellish loves, or the love that underlies them all, is a love of controlling prompted by self-love. These two loves are absolute opposites. *Divine Love and Wisdom 4b*

Tuesday, March 9

They shall be like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see when relief comes. They shall live in the parched places of the wilderness, in an uninhabited salt land. *Jeremiah 17:6*

The notion that a soul can exist and think and be wise without a body is an error that stems from deceptive appearances. Every soul is in a spiritual body after it has cast off the material skin that it carried around in this world. *DL&W 15*

Wednesday, March 10

Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord. They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. *Jeremiah 17:7-8a*

This active turning toward the Lord comes from love and wisdom together, not from love alone or wisdom alone. Love alone is like a reality with no manifestation, since love makes itself manifest in wisdom; and wisdom without love is like a manifestation with no reality, since wisdom is the manifestation of love. *DL&W 15*

Thursday, March 11

It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit. *Jeremiah 17:8b*

We can see that all final goals become fresh new goals from the fact that there is nothing so lifeless and dead that it has no trace of effectiveness in it. Even from sand there breathes something that provides a resource for accomplishing something, and therefore for having some effect. *DL&W 172*

Friday, March 12

Heal me, O Lord, and I shall be healed; save me, and I shall be saved; for you are my praise. *Jeremiah 17:14*

The grand purpose, or the purpose of all elements of creation, is an eternal union of the Creator with the created universe.
DL&W 170

Saturday, March 13

This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the Lord," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.
Jeremiah 31:33-34

Through this union, the Lord is present in every work he has created, since in the last analysis everything has been created for our sake. As a result, the functions of all created things rise level by level from the lowest things to us, and through us to God the Creator, their source. *DL&W 170*

MAR 14 I Didn't Come to Call the Righteous

Rev. Dr. Jonathan Mitchell

Psalm 1

Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; but their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate day and night.

They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper.

The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away.

Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous; for the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.

Mark 2:13-17

Jesus went out again beside the sea; the whole crowd gathered around him, and he taught them.

As he was walking along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him.

And as he sat at dinner in Levi's house, many tax collectors and sinners were also sitting with Jesus and his disciples—for there were many who followed him. When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, they said to his disciples, "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?"

Once at a social gathering I found myself talking to a young woman who worked for a law firm specializing in environmental law. As the conversation proceeded, there came a point at which I realized with an inward start that her firm did indeed work on environmental law, but from the industry side! I chalked it up to being in Washington; in few other places do you so frequently find yourself eating and socializing with those who lobby against the causes you support.

This story came to mind as I reflected upon our gospel reading for this morning. Jesus is criticized for eating with sinners, and responds by saying that he didn't come to call the righteous but sinners. Don't get me wrong—I'm not saying that either of us in that situation was the righteous one or the sinner. Indeed, in the course of that conversation, I learned of some instances in which industry and environmentalists are allied. But it does call to mind our tendency to take sides and our instinct to associate with like-minded people.

"I came not to call the righteous," says Jesus, "but sinners." An important challenge in interpreting this saying is to determine to what degree Jesus is using scare quotes. To what degree is Jesus responding to his critics with sarcasm? "I didn't come to call you who see yourselves as the righteous," we can imagine him saying, "but precisely to call those whom you despise as sinners." In support of this view, we have the many passages in which Jesus condemns ostentatious and hypocritical displays of virtue.

On the other hand, we note the immediately preceding statement: It is not the healthy who need a physician, but the sick. This implies at the very least that the sinners with whom Jesus ate were not perfectly fine just the way they were. They needed healing.

In what spirit is one to eat with "the sinners"? There is a slogan often cited by our sisters and brothers of the Christian Right—"Love the sinner; hate the sin." I know what it feels like to be on the receiving side of that slogan, as it is often used in support of anti-gay ministries. If your love of me is predicated upon trying to convince me to suppress what I see as a good and God-given part of myself, then I can only say, "Thanks, but I don't want or need that kind of love."

Perhaps you will say that the slogan is fine and has only been misapplied here—that the slogan is true but the belief that homosexuality is a sin is mistaken. Still, I find myself uneasy with any approach to fellow humans that focuses on their real or imagined sin and defines them as sinners.

The fundamental question is whether the concept of “sinner” is a useful and helpful one in our approach to either our fellow human beings or ourselves. Many of our Christian brothers and sisters on both the left and the right adopt a theology according to which we are all sinners. If Jesus calls sinners and not the righteous, and we are called, we must be sinners, right?

