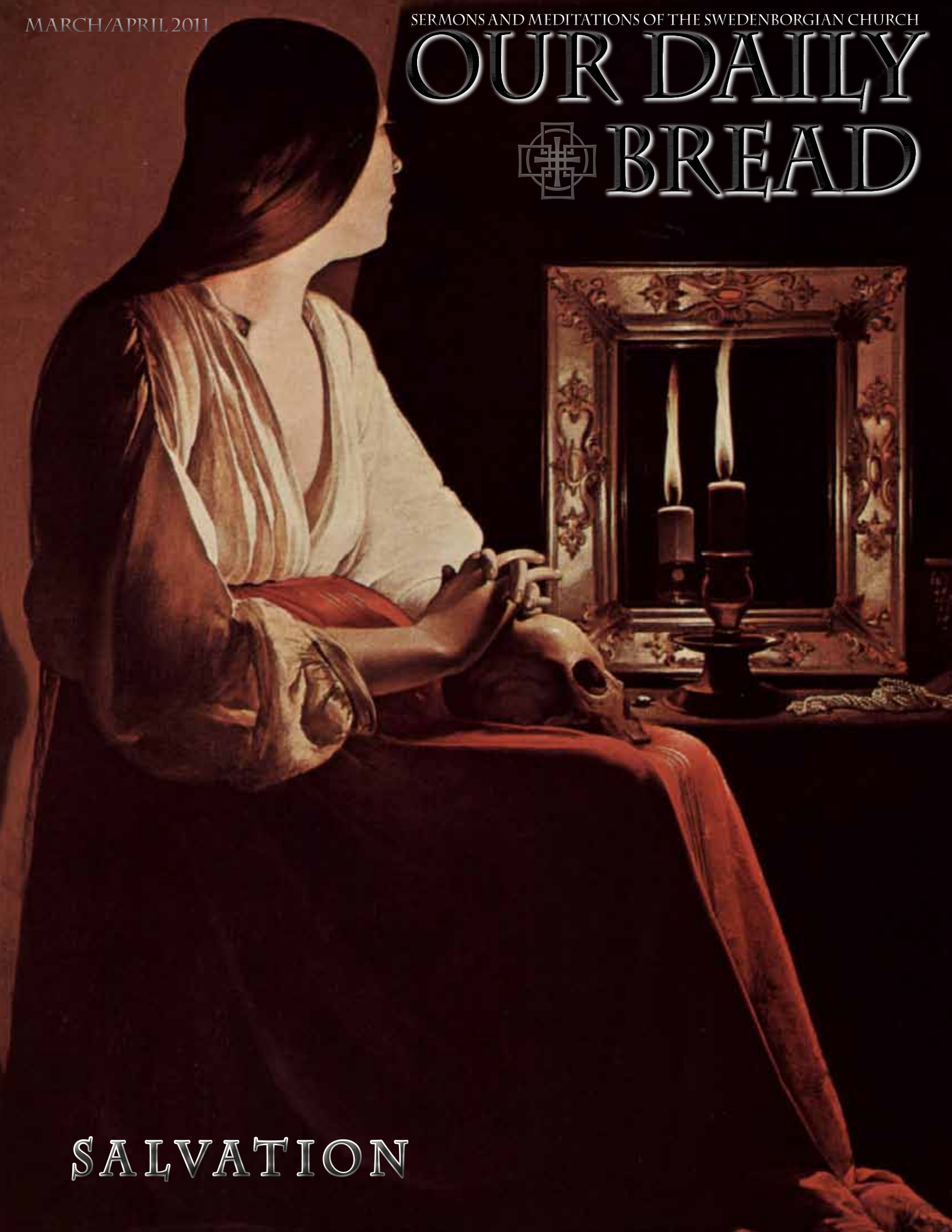


MARCH/APRIL 2011

SERMONS AND MEDITATIONS OF THE SWEDENBORGIAN CHURCH

OUR DAILY BREAD



SALVATION

Prayer

O Christ, my Lord, again and again I have said with Mary Magdalene,

“They have taken away my Lord and I know not where they have laid him.”

I have been desolate and alone.

And thou hast found me again, and I know that what hast died is not thou, my Lord, but only my idea of thee, the image which I have made to preserve what I have found, and to be my security.

I shall make another image, O Lord, better than the last.

That too must go, and all successive images, until I come to the blessed vision of Thyself,

O Christ, my Lord.

- G. A.

Cover Art

“The Penitent Magdalene,” George de la Tour (1593-1652)

Notice to Subscribers

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Dear Readers,

The timing of Lent begets introspection. In the northern hemisphere, at least, the weather is undependable at best, and the days, though lengthening, are still short. But whatever the weather, Lent’s placement in the Christian year encourages us to burrow deeper and examine more closely the state of our souls.

By its nature, Lent is a pretty somber time. Falling between Epiphany and Easter, Lent straddles the gap between the Lord’s joyful coming to humanity and his triumphant return as the conqueror of sin, death, and brokenness. Lent is a season of waiting, of in-betweenness, of existential breath-holding. During Lent, just as during Advent, we await, hope for, and work toward the fulfillment of God’s presence with us. In the process, we learn that life, most of the time, more closely resembles Lent than Christmas or Easter: we live mostly in the meantime. Life is hope and expectation, an endless series of fulfilled ends that become the jumping-off points for new visions, new dreams, new struggles, new journeys.

This realization that life consists of waiting more than obvious fulfillment should not make us sad. To the contrary, God dwells in the interstices, the cracks between big moments, the apparently empty spaces. Transformation and wholeness – in other words, salvation, which comes from a Latin root meaning “health” – await us here. The Orthodox liturgy says, “Let us not be of a sad countenance; for the change in our way of life during these blessed days will help us to gain holiness.” May you find salvation in the subtle, abiding gifts God grants during the in-between times.

Many blessings,

Leah Goodwin & Kevin Baxter

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ISSN: 1056-3296 • Volume 63, Number 2

Mar/Apr 2011

Published by:

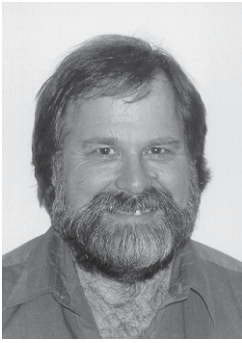
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Issued under the auspices of the
Council of Ministers of the Swedenborgian Church
USA & Canada: US \$15/year

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In This Issue

<i>The Season Of Lent</i>	4
Rev. Dr. William R. Woofenden	
<i>The Holiest Week</i>	8
Rev. Ken Turley	
<i>The Idea of All</i>	12
Rev. Julian Duckworth	
<i>Love's Judgment</i>	16
Ms. Leah G. Goodwin	

<i>From a Peep to a Quack</i>	20
Rev. Ron Brugler	
<i>Don't Go Away Sad</i>	24
Rev. Sarah Buteux	
<i>Shed For You</i>	28
Rev. Dr. George F. Dole	
<i>Working Ourselves to Death</i>	32
Rev. Kevin K. Baxter	

MAR 6 The Season Of Lent

Rev. Dr. William R. Woofenden

Haggai 1

In the second year of King Darius, in the sixth month, on the first day of the month, the word of the Lord came by the prophet Haggai to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest: "Thus says the Lord of hosts: "These people say the time has not yet come to rebuild the Lord's house.'" Then the word of the Lord came by the prophet Haggai, saying: "Is it a time for you yourselves to live in your paneled houses, while this house lies in ruins? Now therefore thus says the Lord of hosts: 'Consider how you have fared. You have sown much, and harvested little; you eat, but you never have enough; you drink, but you never have your fill; you clothe yourselves, but no one is warm; and you that earn wages earn wages to put them into a bag with holes.' Thus says the Lord of hosts: 'Consider how you have fared. Go up to the hills and bring wood and build the house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored,' says the Lord. 'You have looked for much, and, lo, it came to little; and when you brought it home, I blew it away. Why?' says the Lord of hosts. 'Because my house lies in ruins, while all of you hurry off to your own houses. Therefore the heavens above you have withheld the dew, and the earth has withheld its produce. And I have called for a drought on the land and the hills, on the grain, the new wine, the oil, on what the soil produces, on human beings and animals, and on all their labors.'"

Then Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, and Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, with all the remnant of the people, obeyed the voice of the Lord their God, and the words of the prophet Haggai, as the Lord their God had sent him; and the people feared the Lord. Then Haggai, the messenger of the Lord, spoke to the people with the Lord's message, saying, "I am with you," says the Lord." And the Lord stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and the spirit of Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the spirit of all the remnant of the people; and they came and worked on the house of the Lord of hosts, their God, on the twenty-fourth day of the month, in the sixth month.

Matthew 5:1-16

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled underfoot.

"You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."

Sermon

You expected much, but see, it turned out to be little. What you brought home, I blew away. Why? declares the Lord Almighty. Because of my house, which remains a ruin, while each of you is busy with his own house. (Haggai 1:9)

This coming Wednesday is known in the church calendar as Ash Wednesday and marks the beginning of the church season called Lent. The observance of a period called Lent was old even in the days of the apostolic fathers, and in the fourth century the time was extended to forty days and finally fixed to begin on Ash Wednesday, forty days—exclusive of Sundays—before Easter. Its continuing purpose is to inspire in us a deeper self-examination and self-humbling in preparation of mind and heart for Easter.

One practice that became quite common, and in some communions still is quite common, is the giving up of some external thing for this forty-day period. It is my belief that this ritual does not really serve a

useful purpose, for usually it involves the temporary giving up of something that is admittedly potentially harmful to the person, only to be resorted to again after the period of Lent is over.

What would more adequately serve to promote spiritual growth would be making an effort to recognize and give up some wrong way of thinking or feeling, with the intent of giving it up permanently and thus establishing better personal habits. If the period of Lent is used to gain a deeper awareness of our weaknesses and needs and a higher view of the real purpose of life, it cannot fail to bring a blessing to us. One of the basic teachings of our church is that the Lord in his providence looks only to those things that are eternal.

The Scriptures teach that God is the life of the universe. He created the heavens and the earth, the world and its people. All creation lives only by its connection with God, the only source of life. We read, "In him we live, and move, and have our being" (Acts 17:28). The primary mission of the church is to bring us into right relation with God. In its broadest and most relevant and penetrating meaning, the church is the Lord's kingdom on earth.

The rise and fall of our fortunes on earth has always been directly dependent on our relationship to our creator. And because of this, God has always revealed himself to people on earth by one means or another, sending his prophets "since the world began." And our acceptance or rejection of these revelations has determined our progress or decline. Those who have accepted divine revelation and have been governed by it have constituted the church on earth, the living center of human history from age to age. Each age, in turn, has had as its center and source a specific spiritual dispensation or church era.

This should not be hard for us to understand or accept. We know, for instance, that when we hear such names as China, India, Ethiopia, Italy, or England, we think not only of the geography of those countries, but also of the character of the people, the state of their arts, their civilization, and especially the nature of their prevailing religions. There is a tendency in the world today to argue that religious beliefs matter very little, yet it should be obvious that nations are partly viewed as advanced or backward according to their religious beliefs and the type of life they produce.

We are primarily concerned with the Christian church. And we should note that the word "church," as we use it in everyday conversation, has various meanings. It may simply mean a building set apart for public worship, as when we say, "This church is

on West Street." Or it may mean a body of Christians holding the same creed and acknowledging the same ecclesiastical authority, as the Catholic Church, the Episcopal Church, the Baptist or Methodist Church. Or it may mean the collective body of Christians, as when we say, "What is the church doing about war, or crime, or poverty?"

There are still other meanings, and we can't consider them all. But there are two which it is vitally important for us to recognize and distinguish. The Christian church is for all of us, first, a body of teaching about the Lord and his way of life, and, second, a body of receivers of that teaching, the collective body of those who acknowledge and worship Christ. In the first of these two aspects, a system of truth revealed by the Lord in his Word as a way of life, the church is perfect. But in the second, as it is perceived by us and lived by us, it is very imperfect.

It is this second aspect of the church, the church as composed of men and women, that is our primary concern. The apostle Paul said, "Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's spirit lives in you?" (1 Cor. 3:16) Unless the teachings of the church are embodied in human hearts and minds, they are mere abstractions; they exist only in the imagination. And if there were no individual worshipers there would be no collective body. It is this collective body that is "God's temple," the church.

The Lord came to Earth to establish the Christian church. In order to do this he called his disciples, taught them, and sent them forth to baptize nations. Part of their message was that men and women are created for the purpose of learning and doing the will of God so that they might have his joy fulfilled in themselves and be coworkers with him in the establishment of his kingdom. Imperfect as we are, the progress of civilization depends on us. The church—this body of teachings with its receivers—is the means by which the Lord joins himself with all of humanity.

