

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2012

SERMONS AND MEDITATIONS OF THE SWEDENBORGIAN CHURCH

OUR DAILY BREAD



Our Ways,
The Lord's Ways

Meditation

O Lord, the day is yours,
and the night;
You have prepared the light
and the sun;
They continue this day
according to your ordinance,
for all things serve you.
Blessed are you, O Lord,
Who turns the shadow of death
into the morning
And renews the face of the earth.

- *Bishop Lancelot Andrewes*
(1555-1626)

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11 Highland Avenue, Newtonville, MA 02460-1852
(617) 969-4240

Leah Goodwin & Kevin Baxter, Editors
43 Hobart Square, Whitman, MA 02382
ourdailybreadmag@gmail.com • (781) 447-4901
www.odt-online.com

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Dear Readers,

God moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform;
He plants His footsteps in the sea
And rides upon the storm.

In his sermon "God Only Knows," Rev. Julian Duckworth opines that "whoever wrote the hymn 'God Moves in a Mysterious Way' has done us all a huge favor" by putting words to the unfathomable workings of God's goodness. We agree.

William Cowper, who authored that hymn, struggled mightily with depression; legend has it that this particular hymn was inspired by a particularly dark emotional storm and its surprising conclusion. Having decided to commit suicide by drowning himself, he hailed a horsedrawn cab and headed for the Thames River. A thick fog, however, made them lose their bearings. Disoriented, the cabby finally stopped and let Cowper out. The poet was stunned to find himself on his own front stoop, returned home safe and sound despite his best efforts to the contrary.

God's purpose is ever unfolding, although we are not often privileged to see the larger picture of his providence except perhaps occasionally in hindsight. In this new year, may you feel God's powerful goodness and know the depth of his abiding love for you, however mysterious his ways may seem.

Many blessings,
Leah Goodwin & Kevin Baxter

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Contributors to This Issue



The Rev. Dr. David Fekete is the pastor of the Church of the Holy City in Edmonton, Canada. He also serves as the National Youth Chaplain and is one of the Swedenborgian Church's delegates to the National Council of Churches, USA.



The Rev. Eric Hoffman is the general pastor of the Illinois Association. He has served as the pastor of the Virginia Street Church in St. Paul, Minnesota and the LaPorte New Church in LaPorte, Indiana.



The Rev. Dr. George Dole is Adjunct Professor of Biblical Studies at the Swedenborgian House of Studies. He is also the pastor of the New Church of Bath, Maine.



The Rev. Sarah Buteux is an ordained Swedenborgian minister serving the First Congregational Church of Hadley, Massachusetts (UCC). She previously served as the pastor of the Cambridge Society of the New Jerusalem.



Ms. Leah G. Goodwin is the associate pastor of the First Baptist Church of Hanson, Massachusetts (ABC-USA) and co-editor of Our Daily Bread. She served as the director of parish ministries at Swedenborg Chapel in Cambridge, Massachusetts.



The Rev. Kevin Baxter is the pastor of the Cambridge Society of the New Jerusalem in Massachusetts and co-editor of Our Daily Bread. He also serves as the Swedenborgian chaplain to the Harvard Chaplains.



The Rev. Julian Duckworth is the president of the New Church in Australia. He is also the minister of the Roseville New Church in Sydney.



The Rev. Kathy Speas is a hospice chaplain near San Francisco, CA. She preaches at area churches and serves on the board of directors for the Swedenborgian House of Studies.

Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28

Jacob settled in the land where his father had lived as an alien, the land of Canaan. This is the story of the family of Jacob. Joseph, being seventeen years old, was shepherding the flock with his brothers; he was a helper to the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father's wives; and Joseph brought a bad report of them to their father. Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age; and he had made him a long robe with sleeves. But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him.

Now his brothers went to pasture their father's flock near Shechem. And Israel said to Joseph, "Are not your brothers pasturing the flock at Shechem? Come, I will send you to them." He answered, "Here I am." So he said to him, "Go now, see if it is well with your brothers and with the flock; and bring word back to me." So he sent him from the valley of Hebron. He came to Shechem, and a man found him wandering in the fields; the man asked him, "What are you seeking?" "I am seeking my brothers," he said; "tell me, please, where they are pasturing the flock." The man said, "They have gone away, for I heard them say, 'Let us go to Dothan.'" So Joseph went after his brothers, and found them at Dothan. They saw him from a distance, and before he came near to them, they conspired to kill him. They said to one another, "Here comes this dreamer. Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; then we shall say that a wild animal has devoured him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams." But when Reuben heard it, he delivered him out of their hands, saying, "Let us not take his life." Reuben said to them, "Shed no blood; throw him into this pit here in the wilderness, but lay no hand on him" —that he might rescue him out of their hand and restore him to his father.