Turning to Swedenborg’s writings for guidance here, an interesting progression emerges. In the posthumously published *Journal of Dreams*, which records Swedenborg’s initial call to interpret the Bible and publish his theological insights, Swedenborg makes use of the word “sinner” and applies it vividly to himself. Yet in his later theological works the word “sinner” is extremely rare and is only used when quoting Biblical texts. Why the shift?

Swedenborg doesn’t explicitly say, but my hunch is that the shift came from his mystical sense of the Divine Presence within. If the very core and essence of our being is to be receptacles of the Spirit, if our finite human lives derive ultimately from the One Divine Life, then at our core we always retain our original purity and goodness. The danger in calling ourselves and others “sinners” is that we will obscure this goodness, thus weakening our ability to draw upon it.

Worse, if we view ourselves as fundamentally flawed—if sin is what

If the essence of our being is Spirit, then at our core we always retain our original purity and goodness.

defines us as human beings—we can hope only for forgiveness. The restoration of our original goodness and purity disappears as a possibility.

To be sure, we are not righteous, either. It would be false to say that our outer lives always (or ever) fully manifest our core goodness. We are all prone to temptation and to what Swedenborg called “tendencies to evil.” We are always learning more about what is useful and what is harmful, what is right and what is wrong. We are

always seeking to know more about what the Divine Life within us wants for and from us, and we are ever seeking to conform our outer lives to what we have learned.

Jesus says, "It is not the healthy who need a physician, but the sick." The human organism, by its God-given nature, is healthy and whole. Sickness disrupts this health and wholeness to one degree or another, but when the physician is successful, health and wholeness are restored. The same is true of our spiritual wholeness. In this process the Lord is our physician, providing us with the wisdom and the willingness we need.

We can learn from people who sincerely seek to learn more about what is good and useful.

With whom, then, should we eat? The Swedenborgian approach suggests that we not try to answer this in terms of naming the righteous and the sinners. Jesus was being sarcastic. We cannot usefully eat with those who view themselves as the righteous—that is to say, with those who think they have nothing more to learn, with those who think they have no room for improvement. But we can usefully eat with those good people who sincerely seek to learn more about what is good and useful. From such we can learn, and such can learn from us. Those with whom we eat may share our views, or they may not. They may even oppose us in the courts and legislatures. May the Lord grant us all the courage to sit at this, his own table. Amen.

Prayer

You, O Christ, are the table set for all, the inextinguishable light of the saints, the sun shining in our midst; and you are joy and grace to your people. - *Symeon the New Theologian*

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Daily Meditations

Monday, March 15

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom like the crocus; *Isaiah 35:1*

Spiritual-minded people love spiritual truths, not only loving to know and understand them but intending them as well. *Divine Love and Wisdom 251.2*

Tuesday, March 16

It shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God. *Isaiah 35:2*

(Describing the divine nature)

2. Divine love and wisdom radiate from the Lord as a single whole.
3. There is some image of this whole in everything that has been created. *Divine Providence 1*

Wednesday, March 17

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; *Isaiah 35:5*

(What an earthly-minded person is and what a spiritual-minded person is.) We are not human because of our faces and bodies but because of our abilities to discern and intend, so “earthly-minded person” and “spiritual-minded person” refer to our discernment and volition, which can be either earthly or spiritual. *Divine Love and Wisdom 251.1*

Thursday, March 18

Then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; *Isaiah 35:6*

Sound reason tells us that everyone is predestined to heaven and no one to hell. We are all born human, which means that we have the image of God within us. *Divine Providence 322*

Friday, March 19

The burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes. *Isaiah 35:7*

If something is focused on what is both good and true, then it is something; but if it is focused on what is both evil and false, it is not anything at all. *Divine Providence 19*

Saturday, March 20

And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away. *Isaiah 35:10*

(a) Everyone is created to live forever. (b) Everyone is created to live forever in a blessed state. (c) This means that everyone is created to go to heaven. (d) Divine love cannot do otherwise than intend this and divine wisdom cannot do otherwise than provide for this. *Divine Providence 323*

MAR 21 Name Dropping

Rev. Kathy Speas

Psalm 23

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside
still waters;
he restores my soul.
He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.
Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for
you are with me; your rod and your staff— they comfort me.
You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my
life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life
long.