Because of its human limitations and weaknesses, many people stay detached from the church; some may say that they can worship better alone. Yet every business, every profession, every institution has these same faults, and we do not turn away from them. Worldly people demand to eat, to work, to walk, to talk, to play with others, but the one thing they do not demand is to worship with others. Although it is not readily admitted, the reason for this may be that subconsciously such persons may fear the power of united worship to disturb their self-centered course. On this most important plane of life, they imagine that they can stand by themselves, even though they may acknowledge that the church exercises an influence

for good in the community and serves to further their personal safety and well-being, knowing that without public worship a community will in time deteriorate, because without public worship, knowledge of God will in time be lost, and with it knowledge of private and public morality.

We may deceive ourselves into thinking that security and happiness can be obtained by external reforms alone, but secular institutions—although necessary—are not sufficient in themselves. However complicated and extensive the machinery of government may become, it is only a machine, and it will not run itself. Like any machine, it needs suitable people to tend it, and “suitable people”—in this sense—are made only by acknowledgment of God and obedience to his laws.

The Lord came into the world when it was in much worse condition than it is now. The worst forms of slavery that ever stained the pages of history prevailed throughout the world, and private and public virtues were merely reminiscences of the past. Yet despite this, the Lord left questions of economic and social reform untouched. Why? Because he knew that what people needed first was the power to see and overcome their sins; for if this could be accomplished, all the rest would follow; and without this, no amount of ethical or external reform would significantly benefit the human race.

It has always been true—and always will be true—that our greatest personal task is that of regeneration. And to regenerate, we need the help of others, and we need to help others in their tasks. God does not ask us to fight personal evil singlehandedly. Also, there are community as well as individual evils that cannot be overcome except by combined efforts. The church links the individual with history, and gives us a part in directing the life of the world. A good life is primarily of the heart and mind. The church, as the Lord gives it to us, is pictured in Scripture as the bride, the Lamb’s wife, to teach us that the church is our spiritual mother, by whom we are born again and thus become truly children of God; which is just another way of describing the purpose God had in mind in founding the church.

If we realize and believe this to be true—that the church is God’s chosen means to prepare every one of us for an eternal life in heaven—for that purpose and for that alone we would be wise to become part of the church, of the body of Christ. We need to support the church—to support it with our money, with our attendance, with our personal service, and with our missionary efforts. But above all we need to support it by so living the Christian life individually that we lift up a standard for the people, so that the hearts of

the people may be turned to the Lord because of the example that we set, not turned away from the church by our shortcomings. We are advised, “Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven” (Mt.5:16). The upcoming season of Lent is an ideal time to do just this. Amen.

Prayer

O Spirit of God, brooding over the formless world: brood over my spirit.

O Spirit of God, giving form to the formless: fashion my spirit.

O Spirit of God, giving life to the lifeless: give life to my spirit.

O Spirit of God, inspiration of the prophets: speak to my spirit.

O Spirit of the Lord, inspiration of the prophets: speak to my spirit.

O Holy Spirit, author of holiness: sanctify my spirit.

O Holy Spirit: knowing the deep things of God: move in the depths of my being.

Fire of the Spirit! Burn all that is not holy.

Fire of the Spirit! Shine with thy light.

Fire of the Spirit! Kindle with thy warmth.

Fire of the Spirit! Generate in us power.

Fire of the Spirit! In flame us with love.

Wind of the Spirit! Breathe in us thy gentleness.

Wind of the Spirit! Blow in thy strength.

Let us pray for the gift of the Spirit.

The gift of the Spirit is wisdom and understanding, resourcefulness and spiritual strength, knowledge and true godliness, and holy fear. Grant us thy sevenfold gift, O Holy Spirit.

Let us pray for the fruit of the Spirit.

The harvest of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, good temper, gentleness, goodness, humility, and self-control. Produce in us thy harvest, O Holy Spirit.

Amen.

- G. A.

Monday, March 7

Remember then from what you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent. Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. To everyone who conquers, I will give permission to eat from the tree of life that is in the paradise of God. *Revelation 2:5&7*

The Lord alone will give the happy things of eternal life to those who are and will be of His church.

Apocalypse Revealed n. 71

Tuesday, March 8

Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Beware, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison so that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have affliction. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life. Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. Whoever conquers will not be harmed by the second death.

Revelation 2:10&11

He who understands should hearken to what Divine truth proceeding from the Lord teaches and says to those who are of His church.

Apocalypse Explained n. 108

Wednesday, March 9

Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. To everyone who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give a white stone, and on the white stone is written a new name that no one knows except the one who receives it. *Revelation 2:14&17*

All the quality of good is from the truths that are united to it; for good without truths is like bread and food without wine and water, which do not nourish; and also like fruit in which there is no juice.

Apocalypse Explained n. 122

Thursday, March 10

To everyone who conquers and continues to do my works to the end, I will give authority over the nations; to rule them with an iron rod, as when clay pots are shattered—even as I also received authority from my Father. To the one who conquers I will also give the morning star. Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. *Revelation 2:26-29*

Those who read the Word solely for repute of erudition, or to acquire fame that they may be exalted to honors or may gain wealth, never see and perceive truths, but falsities instead; and the truths that stand out before the eyes in the Word they either pass by as if not seen or they falsify them.

Apocalypse Explained n. 177.2

Friday, March 11

Remember then what you received and heard; obey it, and repent. If you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come to you. If you conquer, you will be clothed like them in white robes, and I will not blot your name out of the book of life; I will confess your name before my Father and before his angels. Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

Revelation 3:3&6

To see truths, and to see what they are, is of perception; and to live according to them is of reception; and according to perception and reception there is intelligence and wisdom.

Apocalypse Explained n. 198

Saturday, March 12

I am coming soon; hold fast to what you have, so that no one may seize your crown. If you conquer, I will make you a pillar in the temple of my God; you will never go out of it. I will write on you the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem that comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name. *Revelation 3:11&12*

Those who are in spiritual love or in charity and faith therefrom, are in intelligence; while those who are in celestial love, or in love to the Lord, and in the perception of truth therefrom, are in wisdom.

Apocalypse Explained n. 189

MAR 13 The Holiest Week

Rev. Ken Turley

signified by “arise, go up to Bethel,” namely progress toward the interiors.

II Samuel 6:12-15

It was told King David, “The Lord has blessed the household of Obed-edom and all that belongs to him, because of the ark of God.” So David went and brought up the ark of God from the house of Obed-edom to the city of David with rejoicing; and when those who bore the ark of the Lord had gone six paces, he sacrificed an ox and a fatling. David danced before the Lord with all his might; David was girded with a linen ephod. So David and all the house of Israel brought up the ark of the Lord with shouting, and with the sound of the trumpet.

Matthew 21:1-11

When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, ‘The Lord needs them.’ And he will send them immediately.” This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, “Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”

The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!” When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, “Who is this?” The crowds were saying, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.”

Arcana Coelestia 4539(3)

For Jerusalem was the inmost of the land, and by it was signified the Lord’s spiritual kingdom; and the house of God was the inmost of Jerusalem, because by it was signified the Lord’s celestial kingdom, and in the supreme sense the Lord Himself. Hence people spoke of “going up” to them. From all this it is evident what is

Sermon

This past week we observed Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent, which marks the forty days before Holy Week and the Lord’s death and resurrection. This is the most important event in the life of Christ, and by far the most important event in the life of every Christian. We call the week before Christ’s resurrection Holy Week. It begins with the triumphant entry into Jerusalem, which we call Palm Sunday, and ends with Jesus’ resurrection and first appearance to the disciples, which of course we call Easter. This is the holiest of weeks because many of the Lord’s most important teachings were given and the most important events took place during this final phase of the Lord’s earthly life, which occurred in and around Jerusalem, the holy center of Israel.

This morning I would like to do a quick overview of the events of Holy Week and their significance to us in our own spiritual journeys. Holy Week is a time of joy and expectation, of betrayal and disappointment, of profound grief and depression, of deep reverence, of soul-stirring thanksgiving and praise. In this one week, the disciples then, and we by virtue of our discipleship now, are taken from the depths to the heights and challenged to the cores of our beings. In the end, the one ultimate purpose for the Lord’s life on earth is revealed and the single most important question of belief is put to all of the Lord’s disciples. We think of our lives as being busy and intense. Well, we are about to find out how to pack some serious living into the space of one short week!

Our scripture readings for this morning are about David and then Jesus going up to Jerusalem. As we heard in our reading from Swedenborg, the city of Jerusalem and the temple represent the center of the heavenly realm, the spiritual core of the Lord and heaven, and being created in the image and likeness of God—and therefore the spiritual core of each one of us as well. This is significant because it tells us that the events of Holy Week are not about things going on at the periphery of our lives, but at the very center of all that is important to us, the very center of all that is us! The events of Holy Week are about spiritual challenge and decision and the resulting transformation of the deepest elements of our character, our spirit, our soul. This is not superficial stuff; it is about what is going on at our core: our beliefs, the nature of our

commitment to God, the nature and ultimate object of our love and loyalty.

We read about Jesus “going up” to Jerusalem, and what we should hear in that narrative is that each one of us “going in” to the center of our being, to our deepest connection to God and the realm of heaven. It is here that the events of Holy Week and all that they represent in terms of our spiritual regeneration take place: at the center.

This week is about being willing to go there, being willing to face the challenges of going deep within our own hearts and minds, being willing to go deep within to the very essence of our relationship with God. To do that takes courage and commitment. It is easy to skirt around the edges, to stay superficial, to be content and self-satisfied with our illusions of who we are. It takes guts to go within and face the inner reality of who we are. For to do that is to risk disappointment, to expose to ourselves our own weakness, to bring out into the light those aspects of ourselves that would betray what we claim to hold dear. When Jesus took that triumphant ride up to Jerusalem, even while all the cheering and adulation were going on around him, he knew full well that he would not only be facing attempts on the part of the Pharisees and the powers that be to discredit him and destroy him, but also bringing to light the true nature of Judas and the rest of the disciples, those in whom he trusted, those who claimed to be his loyal and true followers. And they were—it’s just that they were filled with human fears and weaknesses.

And, given that we are human, if we have the courage to take our ride to the center of our being, why should we not expect to find, amid all of the beautiful and wonderful things of our spiritual center, the fears and weaknesses and things that, in the moment of truth, will seek to betray us? After all, we are human. So we have before us an invitation and a challenge. God is calling us to the events of this most holy of weeks, and we must decide whether we are willing to go.

Now, it is no coincidence what happens first. It is a preview in microcosm of all that is to happen in the remaining days of Holy Week. It is a symbolic acting out of Jesus’ ultimate purpose for being there in the first place. What do you suppose was his first public act? He went to the temple, and, with a braided rope in one hand and a righteous fury in his heart, created a near riot! The temple that was intended to be for the people a place of worship and a place to make sacred offerings to God had become a marketplace for those who were commercializing, who were cashing in,

who were making material fortunes off the very act of spiritual worship. See, we think it is only we, here in the twentieth century, who are materialistic, that it is only now that capitalism seeks to commercialize and profit from every good thing that people try to do. No, no, the desire to materialize, to trivialize, to commercialize and profit from people’s spiritual needs has existed since time began. We have no corner on the market of greed and superficiality. It is a tendency that has been in the hearts and minds of people for all time. It was there in the people in the time of Jesus, it is here in the people of our time, and it is here within the hearts and minds of you and me. Each one of us has within us that element that seeks to materialize and bring personal gain from our own deep spiritual need for God. There is that element within us that is more concerned with looking good for the people around us than being good for God. There is within each of us that which is seeking to buy our way into heaven with material and superficial offerings—trying to bribe God, actually—rather than seeking to find the way to let heaven into our own hearts and minds. For that is what comes with a price: for that to happen we must let go of our pride, our fear, our personally motivated jealousies and hatreds.