So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the long robe with sleeves that he wore; and they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it. Then they sat down to eat; and looking up they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, with their camels carrying gum, balm, and resin, on their way to carry it down to Egypt. Then Judah said to his brothers, "What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and not lay our hands on him, for he is our brother, our own flesh." And his brothers

agreed. When some Midianite traders passed by, they drew Joseph up, lifting him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver. And they took Joseph to Egypt.

Matthew 14:22-33

Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

Sermon

The story of Joseph is a striking example of God's divine providence. While Joseph goes through severe trials, the result of his journey benefits all the players in his life—including himself. Our journeys as pilgrims in this life may be similar to Joseph's. We may go through difficult times, we may appear lost at times, but for those who have faith in God's providence, in retrospect we can see that all the winding ways of our lives have resulted in spiritual growth.

In our Bible reading, things do not look good for Joseph. Hated by his own brothers, he is sold into slavery to the Midianites and then to the Ishmaelites, who in turn sell him to the Egyptians. In Egypt, other tragedies befall him: he is thrown into prison on false charges. But ultimately Joseph rises to a position of power in Egypt. He rules as the pharaoh's right-hand man. All of Egypt is under his command, with the sole exception of the pharaoh himself. Later, when the land of Israel experiences famine, Joseph gives food to his family, which has traveled to Egypt for aid. A tearful reunion takes place between Joseph and his family. And, in his position of power in Egypt, he is

able to give his family the food they need. The same tragedy he experienced in his young years allows Joseph to prosper immensely.

For many of us, life is a winding pathway through times of happiness as well as times of sorrow and even despair. But all the while, God is leading us to heaven and to heavenly joy and happiness. In every turn of our life's direction, God is leading us into greater love for Himself and for our neighbors, which is the same thing as saying that God is leading us to salvation. Swedenborg writes,

"Providence continually regards what is eternal, and continually leads unto salvation, and this through various states, now glad, now sorrowful, which man cannot possibly comprehend, but still all are conducive to his eternal life" (*Arcana Coelestia* 8560).

When we look back on our lives, we see that the paths we have followed have made us who we are. When we are in the depths of despair and things look overclouded with sorrow, it is hard to maintain faith that God is still with us. There is that famous poem that we have on the wall downstairs, called "Footprints." In that poem there are two sets of footprints on the beach. Then, for a time, there is only one set of footprints. The writer says to God, "Where were you when there was only one set of footprints?" thinking that God had abandoned him in a time of grief. God's response is, "Those footprints were mine, when I was carrying you." We can't see divine providence working in our lives in the moment. But we can see it when we look back on our lives. Swedenborg tells us,

"It is granted to see the divine providence in the back and not in the face; also in a spiritual state and not in the natural state. To see the divine providence in the back and not in the face, is to see after the providence and not before it; and to see it from a spiritual but not a natural state is to see it from heaven and not from the world. All who receive influx from heaven and acknowledge the divine providence, and especially those who by reformation have become spiritual, while they see events in some wonderful series, from interior acknowledgement they, as it were, see the divine providence, and they confess it" (*Divine Providence* 187).

I know that when I look back on my own life, I can see that wonderful series of events that Swedenborg speaks of. In my own life, I have experienced dark

times, times when there was only one set of footprints on the beach. As I look back, sometimes I wonder why God was carrying me, considering how angry I had become with Him. It is a measure of just how all-loving God is.

When I was in my twenties, I was preparing for ministry. I fully intended to become a Swedenborgian minister when I was thinking about my career. So I enrolled in our church's college, Urbana College. Urbana College isn't a very well-known school in the U.S., but for Swedenborgian ministry it was, I believed, the best place to prepare for divinity school. From Urbana College I went to our divinity school, the Swedenborg School of Religion. I had been in our divinity school for five years when the church decided that it wouldn't ordain me. That decision was reached in a three-hour-long meeting of the Council of Ministers while I awaited their decision outside the room. Since it was a closed meeting, to this day I don't know the whole story about why they decided not to ordain me. I do know that I was an active alcoholic and quite a loose cannon personally.

At every turn, God is leading us into greater love for Himself and for our neighbors, which is the same thing as saying that God is leading us to salvation.

When I heard about the decision, I was enraged. From my college years through my years in divinity school, I had put seven years of my life toward the Swedenborgian ministry. I felt that I had given my youth to the church, and it was all for nought. Furthermore, with only a degree from the (to the rest of the world) unexceptional Urbana College and an unaccredited diploma from the Swedenborg School of Religion, I wasn't in a very good position career-wise. While I was wallowing in gloom, one of the students said to me, "Oh, David, this may turn into something wonderful in time!" I didn't want to hear this, and I didn't receive the comment very well. But it turns out he was right.

The course of my life led me to accredited graduate schools—first, my master's degree at Harvard, and then my Ph.D. program at the University of Virginia. In these programs, my mind grew and expanded as I studied great works of literature and the scriptures of the world's religions. I became much more open-minded. Before this, all I saw and knew was through the lens of Swedenborg. I judged only by Swedenborgian doctrines. I was very narrow-minded and parochial. Graduate study in the religions of the world opened me up to people of other faiths and taught me about the interesting beliefs of other traditions. It gave me respect for people of other faiths.