Acts 4:5-12

The next day their rulers, elders, and scribes assembled in Jerusalem, with Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, and Alexander, and all who were of the high priestly family. When they had made the prisoners stand in their midst, they inquired, "By what power or by what name did you do this?"

Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, "Rulers of the people and elders, if we are questioned today because of a good deed done to someone who was sick and are asked how this man has been healed, let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead. This Jesus is 'the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone.' There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved."

The authors of our scripture passages are real name droppers. “You lead me in paths of righteousness for your name’s sake.” “By what power or name do you heal?” Peter didn’t say “I don’t need anybody to authorize me to heal”; he dropped the biggest name he knew, and trumped the high priests’ power by claiming it as the only name. Do you think people in Jesus’ time ever said, “You’ll have to forgive me, I’m not good with names?”

Raise your hand if you’ve never had an embarrassing moment when you just could not remember somebody’s name. I think this universal experience gives us some insight into the spiritual nature of names. Think about it—you can’t remember a person’s name, but you fully recall who they are, their character and personality, your feelings about them. How often do we meet someone and remember what they are called, but find ourselves unable to sense anything about them?

The name of God, the name of Jesus, is more than just what we happen to call that mystic-healer-carpenter-rabbi fellow. It is by understanding what names really are that we can really believe that phrase “Jesus is the only name” and get beyond the idea that salvation is only for Christians. It is by understanding the spiritual sense of names and of salvation that we actually know and live the essence of that cornerstone day to day.

Swedenborg writes that the name of God is “all things that belong to love and faith, all things that derive from God.” The name of God is “not a mere verbal expression, but is the Lord’s essential nature, and every quality from which he is worshipped.” God’s essential nature. Every quality of God. Awesome!

Swedenborg also says that when we say the name of Jesus, we manifest his presence among us. In Islam and Buddhism, reciting the many names of God is an integral part of prayer, and is believed to manifest the qualities of God on earth. We honor the memory of the dead on All Saints’ Day by saying their names aloud in this sanctuary. The best-crafted sermon ever preached from this pulpit doesn’t hold a candle to the emotional and spiritual power afoot when we speak all those names. If you’ve never been to that service, it’s definitely a three-

Kleenex worship experience. By naming something or someone, we tap into its power and participate in its essence.

***Naming something
or someone lets us
tap into its power
and participate in
its essence.***

The name of Jesus is bigger, truer, and more enduring than Christianity itself, more enduring and true than human religion itself. In trying to understand these things, I often go back to the original language in which Jesus spoke. Aramaic is a very mystical language, in which sounds and vibrations correspond with different qualities. The Aramaic roots of words that address God express an underlying unity in which life is forever sustained. One Aramaic scholar describes the sounds related to the name of God in very poetic terms—"that which rises and shines in space...the entire sphere of a being...the vibration by which one can recognize the Oneness...the clarity or intelligence that arises in ultimate peace." The name, or essence, of Jesus is the power of creative transformation and purposeful renewal that endures eternally by unfolding again and again in ever-expanding possibilities. This infinite creative power is love, eternal life. Jesus the Risen Christ as the earthly incarnation of God, who "became flesh and dwelt among us for a while," expresses, but does not exhaust, the essence or name of God. This name, this essence, these qualities are infinite, manifested through, but not limited to, the historical Jesus.

Think for a minute about the names by which we know God, the images we have of God—shepherd, judge, host who prepares a table and anoints our head with oil, redeemer, healer, mighty fortress. These are all images of relationship. God's qualities, God's names, are not apart and separate from us. They define us. We are not lost and alone—God is our shepherd. We are not disconnected from how we treat others; God is a judge. None of us is left out of the great feast; God is our host. We are not bound by our circumstances; God is our redeemer and healer and fortress. The power of knowing God by name is claiming compassion and relationality (Peter and John's healing), not gaining control (Caiaphas' and Annas' authority). In the many names of God, we lead each other, we call each other to

compassion, we invite and welcome others to our feast. And love—not control—is what endures.