And while we are often willing to pay the price to fulfill the outward rituals of external worship, the price of becoming a child of God, the price of being loving and forgiving, of honoring the truth that inevitably humbles us, that price is often much more difficult to pay. And so it is that Jesus begins his final week of ministry on earth by cleaning house. That is why Ash Wednesday and Lent are about repentance—not because we need to punish ourselves, going around looking sad and forlorn to impress everyone with how devout and sincere we are, but to get the cobwebs and misguided motives out of our spiritual centers, to get our hearts and minds open and free from self-deception and hypocrisy, so that we may move past the appearances of superficial ritual and action and get down to the reality of truly being in relation with God, not just on the surface where everyone can see, but at the core where only we can see! Repentance is about preparing to worship God in spirit and in truth, not about worshipping our own images in appearance and in suits. Swedenborg says many times that true worship is the life of charity. Jesus went to the temple and drove out the sellers and money changers before he did anything else. And so it is, as we enter Holy Week, that we must go to our spiritual centers and drive out the misunderstandings, the distortions and hypocrisies, that would and do distract us from the true worship of God: the true love of our neighbor. It

is a hard and painful lesson, but the holiest of weeks begins with a thorough house cleaning.

Now, with that unpleasant task out of the way, Jesus moves on to bigger and better things, and so must we. The next several days are filled with some of his most inspired and inspiring teachings. They are not as gentle and forgiving as his earlier messages. They are not filled with the kindly reassurances of, say, the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus knows the end is near, and he is getting down to it. He talks a lot about what heaven is like. He talks a lot about the joys and pleasures of truth and kindness and charity, about the blessedness of loving God and our neighbors. But he also talks a lot about the pain and desperation of deception and cruelty and selfishness, about the curse and loneliness of loving oneself above all else and not caring for anyone else except for how they can benefit us. This is a place of gnashing teeth and immense suffering. It is a place where people suffer the flames of frustrated lust and addiction, where people are afflicted with punishments that they have inflicted and continue to inflict upon themselves from a lifetime of habits, a lifestyle they are too weak to change. It is a place where people's illusions about who they are only fool themselves. As Jesus describes it, it is not a pretty sight.

But he talks even more about the wonders of heaven. He describes a place, a state of being, where whatever good we might have is multiplied many times over; a place where whatever love we have for God and others is returned to us magnified beyond measure; a place where joy and happiness and peace and fulfillment fill us to overflowing; a place where we are able to be with those we love and who love us in a kind of closeness we can only dream about now; a place where we are separated from and protected from all that would seek to hurt us and pull us down; a place that is everything wonderful about life on earth, but so very much better that words just don't do it justice. I suppose that is why Jesus could only speak about heaven in parables: words just don't do it justice.

And of course, the week leads to the Last Supper and what we call Good Friday. I would love to meet the person who came up with that phrase. I never have been able to figure out why we say "Good Friday" to describe the day Jesus was betrayed, beaten, ridiculed, run through a mock trial, and then killed in one of the most cruel tortures ever devised by the mind of man. The only good thing about that

particular Friday is that it came before that particular Sunday.

To put it simply, the events of what we now call Easter Sunday are the very foundation of Christian faith and life. In the glorification and resurrection of Jesus Christ we have the message of every sermon ever given all rolled into one. That day gives us our reason for being. It is the final proof positive that the purpose of all we go through here on earth is the preparation of our souls for the ongoing life hereafter. It is that simple and that profound. If you don't get this, you don't get it, period. There is nothing more important than understanding that human life is not about what we amass or even accomplish in terms of worldly values; it is about what we accumulate, what we accomplish in terms of heavenly values—the love of God and the love of the neighbor. The body will fall away in time. For the young it may seem like that day will never come; for the middle-aged it seems like it will happen eventually; for the elders among us it perhaps seems to be coming all too soon. But it happens, and it happens to all of us. It has been proven

experientially that life is fatal. Forget taxes—the only thing that is sure is that we will die and go to meet our maker. And how we feel about that experience is directly related to what we believe and how we have lived our life. If that is not important to you, well, I would just as soon not have to watch when it happens. For, as I said before, it will not be a pretty sight. But if it is important to you, as it is

to me, then I look forward to the moment we celebrate together in the loving and joyous house of God, our next home, which will be just heavenly.

All in all, Holy Week is quite a week. It is a challenge. It is a calling. And so I put the question to you, "Who is willing to make that ride with Jesus up to Jerusalem?"

Prayer

Come, let us enter the inner chamber of our soul, offering prayers to the Lord and crying aloud: Our Father, who art in heaven, remit and forgive our debts, for thou alone art compassionate.

Showing joyfulness of soul in the fast, let us not be of a sad countenance; for the change in our way of life during these blessed days will help us to gain holiness....

Uncreated Unity, the God of all, we exalt thee above forever and ever. *- Matins in Lent, Orthodox*

*The events of
Holy Week
are about the
transformation
of the deepest
elements of our
souls.*

Monday, March 14

"The Lord is my strength and my might, and he has become my salvation; this is my God, and I will praise him, my father's God, and I will exalt him. The Lord is a warrior; the Lord is his name."

Exodus 15:1&3

Combats with the devil, or what is the same, with hell, are signified by the wars mentioned in the Word.

Arcana Coelestia n. 1664

Tuesday, March 15

"In the greatness of your majesty you overthrew your adversaries; you sent out your fury, it consumed them like stubble. At the blast of your nostrils the waters piled up, the floods stood up in a heap; the deeps congealed in the heart of the sea." *Exodus 15:7&8*

They who are in falsities and evils should be tortured until they are utterly destroyed; they are veiled over by their falsities and evils as by thick mists, which are of such a nature as to mitigate the influx of the Divine, or to repel or to stifle it, as earthly mists or clouds do the rays of the sun. *Arcana Coelestia n. 8265*

Wednesday, March 16

"The enemy said, 'I will pursue, I will overtake, I will divide the spoil, my desire shall have its fill of them. I will draw my sword, my hand shall destroy them.' You blew with your wind, the sea covered them; they sank like lead in the mighty waters." *Exodus 15:9&10*

Moreover, falsity from evil is of such a nature that it sinks down toward lower things, as does a heavy body in the world. But truth from good is of such a nature that it ascends to higher things, as does something light in the world. *Arcana Coelestia n. 8279*

Thursday, March 17

"Who is like you, O Lord, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in splendor, doing wonders? You stretched out your right hand, the earth swallowed them." *Exodus 15:11&12*

All the truth of good proceeds from the Divine Human of the Lord...because truths can proceed from everybody; but the truths of good [proceed] only from the Lord, consequently from those who are in good from the Lord. *Arcana Coelestia n. 8301*

Friday, March 18

"In your steadfast love you led the people whom you redeemed; you guided them by your strength to your holy abode. The peoples heard, they trembled; pangs seized the inhabitants of Philistia." *Exodus 15:13&14*

It is states of truth and of good, and in the opposite sense, states of falsity and of evil, which are represented in the other life by means of heights and depths.

Arcana Coelestia n. 8325

Saturday, March 19

"You brought them in and planted them on the mountain of your own possession, the place, O Lord, that you made your abode, the sanctuary, O Lord, that your hands have established. The Lord will reign forever and ever." *Exodus 15:17&18*

Falsities which are not opposed to good are indeed in themselves falsities, but relatively to the good of life, to which they are not opposed, they almost put off the quality of falsity, which is done through application to good. For such falsities can be applied to good, and they can be applied to evil. If they are applied to good, they become mild; but if to evil, they become hard; for falsities can be applied to good equally as truths can be applied to evil. *Arcana Coelestia n. 8311*

MAR 20 The Idea of All

Rev. Julian Duckworth

Luke 14:25-35

Now large crowds were traveling with Jesus; and he turned and said to them, "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, saying, 'This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.' Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace. So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions."

"Salt is good; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is fit neither for the soil nor for the manure pile; they throw it away. Let anyone with ears to hear listen!"

Arcana Coelestia 6138

We have life from the Lord, yet from heredity and from what we want to do we resist spiritual life. Once these have been renounced so completely that they no longer control us there is total submission. When we are being regenerated we come to the point where we no longer wish to be our own person but the Lord's. Once this happens we would be sad if we were left to ourselves, but when we are brought out of that we have peace of mind. God needs our total submission so that he can make us happy; that is, he does not want us to be partly ours and partly the Lord's, for then there are two masters who cannot be served at the same time. So, since love to the Lord comes from the Lord and not from us, all our heart, all our soul, all our mind and all our strength must be the Lord's, and they must be totally submitted to him.

Sermon

Whoever of you does not forsake all that he has, cannot be my disciple. (Luke 14:33)

The theme today is around the idea of "all," which I think is probably the biggest theme in the gospels. It's certainly one that keeps coming up, especially in Jesus' words and teachings, this short three-letter word "all." For example, Jesus and some of the disciples were once watching people going into the temple in Jerusalem, and just inside the entrance was the offertory box (just like ours here!). Apparently the box was a large brass basin which, if you banged it, would clang very loudly. So, the rich people would come along and throw a handful of gold coins into the basin, probably throwing them in very hard and from a bit of a distance and against the side of the basin, too, and anyone within earshot would know this person had given a lot of money to God. And as Jesus and the disciples watched, this poor widow came up and put in two mites—two tiny coins worth almost nothing—and went on her way. And Jesus said, "Do you see that? They came and put in from their abundance, but she put in more than all of them—she put in all that she had."

This little word "all" is quite amazing because it covers some very profound ideas, and yet of course we use it without realizing what we're saying a lot of the time. You look at an advertisement in a magazine—let's say it's for a set of recipe cards that will be sent to you every month, which you really don't need at all. Just underneath the glossy picture of glistening profiteroles that makes you drool but bears no resemblance to the ones you will turn out, it says, "All you have to do is send the reply form with your first down payment." This is very clever, of course, but it is quite untrue. This is certainly not all you have to do or should do. It's telling you to bypass considering whether you want this offer or can afford it or will in fact ever use it. All they want is your money.

So we use this word a lot. "All it takes is a bit of care." "Stop doing that, you're doing it all the time!" "Is that all you've done?" What about the "be-all and end-all"? A good one is "all in all"—"all in all, it's a busy time when you have a young family." That is the understatement of the year, but what you're doing is summarizing how it is. We use that same phrase to describe God. God is the all in all of everything. You can't improve on that. And it's very descriptive, too. God is the all that is in all things. You could think about that idea all the time.

When Jesus uses the idea of all, it is nearly always in the sense of making a total commitment, as in the text for this morning: "Whoever of you does not forsake all that he has, cannot be my disciple." Jesus is putting it in the strongest words to get the point

across. It's called hyperbole—overstatement. Jesus does not actually want you to forsake everything that you have and walk out on your family who love you and depend on you. But what he does want is for you to know why you love and care and keep going with everything. It's about putting God first.

If you love those who love you, Jesus says, what credit is that to you? If you love someone because they do things for you, it's not the right kind of love. In fact, you shouldn't really be using the word "love" in that situation; you should call it a "bargain." If they stopped, would you stop too? You have to keep away from that kind of condition thing—in fact, that's what Jesus really wants us to forsake—the self-interest and expectation we sometimes bring into things. "I'll stay in my job so long as I'm paid enough and they treat me properly." Hang on; what about "I'll stay in my job because I want to do my best for the company and I think I have what it takes"? That's what I said at the job interview and wrote on my application. Did I mean that?

So Jesus is advocating that we try and get our priorities right—in fact, that we do get our priorities right, because "trying to" is still putting a bit of a condition on things. "Look, I'm trying as hard as I can" is not really good enough, because there's a bit of "me" in it still. It's got to go further and be full-on, total, the idea of all. And we look at that idea of giving all and we even get that wrong too. People say you have to love until it hurts, and we all nod and say "Oh, how true, but if you really do love with the idea of all, it will actually stop hurting. It won't hurt any more." And someone pipes up, "That must be nice. Do you mean you won't feel anything any more?" And you look at them and say, "You're not really getting this, are you?"

It's like a shift, a shift right across. You can't get there by pushing yourself hard. You're either there or you aren't. Do you remember Peter Pan? The children went to Never-Never Land, but they wondered where it was. And Peter said, "It's second left and straight on till morning." And even that's a bit short on truth, because it suggests you go there. You don't go there. You are there while you're washing up and mending a fuse.

Back in the Old Testament it says that we are to love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our mind, and with all our strength. By now, I think you have gotten the idea of that in the right kind of way. Shift across into that kind of

love with the idea of all, and goodness, how easy it then becomes! We really like the idea of easy, but we get it wrong. Not easy as in "nothing left to do." Not easy like "now I can take it easy." That's the same as pushing too hard, but now we're taking it backwards. Just...easy. Jesus said, "My yoke is easy." All you have to do is drop everything else. Do you mean...? No, don't go there!

What we're really getting with this is a glimpse into the way that God loves us. We've already said that God is the All In All. Keep hold of that as much as you can...no, just keep hold of it. "God loves us very much." But that's not a good enough description. "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son..." Well, it's biblical, of course, but, again, it's awkward and using a measurement. Try "God just loves us." Nearly ... but don't use "just," because it suggests that God could love us like this or like that, but in the end He just loves us. Say "God loves" and leave it at that and don't go into how much.

Think about people for a moment. People are fascinating. I knew a sweet lady once who said that people were her only real hobby. She just enjoyed them and being with them and looking at how they are. One of the things you often get from people is that they seem to have something you can't really put your finger on, but golly, is it there! And some people don't have that something at all, at least as far as you can tell, and you know, you can usually tell, can't you?

Some people just seem to be naturally good at what they do and make it all look so easy, and then you wonder whether they're born like that or whether they've practised or trained so hard to get it so good that it's become second nature. Like a ballerina or a teacher or a nurse. It's wonderful to behold, and yet, while skill and talent oozes out of them, they will have things they aren't so good at. The ballerina may be a bit of a drama queen; the teacher may be a bit of a control freak, the nurse may always be running late because when she isn't nursing she's a bit disorganized. But you don't see that. You see their consummate skill.

Now, think about people who always seem to be up against something. It goes from this to that. I'll let you come up with your own examples. You probably feel for them having to cope with it all. And, if we're not careful, we start making our comparisons and wondering why God in His wisdom has made it like that. "So unfair," we say. The strange thing, though,

*Jesus is
advocating
that we get our
priorities right.*

is that any of all these people I've been mentioning may have made that shift across to allness or totally being in it and know what they do and why. How it is for them really doesn't come into it now. Something about them never changes, and you could trust them with your life.

This is something of the idea of all. The widow put in all she had, but she was still a widow and all that that involved. Jesus says, "I need all of you, you as a whole." Not to slap a label of Christianity on us... simply to allow us to live so that at least something in us isn't tossed around but is all in place, all set, and always there to hand. Amen.

Prayers

My Father, I abandon myself to you. Do with me as you will.

Whatever you may do with me, I thank you.

I am prepared for anything, I accept everything.

Provided your will is fulfilled in me and in all creatures, I ask for nothing more, my God.

I place my soul in your hands.

I give it to you, my God, with all the love of my heart, because I love you.

And for me it is a necessity of love, this gift of myself, this placing of myself in your hands without reserve, in boundless confidence,

Because you are my Father.

- Charles de Foucauld, 1858-1916

Stay with me, Lord, and then I shall begin to shine as thou shinest, so to shine as to be a light to others. The light, O Jesus, will be all from thee. None of it will be mine. No merit to me. It will be thou who shinest through me upon others. O let me thus praise thee, in the way which thou dost love best, by shining on all those around me. Give light to them as well as to me; light them with me, through me. Teach me to show forth thy praise, thy truth, thy will. Make me preach thee without preaching—not by words, but by my example and by the catching force, the sympathetic influence, of what I do—by my visible resemblance to thy saints, and the evident fullness of the love which my heart bears to thee.

- John Henry Newman, 1801-1890

When I am down and helpless,
when lies are reigning,
when fear and indifference are growing,
may your Kingdom come.

Into our churches,
into our praying, into our singing,
may your Kingdom come.

Soon.

- from Czechoslovakia



Betty Wiberg
Rockport, MA

Monday, March 21

The Lord said: Because these people draw near with their mouths and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their worship of me is a human commandment learned by rote; so I will again do amazing things with this people, shocking and amazing. The wisdom of their wise shall perish, and the discernment of the discerning shall be hidden.

Isaiah 29:13&14

“To fear God” signifies to love the things which are of God, by doing them, and by not willing to do those which are against Him. *Apocalypse Revealed* n. 527.2

Tuesday, March 22

Ha! You who hide a plan too deep for the Lord, whose deeds are in the dark, and who say, “Who sees us? Who knows us?” You turn things upside down! Shall the potter be regarded as the clay? Shall the thing made say of its maker, “He did not make me”; or the thing formed say of the one who formed it, “He has no understanding”? *Isaiah 29:15&16*

The Word teaches that in proportion as a man has not been purified from evils, his goods are not good, nor are his pious things pious, and neither is he wise.

Doctrine of Life (Potts) n. 30

Wednesday, March 23

Shall not Lebanon in a very little while become a fruitful field, and the fruitful field be regarded as a forest? On that day the deaf shall hear the words of a scroll, and out of their gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind shall see. *Isaiah 29:17&18*

Divine wisdom and intelligence are communicated to those who are in love towards the Lord, and from that in faith in Him, because “eyes” in the Word signify in reference to man the understanding of truth, and the understanding of truth is intelligence and wisdom

Apocalypse Explained n. 152

Thursday, March 24

The meek shall obtain fresh joy in the Lord, and the neediest people shall exult in the Holy One of Israel.

Isaiah 29:19

The rich and the poor alike come into heaven, the one as easily as the other. The belief that the poor enter heaven easily and the rich with difficulty comes from not understanding the Word where the rich and the poor are mentioned. In the Word those that have an abundance of knowledges of good and truth, thus who are within the church where the Word is, are meant in the spiritual sense by the “rich;” while those who lack these knowledges, and yet desire them, thus who are outside of the church and where there is no Word, are meant by the “poor.” *Heaven and Hell (Ager) n. 365.*

Friday, March 25

For the tyrant shall be no more, and the scoffer shall cease to be; all those alert to do evil shall be cut off—those who cause a person to lose a lawsuit, who set a trap for the arbiter in the gate, and without grounds deny justice to the one in the right. Therefore thus says the Lord, who redeemed Abraham, concerning the house of Jacob: No longer shall Jacob be ashamed, no longer shall his face grow pale. *Isaiah 29:20-22*

It is quite contrary to the Divine that some should be born as the elect to salvation and heaven, and some as the nonelect to damnation and hell. To think so about the Divine would be horrible, because such conduct would be the height of unmercifulness, when yet the Divine is mercy itself. *Arcana Coelestia* n. 7051.4

Saturday, March 26

For when he sees his children, the work of my hands, in his midst, they will sanctify my name; they will sanctify the Holy One of Jacob, and will stand in awe of the God of Israel. And those who err in spirit will come to understanding, and those who grumble will accept instruction. *Isaiah 29:23&24*

Faith is from God, and consequently “true” in the Word is predicated of faith, for the reason that all truth is of faith; for that is called “true” which is believed.

Apocalypse Explained (Whitehead) n. 204.

MAR 27 Love's Judgment

Ms. Leah G. Goodwin

Numbers 21:4-9

From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. The people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food." Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people. And the Lord said to Moses, "Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live." So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

John 3:14-21

And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God."

Ephesians 2:1-10

You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else.

But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead

through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

Sermon

Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him... And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. (John 3:17-19)

You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world... But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ... For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast. (Ephesians 2, selected verses)

Have any of you seen one of these "Wash Away Your Sins" towelettes? They're part of a whole line of "Wash Away Your Sins" cleaning products.

The best part about it is that it really is a handy towelette. I had it in my purse for a while, but I never got around to using it—I was kind of afraid of what would happen if I did!

I'll read you the package: "Save yourself! Save others! Antibacterial formula kills sin on contact. Handy! Reliable! Heavenly scented! Infused with Easter lily scent! Rights your sins with a single swipe."

There's often darkness in humor—and this towelette package is funny because the claims it makes are, at least as far as I know, unfortunately not possible. Sin is a sickness, but it's not bacterial. Wrongs can't be "righted with a single swipe."

This issue of sin weighs particularly heavily on us on this late March Lenten morning. Not least of these reasons is a peculiar paradox of this day in the church year. This Sunday is the fourth Sunday in the forty-day season of Lent. It is the Sunday known as "Laetare Sunday," or the Sunday of Rejoicing. Even the medieval Christian world knew that a bit of a break is a good thing, especially when a person is contemplating his or

her sins, and in the fourteenth century or so Rejoicing Sunday was added to the Lenten seasonal lineup.

But, of course, even rejoicing is informed by the spirit of the season. So it is that we come to our readings for this morning, which are notable for both heights of ecstasy and depths of grief. Our Gospel reading for this morning begins in the middle of things, halfway through a conversation that Jesus is having, in the middle of the night, with a man named Nicodemus who has come searching for the secret to eternal life. Our reading begins as Jesus (or John, we're not sure which) muses on the nature of Christ's mission: "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him...." Truly, cause for rejoicing!

But then comes the scary part: "Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil."

"Those who do not believe are condemned (judged) already." It is so simple, so tempting, to think, "Pfft. Too bad for them. They condemned themselves—free will and all that. God wants to save us - but we do, after all, have the freedom to choose hell." And then we feel a bit freer to give a big ol' Bronx cheer to people or groups or political parties, or even ourselves—whomever we feel doesn't measure up.

It is so easy to understand Jesus' message in this passage from the Gospel of John as one that separates the saved from the damned, insiders from outsiders, the faithful from the unfaithful—in other words, the members of the Jesus club from the nonmembers. Some may read this passage and feel pretty sure that they're on the club roster.

And some may encounter this passage and believe quite the opposite - that, in fact, they are the unredeemable one, the one whose soul is too broken ever to be saved, or too dead ever to be brought back to life.

Well, I don't buy it.

I don't buy it for a number of reasons, a number of which are separate sermons in themselves.

But mostly I don't buy it because of what the gospel itself says, which I believe outweighs any condemnatory impulses we may bring to bear on the text: "For God so loved the world..." The Word speaks most powerfully in that one little phrase, "the world."

The writer of John's gospel uses the Greek word *kosmos* for what we translate in this famous quote as "the world." The word *kosmos* is familiar to us—we use it to mean the vast universe, the whole of creation—but in New Testament Greek *kosmos* has a particular connotation that sort of gets lost in translation. *Kosmos* means not just the creation, but damaged creation, broken creation, fallen creation—the universe or world or person that has turned away from its creator, from God.

So when the writer of John's gospel tells us that "God so loved the world," he's saying that God loved—still loves—the broken world. God loves a world that, quite often, did not and does not love him back. As Edward Marquardt puts it, "The world is generally hostile to God, hates God, resists God, does not have time for God, does not believe in God. And God loves the world." God ceaselessly strives, as Swedenborg told us this morning, to bring us into mutual union with him.

God loves a world that, quite often, did not and does not love him back.

"The grand purpose, or the purpose of all elements of creation, is an eternal union of the Creator with the created universe. This does not happen unless there are subjects in which the Creator's divinity can be as it is in itself, at home, so to speak—subjects in which it can dwell and abide. For these subjects to be his dwellings and homes they must be receptive of his love and wisdom apparently of their own accord, subjects who will with apparent autonomy raise themselves toward the Creator and unite themselves with him. In the absence of this reciprocity, there is no union...Through this union, the Lord is present in every work he has created." (*Divine Love and Wisdom* §170)

This notion that all of creation exists so that it might be a home for God begins to illuminate what the Gospel reading is saying to us—that the "judgment" of which Jesus speaks, the "condemnation" that we bring upon ourselves, is not God's finger pointing certain dreadful people to the door marked "Hell." Rather, it is the spiritual kick in the pants that occurs whenever the light of divine truth comes into contact with the dark, broken, dead parts of ourselves, and of this world.

Rev. Sarah Buteux put it this way:

"The only person I have a right to judge is myself. And even this right should not be taken as an opportunity for self flagellation, or self-degradation, but rather as an opportunity for repentance, and a chance to be conscious of my need for humility and compassion toward myself and others. What is needed is a recognition that I am not perfect, but the Lord loves me anyway, and is willing to forgive what is wrong in me because he is so deeply committed to all that is right."

This is the point: that the only true judgment is love's judgment. The only judgment that really transforms us, that truly makes us new, is the one that we experience when we, in our brokenness, come into contact with the clear and unflinching light of divine love.

The purpose of love's judgment is not to hand down a sentence, "saved" or "condemned," "heaven" or "hell." The point of love's judgment is not retributive, locking the prison door and throwing away the key. Judgment for the sake of some idea of cosmic retributive justice, judgment that points the finger and tells each of us just how sinful we are and what it is we deserve, is ultimately not God's purpose.

Love judges us, sifts us out, on every level—each one of within ourselves, as a congregation, as a nation, as a culture, as an epoch, as a world—so that we might find our wheat separated from our chaff.

Love judges us so that we might become whole, which is, after all, really what it means to be "saved." Love judges us, reveals the parts of our souls that are "dead through trespasses and sins," dead because they follow the course of this world.

Love judges us in order to heal us. And sometimes God's cleansing love is astringent, feels harsh, to our precious uncleanness—no delicately scented handy-wipe towelette here.

Jesus Christ, my friends, is the substance of love's judgment. He is, in his every aspect, the unflinching light of God's truth, the unceasing and unrelenting embrace of God's love.