So when Peter says he has healed in Jesus' name, he is saying that the healing power of God's love is available to us all in the world. Peter and John weren't just going around preaching and arguing doctrine—they were healing, saving. The word for "salvation" in the Bible is translated variously as "healing," "keeping alive," "preserving," "rescuing," "bringing to safety," "delivering from danger." It has nothing to do with gaining entrance to an exclusive club. Marcus Borg describes salvation as "healing the wounds of existence." Peter and John aren't telling us who's going Up and who's going Down after death; they are telling us that how we choose to participate in boundless creative potential is the cornerstone of whatever we build. Our own potential may be pretty good, but it is limited; God's potential, on the other hand, is infinite. And when God reveals his name to Moses as "I am being itself," which really tells us "I am relationship itself," it is a covenant of responsibility to participate in God, not a covenant of privilege that excludes people outside the circle of power. It's what you do, not what you call it, that matters.

Maybe Christianity itself can be transformed by a renewed understanding of Paul's phrase "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven by which we must be saved." Our very lives (that would be yours and mine) will proclaim that this passage does not mean that only people who join the Christian church can go to heaven. How we relate to each other and to all life, how we express our reverence for the connectedness of all life that is the name of God, will proclaim that this message means "Make the cornerstone of all you build in life compassion and unity and sustainability, for this is the only way that the wounds of existence will be healed."

***God is
relationship itself.***

The late Dorothee Soelle calls us to live out the name of God:

"I think that one danger in our lives is that we often confuse the meaning of life with success. In this way, we remain at a spiritual level

which regards success as the supreme value. It is also conceivable to the believer that the enemies of God will succeed in destroying this creation. In that case, the truth of Jesus would end in tragedy. But would it be destroyed as truth? In that case God would sit over the ruins of this radioactive planet, weeping. Faith does not mean living without anxiety. If we are serious about understanding God's being in social terms, thinking of God as the power at the beginning, the power of relationship, then the continuation of creation depends on the strength of love among human beings. Whether or not the nuclear winter comes depends on how many people rise from the death of unrelatedness and are converted. God lures anew each day."

Life in all its wholeness. The essence of the cornerstone. The precious name of God.

Don't drop it.

Amen.

The Rev. Kathy Speas is a hospice chaplain at Hospice by the Bay in Marin County, California.



Prayer

O, Almighty Lord,
O, Ancient of Days,
Long before the earth had form,
Before the stars burned in the sky,
Before there was a universe to shout your praise,
You loved this world -
Every one of our names was inscribed on your heart.
O precious one, we thank you,
For, in your goodness,
You sang creation into being
and made covenant with the universe,
with the earth and all its creatures,
As your beloved ones.
And you came to us, Lord,
You kept faith with your creation,
And hid your infinity in human form.
You allowed us to walk with you
That we might love you and follow you,
That we might know the unknowable,
See the invisible,
Touch the transcendent.
Lord, we too easily forget why you lived and died among us;
We forget that you mean us for heaven,
We forget, in the darkness that sometimes dims our days,
That you are with us, within us.
But your mercy is so infinite, so unshakeable, so everlasting,
That you put off the fetters of death and rise again,
And remind us of our freedom,
Of our preciousness,
Of our own power to make heaven on earth.
All this we pray in the name of The Lord Christ,
Our Morning Star,
Whose rising brings eternal daybreak to our souls.

- Leah G. Goodwin

Daily Meditations

Monday, March 22

It is good to give thanks to the Lord, to sing praises to your name, O Most High; *Psalm 35:1*

Love is our life. *Divine Love and Wisdom 1*

Tuesday, March 23

to declare your steadfast love in the morning, and your faithfulness by night,
to the music of the lute and the harp, to the melody of the lyre.
Psalm 35:2-3

God alone--the Lord--is love itself, because he is life itself. Both we on earth and angels are life-receivers. *DL&W 4*

Wednesday, March 24

For you, O Lord, have made me glad by your work; at the works of your hands I sing for joy. *Psalm 35:4*

If we let ourselves be misled in thought so badly that we think we are not life-receivers but are actually life, there is no way to keep us from thinking that we are God... Since life and love are one and the same, as we can see from the first two sections above, it follows that the Lord, being life itself, is love itself. *DL&W 4*

Thursday, March 25

The righteous flourish like the palm tree, and grow like a cedar in Lebanon. *Psalms 35:12*

It is essential to realize that the Lord, being love in its very essence or divine love, is visible to angels in heaven as a sun; that warmth and light flow from that sun; that the outflowing warmth is essentially love and the outflowing light essentially wisdom; and that to the extent that angels are receptive of that spiritual warmth and spiritual light, they themselves are instances of love and wisdom--instances of love and wisdom not on their own, but from the Lord. *DL&W 5*