Love judges us in Christ's coming. For each one of us, and for us as a world, it is the coming of the Word of God, God's divine truth, into our individual and collective lives. In the brightness of this light we can begin taking stock of ourselves and of our kosmos, our pitifully broken, divinely beloved world. There is no hiding from God's light—no hiding our darkness and no hiding our beauty as God's creation, either.

Love judges us in Christ's death on the cross, in the truths that we recognize but reject—those things that we know, somewhere deep within ourselves, to be good and real, but push away, those ideas or parts of ourselves or people that are so perversely satisfying to ignore or to hurt, precisely because they are true.

And love judges us in Christ's resurrection—in taking what is dead and making it alive, in taking what kills and giving it healing power (remember that bronze serpent from our Old Testament reading this morning?)—in taking grief and turning it into Good News, into gospel. Love judges us by striving with us and within us, by taking what is lost in us and making it found, by taking this broken world and our broken hearts and making it—and us—whole and new.

Divine love comes to us in all its truth, in the form we know to be our Lord Jesus Christ, and reveals to us the parts of our being that are "dead in sin," the parts of our souls that are not really who we are, the parts of us that "follow the course of this world" and not God's creation, that are not what God created us to be.

As a part of the church year, Lent is a time for taking stock. It is an introspective, meditative, and (yes) somber time of spiritual birth and death, a time to prepare ourselves for the great joy of Easter. So it is appropriate, as I close this morning, to turn to a work from Lent's sister season of Advent. This is from T. S. Eliot, who speaks as one of the Wise Men, the Magi.

Love judges us in order to heal us.

All this was a long time ago, I remember,
And I would do it again, but set down
This set down
This: were we led all that way for
Birth or Death?...

I had seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here...
I should be glad of another death.

(T.S. Eliot, "The Journey of the Magi")

"This," says Jesus, "is the judgment...that the light came into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil."

But this judgment, this shock of realization, this sinking feeling of shame that overtakes us when God's wholeness comes to heal our brokenness, is not the end of the story. Because, as John's Gospel tells us also, "the light came into the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." Amen.

Monday, March 28

Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.

Happy are those to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

While I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. *Psalm 32:1-3*

Those who are in the celestial kingdom of the Lord do not from their intellectual part know truths, but perceive them; for the good that has been implanted in the will is presented in its quality and in its form in the understanding, and is there in a light as it were flaming. *Arcana Coelestia n. 9818*

Tuesday, March 29

For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.

Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity; I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord," and you forgave the guilt of my sin.

Psalm 32:4-5

There must be temptation in order that the man may be regenerated, which is effected through the implanting of faith and charity, and thus through the formation of a new will and a new understanding.

Arcana Coelestia n. 8351

Wednesday, March 30

Therefore let all who are faithful offer prayer to you; at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters shall not reach them. *Psalm 32:6*

For in temptations apparently man is left to himself alone, although he is not; for God is then most nearly present in man's inmosts and sustains him; therefore when man conquers in temptation he is inmostly conjoined with God, as in temptation the Lord was inmostly united to God His Father.

True Christian Religion n. 126

Thursday, March 31

You are a hiding place for me; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with glad cries of deliverance. *Psalm 32:7*

All things in the heavens are goods and truths, and all things in the hells are evils and falsities; and thence the heavens and the hells are altogether separated, and in an inverted position like the Antipodes; wherefore evils and falsities cannot reach to the heavens.

Apocalypse Revealed n. 761

Friday, April 1

I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you.

Do not be like a horse or a mule, without understanding, whose temper must be curbed with bit and bridle, else it will not stay near you. *Psalm 32:8-9*

Because goodness comes from love and truth comes from wisdom, God is goodness itself and truth itself.

True Christian Religion n. 36

Saturday, April 2

Many are the torments of the wicked, but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the Lord.

Be glad in the Lord and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart. *Psalm 32:10-11*

Trust is an attribute of love expressed through faith; consequently trust in Jehovah, that is, in the Lord, does not exist except with those in whom love is present, that is to say, love to the Lord and towards the neighbour; for faith does not reside with any others.

Arcana Coelestia n. 8240

APR 3 From a Peep to a Quack

Rev. Ronald Brugler

Exodus 34:29-35

Moses came down from Mount Sinai. As he came down from the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant in his hand, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, the skin of his face was shining, and they were afraid to come near him. But Moses called to them; and Aaron and all the leaders of the congregation returned to him, and Moses spoke with them. Afterward all the Israelites came near, and he gave them in commandment all that the Lord had spoken with him on Mount Sinai. When Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil on his face; but whenever Moses went in before the Lord to speak with him, he would take the veil off, until he came out; and when he came out, and told the Israelites what he had been commanded, the Israelites would see the face of Moses, that the skin of his face was shining; and Moses would put the veil on his face again, until he went in to speak with him.

Luke 9:28-43

Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah" —not knowing what he said. While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.

On the next day, when they had come down from the mountain, a great crowd met him. Just then a man from the crowd shouted, "Teacher, I beg you to look at my son; he is my only child. Suddenly a spirit seizes him, and all at once he shrieks. It convulses him until he foams at the mouth; it mauls him and will scarcely leave him. I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not." Jesus answered, "You faithless and

perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and bear with you? Bring your son here." While he was coming, the demon dashed him to the ground in convulsions. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, healed the boy, and gave him back to his father.

And all were astounded at the greatness of God.

Sermon

Years ago, when I was a child, one of my favorite joys of Easter was getting up in the morning and going downstairs to discover seven Easter baskets lined up along the wall in the living room. We children would dive into the assortment of candy, only to have our feast interrupted by the sound of peeps coming from shoeboxes that were always sitting on the dining room table, tied with fancy ribbons. Inside each box were tiny chicks and ducklings that had been dyed a variety of bright colors—red, blue, purple, and yellow. Their peeps cheerfully proclaimed the dawn of another Easter morning. Without them, it would not have been Easter.

I have no idea why my parents did this each year; it was simply one of our Easter rituals. True, we lived on a farm, and the chicks would grow into chickens and provide us with eggs (and the occasional chicken dinner)—but we already had plenty of chickens, and they dutifully sat on their eggs, ensuring that their species would continue. As for the ducks, well, once Easter had passed, we would load the ducklings into our station wagon and head down the road to our neighbor's farm. There we kids would say our sad goodbyes and watch the ducklings head straight for the pond behind their barn.

I remember that every year, the day before this exodus was to take place, I would sit and have a conversation with those ducklings. I would try to explain to them many of the mysteries of life. "Tomorrow," I would tell them, "your life is going to change. You are going to discover that the world is a terribly big place, not at all like the confinements of the cardboard box you now call home. And with that news, I always imagined, their eyes become as large as saucers as they wondered of what I spoke.

I'd go on to explain that their little pan of water was going to become a large pond, and that they were going to have to learn how to swim. I'd explain how they were to move their feet. They would nod their heads as if to indicate understanding. "You're going to meet other ducks," I'd say, "but they'll be your friends." And they would peep in anticipation of the new acquaintances they would soon make. "There'll be plenty of food, so don't worry about that"—and

they would shake their small duckling tails in relief. "But most importantly," I continued, "someday soon you're going to open your beaks, and instead of peeping, you're going to quack!"

At those words they would stop dead in their tracks to look at me in total amazement. The ducklings' eyes would invariably be filled with wonder and disbelief! Swimming they could understand. The fact that the world is a big place offered them a taste of freedom. Meeting other ducks was a source of excitement. But the news that they were about to experience the transformation from peep to quack was beyond them. It was a mystery of duck life.

In just the same way, all of us inevitably come to a point in life when we are confronted with a similar mystery—something that we hear but just don't understand. Life as we know it seems to lead us to nowhere but toward dead ends, brick walls that fail to satisfy our inner needs. We hear of things of the spirit, we talk of God and the power of love, and we hear that these things will forever change our life. "We see," as Paul so eloquently noted, "through a glass dimly." And we wonder what lies on the other side.

We are faced with the reality that we can never understand God until we live in God's presence, and we hear a call inviting us to experience the Divine presence within us. Yes, just like those ducklings of my childhood, we must leave our little boxes and experience the great realms and depths of life.

The noted psychologist Abraham Maslow based much of his career on underscoring the importance of such experiences in life. He referred to them as "peak experiences." By this term he meant instances of special enlightenment that are regarded as moments of personal revelation. He wrote, "A peak experience is one that altogether awesome and inspiring, and when we have such an encounter, we are forever changed. We hold them dear to our hearts." And yes, for a duck it may come when that first quack pours out of its beak. But for us, that moment may come the first time we look into a newborn child's face, or see the gleam of love in our spouse's eyes, or watch a sunset over Lake Huron.

One of the most beautiful elements of our faith is our belief that the whole range of human life is fertile ground for such experiences. Swedenborg wrote of this wonderful potential of life when he noted, "We reach a point in life when we are called to enter a

doorway into spiritual understanding, and entering through it enables us to view wonderful and beautiful things of life, to touch them, and know that they are real. Seldom seen in the world, [they are] often seen in the eyes of those who have unlocked the Spirit. Such seeing intensifies our understanding of life. We behold the Divine presence with us."

Likewise, our teachings show that the Bible is filled with hundreds of such experiences. We can sense the power Moses felt upon first holding those stone tablets in his hands. We can feel the wonder that rushed through the disciples' minds when Jesus was transfigured before their eyes. We feel the overwhelming joy of the woman who did nothing but reach out and touch our Lord's robe as he passed by and was healed of her disease. In each of these there is an element of the realm of the spirit, which forever affected those who witnessed them and changed their life in profound ways.

But the beauty of these experiences lies also in the fact that they are ours too! Every individual can have, and does have, peak experiences, when the familiar shines with a new glory and radiance. We know of events that call us back to the source of our faith, that renew our visions and covenants with our God. And when we do, we discover anew the meaning of those words, "Lord, it has been good for us to be here!"

Several years ago Sir Alister Hardy, a biologist at London's Oxford University, underwent such a transfiguration. Here was a man whose entire career was focused on the origins of life. He had no faith, for faith to him was something that had no place in the life of a scientist. He sought truth, and sought it well. He was renowned in scientific circles for his life's work.

But it happened that Hardy's wife of many years became ill and was given but a short time to live. As he sat alone in the hospital room, his heart burdened with an overwhelming sense of grief and sadness over his wife's condition, she suddenly awoke from her sleep, squeezed his hand, and asked, "Now, will you accept that our love is true?"

In describing the events that followed, this scientist, so used to seeking truth in his life, felt that a doorway suddenly opened within his inmost being. He began to pray, and felt a peace that had eluded him all his life. His wife recovered, and to this day their lives are filled with a love that surpasses human understanding.

Everyone has experiences when the familiar shines with a new glory and radiance.

As a result of this experience, Hardy decided that his scientific career had caused him to lose sight of the spiritual realm of life. He subsequently compiled over five thousand accounts from adults who admitted to having forms of religious experiences ranging from miraculous healings to feelings of unusual harmony with the universe. He found that one in three Britons has had such an experience. But perhaps most significantly, he learned something else: Most of the people sought out the church as a place to share these wonderful events, and the majority agreed on one thing—the church had rejected them. “How sad,” Hardy notes, “that the one institution that speaks openly of God’s love rejects sharing how that love touches people.”

Even in the mundane, we can be open to sharing the wonderful transformation that God’s presence can bring about in our lives. After all, we’re not so unlike ducks. We all experience times when we think we are going to peep and out comes a quack! And by those quacks we are forever changed. The joy of those moments seems to overwhelm us. But if we knew that there was a place where we could go to share our joy, to talk to others whose lives have been changed in similar ways, we’d go—quicker than a duck goes to water. My prayer is that this church will be a place where we all can share and grow from such wonderful events.



Prayers

Blessed be the hour, O Christ, in which thou wast born, and the hour in which thou didst die:

Blessed be the dawn of thy rising again, and the high day of thine ascending. O most merciful and mighty redeemer Christ, let all times be the time of our presence with thee, and of thy dwelling in us.

- Eric Milner-White, 1884-1964

God of life, when our lives have no music in them,
when our hearts are lonely and our souls have lost their courage,
flood the path with light, turn our hearts to skies full of promise
and quicken our spirits with the memories of your heroes and saints;
through Christ our Lord.

- St. Augustine of Hippo, 354-430

Monday, April 4

I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. *John 17:6&7*

In the spiritual sense, the name of God means everything which the church teaches from the Word, and by which the Lord is invoked and worshiped. All such things in the complex are the name of God.

True Christian Religion n. 298

Tuesday, April 5

I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them.

John 17:9&10

When the Lord was in the world, and before He was fully glorified, He was the Divine truth; wherefore at that time there was mediation, and He interceded with the Father, that is, with the Divine good itself.

Arcana Coelestia n. 8705.4

Wednesday, April 6

And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. *John 17:11*

As in heaven, and with man, and even in universal nature, all things both in general and in particular have relation to good and truth, therefore also the Lord's Divine is distinguished into Divine good and Divine truth, and the Lord's Divine good is called "father," and his Divine truth "son"; but the Lord's Divine is nothing else than good; yea, good itself; and Divine truth is the Lord's Divine good so appearing in heaven; that is, before the angels..

Arcana Coelestia (Potts) n. 3704

Thursday, April 7

While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. I guarded them, and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost, so that the scripture might be fulfilled. But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves. *John 17:12&13*

"And I heard a great voice in heaven, saying, 'Now is come the salvation, and the power, and the kingdom of our God and the authority of His Christ,'" signifies the joy of the angels of heaven, because the Lord alone now reigns in heaven and in the church, and because they are saved who believe in him.

Apocalypse Explained n.743

Friday, April 8

I have given them your Word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. *John 17:14-16*

The Divine order is that man should set himself in order for the reception of God and prepare himself to be a receptacle and abode into which God may enter and in which, as in His temple, God may dwell.

True Christian Religion n. 105

Saturday, April 9

Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth. *John 17:17-19*

That the Lord alone is holy, and that that alone is holy which proceeds from the Lord, thus that which man receives from the Lord, is plain from the Word throughout; as in John. *Arcana Coelestia n. 9229*

APR 10 Don't Go Away Sad

Rev. Sarah Buteux

Mark 10:17-31

As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: 'You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.'" He said to him, "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth." Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." They were greatly astounded and said to one another, "Then who can be saved?" Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible."

Peter began to say to him, "Look, we have left everything and followed you." Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first."

Sermon

When I sit down to write a sermon, I usually start by asking myself what it is I want people to walk away with. I spend some time thinking about the potential of the good news in any given passage and how I hope that good news will change your lives. Well, as I sat with this passage about the rich young man, I had kind of a crazy thought. I began to wonder what would happen if I preached the best sermon of my life, a sermon so inspiring that you all actually left church, went home, sold all of your possessions,

gave all of your money to the poor, and then came back next Sunday and said, "Okay, Pastor, what now? Oh, and by the way, what's for lunch?"

What would I do? Actually, I know what I'd do. I'd totally freak out. I'd probably get it together long enough to order a lot of pizza, but after that I'd be at a total loss and probably broke too. Which makes me sad, because I realize how little room we've left in our churches and in our ostensibly Christian culture to follow Jesus in such a radical way. The Catholics figured this out a long time ago and made provisions for people to become nuns and priests and monks who could live in community and hold all things in common. But as Protestants, with a few notable exceptions, we've really struggled with this idea.

I read through dozens of commentaries this past week, all of which stressed how important it is that we preachers take a hard line on this passage and not soften or metaphorize its most basic implications about money, and all of which left me wanting to ask their authors, "Yeah, that's great and all, but have you? Have you personally sold all of your possessions? Have you given all your money away to the poor? Or did you write this commentary, much as I will write my sermon, on your personal computer in the comfort of your own home surrounded by more stuff than you know what to do with?"

I certainly haven't given all of my possessions away. We own a house, for goodness' sakes! Well, technically, I think the bank still owns most of it, but we're working on that. We own a car. I own clothes (far, far too many clothes) and shoes (well, definitely still not enough shoes—I'm kidding...sort of). We have a child to feed and another on the way. We are fortunate enough to be able to give a lot away, but we can't give it all, at least not right now. Because if we did, then we would be the needy ones. We'd need other people to feed us and house us and clothe us. We wouldn't be able to help others. We'd need others to help us. We'd be dependent, and honestly, there are very few things in life that scare me more.

Like most of you, I not only love to help others, I love being in a position where I can help others. But I'm not so good at asking for help myself. I pride myself on my independence. I am proud of the fact that Andrew and I are able to support ourselves. I am proud of the fact that I've been able to keep working these past six weeks in spite of all the health issues my family and I have been facing. I'm proud of the fact that I can grill a steak as well as my dad and drive through downtown Boston all on my own, and if I get a flat tire, I pride myself on knowing exactly

how to change it. I don't need to call Andrew to come rescue me. I can call AAA all by myself, thank you very much.

I've got a lot going for me. My relative health and wealth, my age and education, my social network of friends and family, my lovely church, my good fortune at being born in this country—all of these things help me to be the person that I am, and I like this person and the good things this person can do. I don't want to give that up. So I understand why the young man in our reading today was reluctant to give it all up as well.

You see, he was a decent guy, too. He was wealthy and no doubt well respected, but he wasn't a jerk about it. He didn't lord his status over other people. Or at least he didn't lord it over Jesus. There is a generosity of spirit about this man that comes through quite clearly. I mean, most men in his position, if they wanted to speak with Jesus, would have sent for him, but notice that this guy ran out to meet him. And when he arrived, notice that he didn't announce who he was and wait for Jesus to bow in his presence or be impressed. No, no, it was the rich man in all his finery who knelt down in the dirt before the itinerant preacher in his travel-stained tunic.

"Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" he asked.

This young man comes to Jesus in earnest. Unlike the Pharisees, who were always asking him questions just to test him, this man is fully invested in whatever answer Jesus will give. He is as sincere in his seeking as he is devout in his life. We learn that he has kept all the commandments since his youth. Like me and perhaps like many of you, this is a man who takes his faith seriously. He works at it. He makes it a priority to honor God with his actions and his decisions. He has kept the Sabbath. He has studied the scriptures. He's done everything they've ever told him to do. And yet something is still missing. For all his efforts, for all the time, energy, and money he has invested in his faith, he is still not sure that it is enough. He longs for heaven. He longs to know that he is right with God. But at the end of the day, in spite of all he has done, he's still not convinced.

And so he comes to Jesus and asks, "What must I do?" What am I missing here? Why, in spite of all I have done, is there still so much doubt and fear deep in my soul?

And in that moment I think he broke Jesus' heart. Mark tells us that Jesus, "looking at him, loved him." Loved him before he said a word. Loved him even before he knew how the young man would respond. "You lack one thing," said Jesus as he looked straight into the young man's heart, "go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."

We already know that the young man walked away sad. Mark tells us that he "went away grieving, for he had many possessions." But what you might not know is that his grief probably had little to do with the idea of parting with his Rolex sundial or his summer house on the Dead Sea. I think the young man grieved at the idea of giving up his wealth because it was his wealth that had enabled him to be so good in the first place. It was his wealth that had provided him with the wherewithal to study the law, make the appropriate sacrifices throughout the year, keep kosher, and give to others. In his mind, it was his wealth that had enabled him to live all those years as such a good Jew.

Heaven, eternal life, the kingdom of God, are God's free gift to you. How you live into that awareness is your gift to God.

And he wasn't crazy. Everyone thought this way. You see, back then, if you were poor you didn't have the luxury of being holy. Mostly you were just trying to survive. Wealth was seen as a blessing bestowed on good, observant, righteous men, in large part because it was only the wealthy who could afford to be good, observant, righteous men.

This is why the disciples are absolutely shocked by Jesus' words about wealth. If it's that hard for the rich, "who then can be saved?" they ask. They ask this because just like the rich young man, they've missed the point.

"For mortals it is impossible," says Jesus, "but not for God; for God all things are possible."

What is Jesus saying here? Well, it may come as a bit of a shock to you, just as it did to them, but I think what Jesus is trying to say is that it is downright impossible for any of you to work your way into heaven. Eternal life is not something you can earn by keeping the commandments, observing the law, living a good and virtuous life, saying a special little prayer found at the end of a pamphlet, or even—you'll be happy to know—giving all you own to the poor. There is nothing you can do to inherit eternal life, because eternal life is God's free gift to you.

If it were otherwise, then all any of us would have to do is give up all we have and we too could

purchase a ticket for eternity, but that is not the moral of this story. When Jesus asks the rich man to give all he has to the poor, he is not putting a price on the kingdom of God; he is asking this young man to let go of the idea that the kingdom of God is for sale. He is asking him to let go of the belief that he can make his way into heaven by being good (“Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.”), by being rich (“Go, give it all away, and come follow me.”), by being or doing anything.

The good news of this passage, indeed the heart of Jesus’ whole gospel message, is that you’re not going to be welcomed into heaven someday for living a righteous life (which isn’t the same as saying they won’t welcome the fact that you did). Nor will you be welcomed into heaven because you gave away lots of money (which is not to say that they and we here in the church won’t be pleased with that as well). The good news Jesus came to proclaim to us all is that we will be welcomed into the kingdom when we die because we are already welcome there now while we still live. So there is no need to be anxious. There is no need to fear. Heaven, eternal life, the kingdom of God—these are all yours already. They are God’s free gift to you. How you live into that awareness, how you live after receiving this gift, is your gift to God.

It is so simple, yet so frightening, so simple and yet so contrary to the way we do things in our world. Can you see, then, why it was so hard for a young man who had grown accustomed to placing his trust in his own wealth and ability and the autonomy these afforded him to accept Jesus’ charity? Can you see why it was so hard for him to place himself in the hands of Jesus with nothing but his own person, stripped bare, to recommend him?

He thought, as so many of us do, that it was his wealth that made him worthy because it was his wealth that enabled him to do all the good things that would make God love him. But, wonder of wonders, Jesus loved him already. He loved him enough to offer him a new life, an eternal life, a life in the kingdom he could begin to live in the here and now if he would but let go of his need to save himself and follow Jesus in his quest to save others.

My friends, Jesus holds out this same gift to us, right now, not because we have earned it, but simply because he loves us too. “All we have to do,” in the words of the Rev. Richard Fairchild, “is hold out our hands and accept the gift. It’s both the easiest and the hardest thing we can ever do: the easiest—because the gift is free; the hardest—because our hands are so often filled with other things,” things we somehow

think we need to be the people God has created us to be.

The truth is that all God needs is a willing heart, an open heart, a heart that can tell these hands to relax. A heart that can tell these hands that there is no treasure on earth that can compare with the treasure of heaven God is already holding out to us in the here and now. So let go if you can. Let go of the worries and the anxieties and the preoccupations that would keep you from entering right now into the kingdom of God.

As you consider what you will pledge to the church this year, how you will give of your time, where you will share your gifts and your talents, let the fear and the pressure go. I don’t want you to walk away sad, thinking you can never give enough, any more than I want you to give in the hope that God will bless you or save you or love you. Give because he already has and he already does. Give until it feels good. Give as you have been given, the better to love as you have been loved. Thanks be to God.

Prayers

O Lord, be in our heads and in our understanding, in our eyes and in our seeing, in our feet and in our walking, in our hands and in our giving, in our mouths and in our speaking, in our hearts and in our loving, in our lives and in our living, for we are made in your image and we would live as such. Grant, O Lord, that we will not think ourselves more virtuous than we are, neither imagine ourselves as less precious than you have regarded us. For, Lord, you have made us a little lower than the angels, and likewise you have placed us a little lower, that we might work out your will upon this world you love so very much. Help us, Lord, empower us, keep us ever mindful of you as we seek to do all we do in your name and for your glory. Amen.

O Tree of Calvary, send thy roots deep down into my heart.

Gather together the soil of my heart,
the sands of my fickleness,
the stones of my stubbornness,
the mud of my desires;

bind them all together, O Tree of Calvary,
interlace them with thy strong roots, entwine them
with the network of thy love.