Friday, March 26

They are planted in the house of the Lord; they flourish in the courts of our God. *Psalms 35:13*

Spiritual warmth and spiritual light flow into and affect not only angels but also us, precisely to the extent that we become receptive. *DL&W 5*

Saturday, March 27

In old age they still produce fruit; they are always green and full of sap, showing that the Lord is upright; he is my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in him. *Psalms 35:14-15*

Our receptivity develops in proportion to our love for the Lord and our love for our neighbor. *DL&W 5*

MAR 28 Mary Magdalene, The Unexpected — Rev. Kim Hinrichs

Exodus 4:10-13

But Moses said to the Lord, "O my Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor even now that you have spoken to your servant; but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue." Then the Lord said to him, "Who gives speech to mortals? Who makes them mute or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord? Now go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you are to speak." But he said, "O my Lord, please send someone else."

John 20:11-18

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

In her book *Traveling Mercies*, the Bay Area writer Anne Lamott describes her winding and unexpected journey toward faith. A former drug addict and alcoholic, single mother of a son, member of

an African American church and successful author, Lamott brings together the diverse patchwork of her identity in a disarmingly funny writing style.

She describes a desperate time in her life when she was nearly broke, living at a friend's house, having harmful and fleeting relationships with men, overdosing on drugs, alcohol, and food, and feeling consumed with fear. She was nearly beyond the point of being able to help herself. During this time she serendipitously discovered St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church by way of the Marin City flea market. Too repulsed by Christianity to go in, she stood in the doorway for months just to listen to the rich and moving gospel music inside. About this time she became pregnant by a married man with whom she had been having an affair. One night she went to have an abortion, and afterwards, at home, overcome with sadness, she drank a pint of Bushmills whiskey and swallowed some codeine given to her by the nurses at the clinic. She repeated this routine every night for a week. On the seventh night she discovered that she was bleeding heavily and became terrified, too ashamed by her behavior to call for help. After several hours the bleeding stopped and she turned off the light and huddled in the corner of her room. It was then that she became aware of the presence of someone with her, and after a while she recognized beyond a doubt that it was Jesus.

"I was appalled," she writes. "I thought about my life and my brilliant, hilarious, progressive friends, I thought about what everyone would think of me if I became a Christian, and it seemed an utterly impossible thing that simply could not be allowed to happen. I turned to the wall and said out loud, 'I would rather die.'"

Over the next week she started to have the feeling that she was being followed by a little cat who wanted her to open the door and let it in. She writes,

"When I went back to church [the next week], I was so hungover that I couldn't stand up for the songs, and this time I stayed for the sermon, which I thought was just so ridiculous... but the last song was so deep and raw and pure that I could not escape. It was as if the people were singing in between the notes, weeping and joyful at the same time, and I felt their voices or something was rocking me in its

bosom, holding me like a scared kid, and I opened up to that feeling—and it washed over me.

***Mary Magdalene
participates in the
defining moment of
Christian faith.***

“I began to cry and left before the benediction, and I raced home and felt the little cat running along at my heels, and I walked down the dock past dozens of potted flowers, under a sky as blue as one of God’s own dreams, and I opened the door to my houseboat, and I stood there a minute, and then I hung my head and said, “Forget it: I quit.” I took a long deep breath and said out loud, “All right. You can come in.”

She concludes: “So this was my beautiful moment of conversion.”

Alcohol, drugs, abortion, bleeding... These aren’t exactly the words we normally associate with the holy. And yet, for Anne Lamott, it was exactly all of those things, mixed together with some divine transcendence, that led her to God. It was unexpected.

Twenty centuries ago, Mary Magdalene may have been a woman like Anne Lamott. She had been possessed by demons but Jesus had exorcised them. She became a loyal and devout follower of Jesus throughout his ministry. In fact, she is with him as the critical events of his story unfold: she is there as he dies on the cross; she is there when he is buried in the tomb; and most remarkably, she is the first to recognize the resurrected Jesus, who has become the Christ.

Mary Magdalene was not one of Jesus’ twelve male disciples, and yet she has a much more important role than most of those disciples. Her role is unexpected. She was a woman with a difficult past, a woman who had probably committed all kinds of sins, and who, like Anne Lamott, had probably survived periods of intense fear and crippling loneliness. This is the lone character who participates in the defining moment of the Christian faith: this is the woman who recognizes the Jesus who had lived in a body as the Christ who has now become transcendent and available to all. It is unexpected.

What’s further remarkable about Mary’s role is that she then goes to the twelve disciples and tells them what she has seen. And they believe her. Mary Magdalene is the apostle to the apostles, and what

she sets in motion, according to the gospel of John, is the unfolding of Christianity itself. This is unexpected.

To really understand how surprising Mary Magdalene's role is, it is necessary to understand the place women had in Jewish society around the first century. The Jewish culture of Palestine was one of the most patriarchal in the Mediterranean world of that time. Women were under the control of their fathers and then their husbands, and marriages were transacted by these heads of households who would make agreements and settle on dowry prices without the woman's consultation. Women were not entitled to inherit land or money, they were not permitted to divorce, and they had a restricted ability to pursue religious education. They were not permitted to lead or to participate in the religious rites of the synagogue. There is no evidence that prior to Jesus' ministry, Jewish women were ever allowed to be disciples of a great teacher, much less to travel with such a teacher.

Given this background, it is startling indeed that Mary Magdalene had such a prominent role in Jesus' life, a role affirmed by all four gospel writers. And it makes Mary's witness of the resurrected Jesus even more arresting. Why is it that a woman was placed in this role? What is the significance of a female resurrection witness?

As a woman in the Christian tradition, I am particularly interested in the roles women play in the Bible. The Bible was written in a patriarchal culture, and the Christian religion has grown and been passed down through centuries of patriarchy. As a woman, it is sometimes hard for me to find my experience reflected in so many stories about men, and in so much male religious language—in Jesus, in God the Father, and even in Swedenborg. And yet, I find that my Swedenborgian Christian faith is liberating and empowering to me. So I want to find the correspondence between this faith as it is lived out, and the faith as it is articulated in the texts of our tradition. And sure enough, I have found that a Swedenborgian understanding of the role of Mary Magdalene is quite enlightening.

*She recognizes
Jesus as the Christ.*

Swedenborg believed that the Bible was full of correspondences—that is, that the people, animals, vegetation, and objects mentioned

therein correspond to a spiritual reality. Swedenborg also believed that the essence of God was divine love and divine truth. He believed that the actions that flow forth from this union are charity. Swedenborg also believed that women and men had correspondences. I still haven't made up my mind about how fully I accept Swedenborg's ideas about men and women, but let's look at it anyway in light of

***Mary is a reflection
of the Trinity: love
united with truth
leads to a life
inspired by God.***

Mary Magdalene. Swedenborg wrote that women correspond to loves and affections, and that men correspond to wisdom and truth. One way of understanding this is that the male and the female are distinguishably part of one whole, as love and truth are distinguishably part of the whole that is God.

They are different and yet they are both intrinsic parts of the whole.

Swedenborg believed that a person must have love before she or he can understand truth. Love for God, like Mary's love for Jesus, is necessary for the understanding of spiritual truth. Mary, being love, understands the greatest spiritual truth of all: that Christ has risen. But that is not all: she immediately runs to the disciples and tells them what she has seen. The love that Mary represents is united with the truth that she proclaims to the disciples when she says, "I have seen the Lord!" What we have, then, in this story, is a reflection of the Trinity in the character of Mary: love united with truth leads to a way of living that is powerfully inspired by God.

Mary Magdalene has for centuries been seen as the minor character in this narrative. Because of her demon-possessed past, she has been presumed to have been a prostitute, and yet there is no evidence in the text to support this idea. Instead, she is a woman who had purified her soul through her love of God and who had set her demons behind her. She was the woman who understood the risen Christ as he called her by name. She was a woman who did not hesitate to speak the truth about what she knew in her heart, no matter how unlikely it seemed.

Mary Magdalene provides a model for us all, but especially, I think, for women. Love by itself does not do any good. Love must find its expression, must find a way to live in the world, for it to become

good. This is one way we grow in our spiritual growth process: love takes form and this union is recognized as a complete whole. This wholeness naturally gives way to a life that draws its energy from God.

In my experience, many women—and many men, too—struggle to bring love into form—that is, to apply the truth half of the love/truth union. So many of us doubt ourselves and deny our passions, closing the door on living out the life we deeply yearn to have. If instead we could give voice to our greatest loves and then bring them into being by acting on them in our lives, we would experience the wholeness of love’s union with truth. We would experience ourselves as known and affirmed and powerful. Like Mary, we would be called intimately and specifically by name by a power that is at the same time stunningly vast. And this living would give us the power to set history in motion towards an everlasting good.