- Chandran Devanesen

Monday, April 11

O give thanks to the Lord, call on his name, make known his deeds among the peoples.
Sing to him, sing praises to him; tell of all his wonderful works. *Psalm 105:1&2*

Some people believe it is hard to lead the heaven-bound life that is called "spiritual" because they have heard that we need to renounce the world and give up the desires attributed to the body and the flesh and live "spiritually." All they understand by this is spurning worldly interests, especially concerns for money and prestige...However, the actual case is quite different...
Heaven and Hell 528

Tuesday, April 12

Glory in his holy name; let the hearts of those who seek the Lord rejoice.
Seek the Lord and his strength; seek his presence continually. *Psalm 105:3&4*

If we would accept heaven's life, we need by all means to live in the world and participate in its duties and affairs. In this way, we accept a spiritual life by means of our moral and civic life; and there is no other way our spirits can be prepared for heaven. *Heaven and Hell 528*

Wednesday, April 13

Remember the wonderful works he has done, his miracles, and the judgments he uttered,
O offspring of his servant Abraham, children of Jacob, his chosen ones. *Psalm 105: 5&6*

The grand purpose is an eternal union of the Creator with the created universe. This does not happen unless there are subjects in which his divinity can be at home, so to speak, subjects in which it can dwell and abide. For these subjects to be his dwellings and homes they must be receptive of his love and wisdom apparently of their own accord.... In the absence of this reciprocity there can be no union. *Divine Love and Wisdom 170*

Thursday, April 14

He is mindful of his covenant forever, of the word that he commanded, for a thousand generations, the covenant that he made with Abraham, his sworn promise to Isaac,
saying, "To you I will give the land of Canaan as your portion for an inheritance." *Psalm 105:8,9,11*

We are those subjects, people who can raise themselves and unite with apparent autonomy... By accepting love and wisdom from the Lord, we are then raised up and furnished with all the means for the acceptance of love and wisdom.
Divine Love and Wisdom 170-171

Friday, April 15

He spread a cloud for a covering, and fire to give light by night.
They asked, and he brought quails, and gave them food from heaven in abundance. *Psalm 105:39&40*

All the results that we call final goals become fresh new goals in an endless series, from the First, who is the Lord the Creator, to the last, which is our union with him. 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.
Divine Love and Wisdom 172

Saturday, April 16

He opened the rock, and water gushed out; it flowed through the desert like a river.
For he remembered his holy promise, and Abraham, his servant.
So he brought his people out with joy, his chosen ones with singing. *Psalm 105: 41-43*

The universe, from beginning to end and from first to last, is so full of divine love and wisdom that you could call it divine love and wisdom in an image... It is not that the created universe is the Divine-Human One; rather, it comes from him... It all comes from God, who is the intrinsic person, the intrinsic wisdom and love, and the intrinsic form and substance.
Divine Love and Wisdom 52

APR 17 Shed For You

Rev. Dr. George F. Dole

Exodus 12:1-13

The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt: This month shall mark for you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year for you. Tell the whole congregation of Israel that on the tenth of this month they are to take a lamb for each family, a lamb for each household. If a household is too small for a whole lamb, it shall join its closest neighbor in obtaining one; the lamb shall be divided in proportion to the number of people who eat of it. Your lamb shall be without blemish, a year-old male; you may take it from the sheep or from the goats. You shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month; then the whole assembled congregation of Israel shall slaughter it at twilight. They shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it. They shall eat the lamb that same night; they shall eat it roasted over the fire with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. Do not eat any of it raw or boiled in water, but roasted over the fire, with its head, legs, and inner organs. You shall let none of it remain until the morning; anything that remains until the morning you shall burn. This is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it hurriedly. It is the passover of the Lord. For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both human beings and animals; on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the Lord. The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live: when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt.

Matthew 26:26-29

While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom."

Secrets of Heaven 7846, 7877

7846. "And they shall take of the blood." We can see that this means holy truth that is prompted by the good that innocence does, since "blood" means holy truth emanating from the Lord, and this is "the

blood of a lamb," "lamb" standing for the good that innocence does.

7877. What is "truth prompted by the good that innocence does"? The good that innocence does is good done out of love for the Lord. That is, when we are caught up in love for the Lord we are caught up in innocence. That is why the people in the third heaven are more caught up in innocence than others—they are caught up in a love for the Lord. Because of their innocence the people there look to others like children; yet they are the wisest of all in heaven because innocence dwells in wisdom. For them, the truth prompted by the good that innocence does is not truth disclosed by faith but good done because of caring, since people in the third heaven do not know what faith is. This means that they do not know what truth disclosed by faith is. You see, they have a feel for the truth that comes from faith, which means that they know instantly whether something is true. So they never analyze something to see whether it is so, let alone argue about it. Anything that is felt in this way cannot be reduced to the form of data.

Sermon

Taking a cup and blessing it, he gave it to them, saying, "Drink this, all of you, for this is my blood, blood of the covenant, which is shed for many for forgiveness of sins." (Matthew 26:27-28)

There is no obvious relationship between drinking from a cup of wine and having one's sins forgiven, even with the explanation that the wine stands for the Lord's blood. One way a connection has been made is to regard the blood as a sacrifice to appease the wrath of the Father, and this has proved both persuasive and comforting to many. It does not hold up very well under close reading, though, because the picture it gives of the Father is problematic, to say the least. The best we can do with it is to visualize the Father as torn between righteous wrath and love, and using the Son to make a kind of end run around the wrath.

It works, though, for people who have lost hope because they believe with all their hearts that God is angry with them and that they deserve punishment for their sins. Such feelings are not easily argued away, and when the emotional focus shifts from a figure of unforgiving righteousness to that of a compassionate shepherd, the relief can be a true blessing. Lives have been turned around in this way.

All the same, this comes at a cost, a cost perhaps most simply described as the loss of an infinite, omnipotent God who is both loving and wise, a God in whom there is no tension between justice and forgiveness, a God who never punishes because

transgression punishes itself. Turning to the Son seems to be turning away from the Father. Close to the heart of John's gospel, though, is Jesus' insistence not only that he is doing the Father's will, but also that it is actually the Father who is doing the works (John 14:10). Jesus was not trying to change the Father's mind or deflect the Father's intent. He was expressing the Father's mind and carrying out the Father's intent. The goal of his life was in fact to become totally one with the Father.

There was only one way to do this, and that was to lose himself. Mark's account of the crucifixion shows passersby challenging him to save himself: "He saved others—himself he cannot save" (Mark 15:31). He could have, but he had taught that anyone who tried to save his life would lose it, and that only by losing it could it be found (Matthew 16:25, Mark 8:35, Luke 9:24). This was no hyperbole. He meant what he said. He really meant what he said. He had talked that talk; now he was walking that walk, the walk that explained the talk.

There was no way to avoid this. Few experiences are more destructive, more disillusioning, than being devoted to the ideals presented by an inspiring figure and then discovering that this wonderful role model is a fraud. Sexual abuse by the clergy is very much in the news these days, and it is not restricted to any specific denomination or any religion. There was a case not too many years ago of a Buddhist guru who was found to have infected any number of his trusting followers with AIDS. In general, the more the laity trust the clergy, the more possibility there is of that trust being betrayed. "If the minister says this is right, who am I to argue?" When that trust is betrayed, it hurts; and the deeper the trust, the deeper the hurt. Jesus had taught that what was right was to lose one's life. He made no exception for himself, claimed no special privilege. Instead, he accepted a special responsibility, an immense one. The effect of backing down on this central, critical point would have been profound disillusionment. It would have sent the message, "If it hurts too much, compromise."

No, again we come up against that dialogue with Thomas, who protested that the disciples did not know where Jesus was going and therefore could not know the way. When Jesus replied "I am the way" (John 14:6), he told them. When he accepted the cross, he showed them.

This brings us to a critical point. Jesus had taught not only that those who tried to save their lives would lose them but that those who lost their lives for his sake would save them (Matthew 16:25, Mark 8:35, Luke 9:24), and that qualification, "for his sake," makes all the difference in the world. Jesus did not give up his life for his own sake but for the sake of his disciples—which at least potentially includes everyone in the world, including us. He was not showing himself the way. He was showing us the way. He was giving his body for us, he said, allowing his blood to be shed for the forgiveness of our sins.

Still, what is the connection between giving up life and the forgiveness of sins? Perhaps the simplest way of making the connection is to say that when we let go of our lives we let go of the bad as well as the good. We stop trying to rate ourselves on some spiritual or moral spreadsheet. The past is a wonderful resource for learning but an unbearable burden to carry. When we stop blaming ourselves, we can begin to hear what it has to tell us; and if we listen carefully and honestly enough, it will tell us something about what we should be doing in the present.

*When we
stop blaming
ourselves, we
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us.*

We may on occasion find ourselves grateful for some lapse, some sin, because it has showed us something about ourselves that we were keeping hidden. That could well be the surest sign that the sin has been forgiven. It has not been paid for—the Lord never punishes us. Something good has come from it, and part of that good is that we have stopped punishing ourselves. That option is always open to us. We might recall the story of Edison telling a visitor to his laboratory that all his "failures" had been successes because they had taught him what didn't work.

Sometimes we cannot figure out why we reacted as we did, and that, too, can be a good thing. It is a clear signal that we do not understand ourselves completely, and that we need a measure of curiosity, an open mind. If we do, then one of these days another reaction may switch on the light for us.

The main thing throughout this often devious process is that we keep focused on trying to follow the way—to hear what the Lord is trying to tell us. This is where our third reading comes in, with its emphasis on "good done out of love for the Lord." How do we actually feel about the Lord? If we were making a list of those we love, would the Lord come to mind? Here we may turn for a moment to the Psalmist. "One thing have I desired of the Lord: that will I seek after; that I

may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in his holy temple" (Psalm 27:4). "Give to the Lord the glory due to his name; worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness" (Psalm 29:2). "Let the beauty of the Lord our God be upon us" (Psalm 90:17). "Strength and beauty are in his sanctuary" (Psalm 96:6).

Beauty and love go hand in hand, with love in the lead. Love sees in the beloved beauty that others do not see. It seems as though beauty awakens or stirs love; but it would be more realistic to say that love is constantly looking for beauty, and that beauty gives love the opportunity to come forth. If we actually love the Lord, we join the Psalmist in seeing the Lord as beautiful. Some of the world's most beautiful music has been written for religious purposes. "Anything that is felt in this way," our third reading tells us, "cannot be reduced to the form of data." Not many sermons, however enlightening, would be described as "beautiful."

It is when we feel the beauty of the Lord, the beauty that cannot be reduced to statements of fact, that we see as the Lord sees and are therefore moved by love for each other, feeling joy in the joy of others and sorrow in their sorrow. That is when we are most fully innocent, innocent in the fundamental sense of doing no harm. That is when we stop punishing ourselves, because punishment does harm, hurts. The highest angels are caught up in innocence because they are caught up in a love for the Lord, a love that goes hand-in-hand with an awareness of the beauty of the Lord. This is a kind of other-worldly beauty whose light suffuses this world. It is the pearl of great price that prompts the merchant to sell everything in exchange for it.

At the Last Supper, the Lord offered his disciples the bread and wine as symbols of his own being. It is hard to imagine a more compelling way to say, "Take me into yourself." The apostle Paul verbalized this in his letter to the Philippians (2:5ff): "Let that mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus"; and he went on to describe that "mind" as being self-emptying, not regarding equality with God as something to be grasped, but humbling himself even to the point of death on the cross. Jesus simply said "Take, eat." "Drink this." Let my flesh and blood become one with yours. Feel as I feel, and see as I see—then you will speak and act as I speak and act. "Whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do, and in fact will do greater works than these because I am going to the Father." (John 14:12).

Our theology tells us again and again that the human nature the Divinity assumed in the Incarnation was just as weak and flawed as our own, so that throughout his life he was tempted as we are, growing gradually, little by little, toward that full union with the indwelling Father. In other words, he was laying down his life in little ways time after time, giving his full, loving attention to those around him, tending to his own needs only in order to be able to minister. That is why he was able to lay his life down so completely when the time came.

We rarely find ourselves in situations that call for radical self-sacrifice, but we have countless little opportunities. In fact, the people who do respond heroically in times of crisis often report that they have surprised themselves. We tend to take our habitual behavior for granted, and self-forgetfulness is habit-forming.

"This is my blood...which is shed for many for the forgiveness of sins." This is Jesus saying, "I give you myself, now and always. I give you nothing but the love and understanding that I have been giving you ever since we first met. As for your sins, my only longing is to find what good can be brought out of them. That, if you will, is my definition of 'forgiveness.'"

Amen.

Prayer

O loving Christ

who died upon the tree

Each day and each night

I remember your love.

In my lying down

and in my rising up

In life and in death

You are my health and my peace.

Each day and each night

I remember your forgiveness

Bestowed on me so gently

And generously

Each day and each night

may I be fuller in love to you.

- J. Philip Newell, from Celtic Prayers from Iona

Monday, April 18

Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord.
Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the
voice of my supplications! *Psalm 130:1&2*

This innocence of wisdom is real innocence because it is internal, being a property of the mind itself and therefore of our volition itself and our consequent understanding. When there is innocence in these, then there is wisdom as well, because wisdom is a property of volition and understanding. That is why they say in heaven that innocence dwells in wisdom and why angels have as much wisdom as they do innocence.