Buried away in a box somewhere, there is a photo of me taken on my first day of kindergarten, when I was five years old. It is a picture of a little blonde girl with bangs and a blue check dress. I am not smiling, and my big blue eyes look up at the camera with an expression that is tentative, yet ever so slightly hopeful. It is as if I am thinking, “I’m not quite sure about this new experience; I might like it, but I’m going to wait and see.” Much of the time, that little five-year-old girl is still living inside of me. Over the years, I have spent more time that I care to contemplate holding myself back, convincing myself I had a thought that was not worth voicing, believing that I needed to follow certain expectations about how to live—frequently regarding the world from those tentative blue eyes, and waiting. Waiting to create form out of my deepest loves.

*God calls us
intimately and
specifically by
name.*

But something unexpected happened to me about six years ago. I discovered this church, and then with frightening speed I decided I had to go to seminary. This was unexpected for an up-and-coming young internet professional with a salary. For the next three years of school I agonized over the question of whether I could be an ordained minister. This was an unexpected prospect for a woman who had not

grown up in any church, had never read the Bible, known a minister, or gone to Sunday School. I graduated from seminary, had a baby, found an inspiring job working for the church, and decided, finally, that I wanted to become an ordained minister. This is unexpected for a woman who has everything, including a child.

What I have found is that one of my deepest and most driving loves is for the church, as unlikely as that has seemed at times. I have needed to name this love, to recognize this love as true, and then bring it into being by acting on it. When I do this, my life becomes energetic and dynamic, infused with joy, beauty, and humor. And the work I do then becomes a force of goodness in this world.

Anne Lamott didn't expect to have Jesus plunk himself down in her room on that dark and desperate night and to squeeze his way into her life. But in the middle of all those drugs and all that alcohol and self-abuse, Lamott wanted to heal. She was looking for God the way Mary was looking for Jesus in the empty tomb. Her longing for wholeness led her to let God into her life, and the union of that love and that truth changed her life.

Mary Magdalene, the unexpected. We may not have expected her to play the role she did, the woman who encounters the risen Christ. We may not have expected her to have so much to say to us. But let us all, male and female, live like Mary Magdalene—with a fervent and unceasing love, a courageous ability to name the truth, and a way of living that is at once divinely, humanely, and transcendently empowered. Amen.

Prayer

Lord, love of all loving, make my life yours.

Reverend Kimberly Hinrichs was ordained in 2003. She served the Swedenborgian House of Studies for seven years and is currently pursuing a call to family ministry.



Daily Meditations

Monday, March 28

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, "Your God reigns."

Isaiah 52:7

Since the whole heaven and everything in it depend on a single God, it is the nature of angelic speech to come to a close in a particular harmony that flows from heaven's own harmony.

Divine Love and Wisdom 26

Tuesday, March 29

Listen! Your sentinels lift up their voices, together they sing for joy; for in plain sight they see the return of the Lord to Zion.

Isaiah 52:8

The true divine essence is love and wisdom. If you gather together everything you know, focus your mind's insight on it, and look through it carefully from some spiritual height to discover what is common to everything, the only conclusion you can draw is that it is love and wisdom. These two are essential to every aspect of our life. *DL&W 28*

Wednesday, March 30

Break forth together into singing, you ruins of Jerusalem; for the Lord has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem.

Isaiah 52:9

It is because the very essence of the Divine is love and wisdom that we have two abilities of life. From the one we get our discernment, and from the other volition. *DL&W 28*

Thursday, March 31

The Lord has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God. *Isaiah 52:10*

It is because the divine essence itself is love and wisdom that the universe and everything in it, whether living or not, depends on warmth and light for its survival. *DL&W 32*

Friday, April 1

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it. *Isaiah 55:10-11*

Since we have been created to be recipients, then, and since we are recipients to the extent that we love God and are wise because of our love for God (that is, the extent to which we are moved by what comes from God and think as a result of that feeling), it therefore follows that the divine essence, the Creatress, is divine love and wisdom. *DL&W 33b*

Saturday, April 2

For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. *Isaiah 55:12*

All human feelings and thoughts arise from the divine love and wisdom that constitute the very essence that is God. The feelings arise from divine love and the thoughts from divine wisdom. Further, every single bit of our being is nothing but feeling and thought. These two are like the springs of everything that is alive in us. *DL&W 33a*

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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.

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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.

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