Heaven and Hell 278

Tuesday, April 19

If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand?
But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered. *Psalm 130:3&4*

People in a state of innocence do not take credit for anything good, but ascribe and attribute everything to the Lord. They want to be led by him and not by themselves; they love everything that is good and delight in everything that is true because they know and perceive that loving what is good—that is, intending and doing good—is loving the Lord, and loving what is true is loving their neighbor.

Heaven and Hell 278

Wednesday, April 20

I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope; *Psalm 130:5*

Since their greatest love is to be led by the Lord, and since they ascribe everything to him, they are kept away from their self-centeredness, and to the extent that they are kept away from their self-centeredness, the Lord flows in. That is why they do not store in their memory what they hear from him, but immediately heed it, that is, intend and do it. Their intention itself is their memory. *Heaven and Hell 278*

Thursday, April 21

My soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning. *Psalm 130:6*

People who are in the inmost or third heaven... above all others want to be led by the Lord the way infants are led by their father. This is why they accept divine truth directly into their intent and do it... 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. *Heaven and Hell 280*

Friday, April 22

O Israel, hope in the Lord! For with the Lord there is steadfast love, and with him is great power to redeem. *Psalm 130:7*

In outward form [angels of the inmost heaven] look simple—even like infants or little children in the eyes of angels of the lower heavens. They look like people who do not know very much, even though they are the wisest of angels. They are in fact aware that they have no trace of wisdom on their own and that to be wise is to admit this and to admit that what they do know is nothing compared to what they do not know.

Heaven and Hell 280

Saturday, April 23

It is he who will redeem Israel from all its iniquities. *Psalm 130:8*

Since innocence, for heaven's angels, is the very essence of what is good, we can see that the divine good emanating from the Lord is innocence itself, inasmuch as it is this good that flows into angels, moves their deepest natures, and aligns and adapts them to accept all the blessings of heaven... Because innocence is the very heart of all the good of heaven, it also affects minds so strongly that people who feel it...feel as though they are not under their own control. They are moved by such a joy, so taken out of themselves...that it seems as though all the pleasure of the world is nothing by comparison. *Heaven and Hell 282*

APR 24 Working Ourselves to Death

Rev. Kevin K. Baxter

Isaiah 65:17-25

For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight. I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people; no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress. No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime; for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth, and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed. They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat; for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands. They shall not labor in vain, or bear children for calamity; for they shall be offspring blessed by the Lord— and their descendants as well. Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear. The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; but the serpent—its food shall be dust! They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the Lord.

Luke 24:1-12

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body. While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.” Then they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping

and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.

Sermon

The implications of the Lord’s crucifixion and resurrection are some of the most written-about subjects in Christian theology. The studies range from abstract theological analysis to focused practical lessons. With a host of different concepts and ideas to choose from, most anyone can pick a description of these two events that is meaningful to them. This is one of the reasons the Christian church has fragmented into so many different groups—after all, the significance of Easter is at the core of any denomination’s theological identity.

As I was thinking about all these approaches, I was struck by their historical nature. After all, they are talking about an event that we as Christians believe to be an historical one. Yet most Christians, I believe, see Easter as more than a memorial of a past event. There is an immediacy to Easter. There is something special that Easter has to offer us today! Today, we not only memorialize the Resurrection but also celebrate change, birth, rebirth, and growth. Easter bunnies and eggs, along with pastel colors, remind us of the potential and hope in the future. It truly is an incredible time.

But here is my problem: if Scripture promises us that we are going to receive the gift of newness and transformation from the Lord, we must also somehow partake of the whole story, not just the end reward. When we read Scripture, we always want to make ourselves the one who is healed, a disciple, or an injured party. But what if we are not playing that role? What if, for example, we are playing the role of the Pharisee? What if we put the proper order—the law, the doctrines—before our love of the Lord and our love of the neighbor? Then what is our role?

Even if we are not playing the Pharisee, what if we chose the disciple whom Jesus loved? What if we choose Peter? Even then, significant problems arise—the disciples don’t come off looking so perfect either. Only if we identify ourselves as Christ in the Easter story do we walk away clean, and let me tell you, it is hard to read this text and identify with Jesus! Jesus, as we are told at the beginning of the Gospel of John, is the Word, the Word that became flesh. In this church, the Word is more than a bunch of laws to live by; the Word is the rule of love with lessons that help us live the love we are meant to give.

If the Word is the Divine, that means we must identify with other characters in the story. Throughout

this past week, Holy Week, people remembered the specific trials and difficulties the Lord had to undergo as a part of this Easter story. Rather than go into the specifics of the trials and torture Jesus suffered, I will just say that the Lord was defiled.

Here is the crux of the matter: if the act of redemption and resurrection is currently occurring, as we believe it is, so must be the brutal treatment of the Lord. This story is not just a moment lost in time, but like the rest of the Bible is a story that has immediate relevance to our lives. If the Lord is the Word, we must in some way be permitting or aiding in the defilement of the Word.

I am pretty sure that everyone, in some way or another, has done or is doing something to injure God. Assuming that we somehow participate in this Easter story, we are most likely closer to being one of the disciples than not. We most resemble those who wanted to be faithful and to help the Lord, but fell short of the mark. I believe that if the majority of people realized they were defiling the Word, they would want to stop.

I believe that most people are just like those people standing at the tomb in our reading for today—standing at the grave of Jesus and not seeing anything there. They are unsure of what to believe. “Are we at the right tomb?” “Was his grave robbed?” “Did the Romans take the body to be desecrated further?” The other night, as we were talking about the current reading-group book, we were discussing how sensory and physical we as people are. As a whole, we humans need to touch, taste, smell, feel, or hear in order to believe something is true.

This is a modern condition, however. The ancients knew things existed that were real but were not sensory-experience-based—not measurable with the five senses. Often treated as superstition, these beliefs were pushed out the door with the Enlightenment. Yet the ancients were not stupid, nor were they living in a false world. They often understood the difference between physical causality and deeper spiritual causality, but they knew there was more than the physical to be encountered.

Our story today asks us, “Why do you look for living among the dead?” We have been taught and told that the Lord is with us, among us, yet we do not perceive him. But what does it mean for us to be looking among the dead?

Some people try to argue that “the dead” is historicism or nostalgia. If we look at the past and trust the past, they say, we are bogging ourselves down with old stuff. The old ways, old clothes, old music, and traditional approaches to things are all lifeless. It is a bunch of stuff we are holding on to but have forgotten the meaning of. We have grown beyond all this stuff’s original intention.

Other people look to the past for meaning and life and accuse those who look to the future for meaning and life of abandoning true meaning. Modern ways, new clothing, new music, and radical new approaches to things confuse and anger them. They find joy in the subtle complexities of the past and have a connection with them. The new ways seem lifeless, random, self-referential.

Finally, others seek the Now moment (which as far as I can tell tries to capture at least five years ahead and thirty behind). The future and the past in isolation are pretty much meaningless to them. They attempt to stay current and find their joys and seek their life in the averages of the two, which is probably where I am at most of the time.

The fact of the matter is, the person who looks to the past is facing the tomb and looking in. The one who looks to the future is in the tomb facing out. And I would guess the guy in the Now moment is staring at the doorjamb. But none of these people are really doing anything different from one another. They are all seeking the living among the dead.

Past, future, and present are not places where God is going to be found; they are all equally vehicles for the Lord’s presence. That is, they are vehicles for the Lord’s presence if we are actually each willing to knock, seek, and ask for the Lord in each one of those locations. You see, resurrection and redemption have occurred, are occurring, and will occur.

The desecration of the Word that Jesus decries in the gospels was not a question of good moral laws being absent. Rather, he was upset by the fact that the religious laws were being used for personal profit and gain, as well as lifeless codes followed by rote. Written truths were present, but when the love had been removed from them, they were simply falsity. There were books full of laws to help people live a good life, but the Lord felt people needed to understand their deeper purpose. They needed to see an act of love in order to find the life in the laws that were already present.

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Daily Meditations

I would bet that each one of us, including myself, even after hearing it in the Scriptures, even after I preach on it, still has a tendency at points to use rules and laws for self-gain, or at least to avoid being charitable to those who do not want to follow what we think are the right rules and laws.

Easter is a time for us to remember that the Lord is found in love and charity. We have all the knowledge we can muster. We don't really need to worry about collecting facts and ideas about what is—we each have that to such a degree that we have inevitably hurt one another with our skillfully wielded facts—but truth, truth needs humility and love. Yet giving oneself over to potential hurt and ego bruising is very difficult, and we often do not have a map or a toolbox to assist us.

But today, on Easter Sunday, we are reminded of the consequences of our actions. We are reminded of how much effort we can put into working for righteousness, only to be looking among the dead. Yet no matter how we defile or hurt God, the Divine can take it. The Lord and the Word cannot be killed. The Easter story, like all of the other stories in the Bible, is constantly being taught and retaught, each time in the hope that someone new will hear the story and grow or transform because of it. Each telling is not static repetition, but increases and enriches the message, creating a fullness that will eventually lead to an abundance of heavenly communities.

At this high point of the Christian year, we can each rest assured, knowing that we are loved, that God seeks to make each one of us full and whole, and most importantly, that the risen Lord is not found in a competition of righteousness. It is a personal experience within each one of us, as we realize that the things of this world are dead and that only the higher, more powerful love is life. It is when we realize that the Lord is not in his grave, and we say, as we do on every Communion Sunday, "Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, and he will save us. This is the Lord; we have waited for him, we will be glad and rejoice in his salvation."

Prayer

Christ is risen from the dead: trampling down death by death; and upon those in the tombs bestowing life. Thou didst go down into the grave, O Immortal One, yet thou didst put down the power of hell and didst rise a conqueror, O Christ our God: thou spakest clearly to the myrrh-bearing women, Rejoice; thou didst bestow peace upon thine apostles, and to the fallen hast thou brought resurrection. - *Orthodox*

Monday, April 25

Come quickly, all you nations all around, gather yourselves there. Bring down your warriors, O Lord. Let the nations rouse themselves, and come up to the valley of Jehoshaphat; for there I will sit to judge all the neighboring nations. *Joel 3:11&12*

They who are in the truth and good of faith conquer when they look upward to the Lord. *Arcana Coelestia n. 8555*

Tuesday, April 26

The sun and the moon are darkened, and the stars withdraw their shining. The Lord roars from Zion, and utters his voice from Jerusalem, and the heavens and the earth shake. But the Lord is a refuge for his people, a stronghold for the people of Israel. *Joel 3:15&16*

In the Word the Lord in respect to love is likened to the sun, and in respect to faith to the moon; also that the "sun" signifies love from the Lord to the Lord, and the "moon" signifies faith from the Lord in the Lord. *Heaven and Hell n. 119*

Wednesday, April 27

So you shall know that I, the Lord your God, dwell in Zion, my holy mountain. And Jerusalem shall be holy, and strangers shall never again pass through it. *Joel 3:17*

In heaven those who are in the good of love to the Lord, dwell upon mountains, and those who are in charity towards the neighbor dwell upon hills; or, what is the same, those who are of the Lord's celestial kingdom dwell upon mountains, and those who are of His spiritual kingdom dwell upon hills; and the celestial kingdom is distinguished from the spiritual kingdom in this, that those who are of the celestial kingdom are in love to the Lord, and those who are of the spiritual kingdom are in charity towards the neighbor. *Apocalypse Explained n. 405*

Thursday, April 28

In that day the mountains shall drip sweet wine, the hills shall flow with milk, and all the stream beds of Judah shall flow with water; a fountain shall come forth from the house of the Lord and water the Wadi Shittim. *Joel 3:18*

Jehovah God descended and assumed a Human that He might redeem men and save them.

Apocalypse Explained n. 405

Friday, April 29

Egypt shall become a desolation and Edom a desolate wilderness, because of the violence done to the people of Judah, in whose land they have shed innocent blood.

Joel 3:19

Innocence is to acknowledge in the heart that of ourselves we desire nothing but evil, and perceive nothing but falsity, and also that all the good which is of love, and all the truth which is of faith, are from the Lord alone. *Arcana Coelestia n. 9262*

Saturday, April 30

But Judah shall be inhabited forever, and Jerusalem to all generations. I will avenge their blood, and I will not clear the guilty, for the Lord dwells in Zion.

Joel 3:20&21

What has been said of heaven can be said of the Church, for the Church is the Lord's heaven on earth. There are also many Churches, and yet any one of them is called the Church and indeed is a Church, so far as the good of love and of faith rules there. There again, the Lord out of diversity makes a unity, thus, one Church out of many Churches.

Heaven and Hell n. 57

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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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