Then, after all that intellectual work, I ended up in the mental health field, in which my intellect was cut off as I worked with people's moods. This situation looked like another setback, but it was in fact another growing experience. My heart grew. I became more compassionate, and my counseling skills improved. Then there was the gift of sobriety, without which I wouldn't have been able to receive any of these other gifts. There were also unexpected treats from God, like the gift of playing in a rock-and-jazz band. In the long run, I did become the Swedenborgian minister I wanted to be in my twenties, but I had so much more to bring to the ministry. I am now a much different minister than I would have been had I been ordained back then. Furthermore, by being kicked around by life, I grew more humble and my pride diminished. I'm actually glad for the way things turned out.

This narration exemplifies the passage from Swedenborg that I read at the beginning of this talk:

"Providence continually regards what is eternal, and continually leads unto salvation, and this through various states, now glad, now sorrowful, which man cannot possibly comprehend, but still all are conducive to his eternal life" (AC 8560).

Through all this, I became open to my neighbor. I saw that the immediate needs I thought I had were actually things I could get along without. This is what is symbolized by the passage we heard from the New Testament. Jesus' disciples are in a boat when a storm breaks out all around them. They are fighting against the wind. Waves and the turbulent sea symbolize temptations. They symbolize the despair a person goes through from time to time in life, and especially in one's spiritual life. In the midst of this storm, Jesus comes to the disciples, walking on water, and stills the storm. This signifies the state of peace that comes when temptations are quieted and new good has been insinuated into our minds and hearts. The parallel is the compassion and open-mindedness that came to me through the trials in my life.

Temptations are not just the allurements of the forbidden fruit. They are soul-stirring trials in which we can't see our way back to God and it seems we are on a course heading nowhere. We can even despair of our salvation and think ourselves bereft of the light of God's love. These are the times in which we see only one set of footprints on the sand. These periods break down our pride and teach us that we need God every hour, that all the blessings we have are gifts from God. Swedenborg speaks of

"a state of desolation caused by the privation of truth, the last stage of which state is despair. That despair is the last stage of that state, is because the thereby the enjoyment of the love of self and of the world is removed, and the enjoyment of the love of good and of truth instilled in its place; for in the case of those to be regenerated, despair has reference to spiritual life, and consequently to the privation of truth and good, since when they are deprived of truth and good, they despair of spiritual life; hence they have a sweet and blessed joy when they come out of their despair" (AC 5279).

Would we humble ourselves and turn to God without such trials, I ask? There is a lyric from a song written by a friend of mine in Florida that goes, "Without those desperate times, would we ever turn to you and recognize our weakness?" I need to be clear here, though. God does not send us these trials. It is we ourselves who bring them upon ourselves. It was my drinking and wild behavior that gave the Council of Ministers their doubts about me. God moderates these periods and guides them so that good will come of them and we will become more heavenly as a result.

So the path we take in this world is not necessarily an easy one. As Swedenborg tells us, it is "now glad, now sorrowful." But divine providence does not let anything happen to us that does not conduce to our salvation and to greater conjunction with God and with heaven.

Furthermore, all these trials bring us into greater love, and this means into greater happiness. Through these temptations, Swedenborg tells us,

"the Lord enters with affections of the love of the neighbor, and opens the window of his roof, and then the side windows, and makes him see that there is a heaven, a life after death, and eternal happiness; and by the spiritual light and at the same time by the spiritual love then flowing in, He makes him acknowledge that God governs all things by His divine providence" (DP 201).

Those who trust in God can see this happening in their own lives. Whether we are now in a good state or a difficult one, we need to trust that God is with us, that God never gives up on us, and that God will bring us safely home to port. We need to keep in mind the story of Joseph and remember that what looks bad now may turn into something wonderful down the road.

*God will
bring us
safely home
to port.*

Daily Meditations

Monday, January 2

Moses said to the people, "Remember this day on which you came out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, because the Lord brought you out from there by strength of hand; no leavened bread shall be eaten.

Exodus 13:3

To him who is in good and from this desires to be in truth, falsity is not appropriated as falsity, because he thinks well with respect to God and spiritual life, and consequently he applies falsity so as not to be contrary to those things, but in some way to be in accord with them; thus he softens it, and the asperity and hardness of it does not come into his idea.

Arcana Coelestia n. 8051

Tuesday, January 3

"When the Lord has brought you into the land of the Canaanites, as he swore to you and your ancestors, and has given it to you, you shall set apart to the Lord all that first opens the womb." *Exodus 13:11-12*

Regarded in itself the truth of faith without its good is not to be ascribed to the Lord, that is, given to Him, or acknowledged to be from Him, is because no truth of faith has any life in it until it becomes the good of faith; and the truth of faith becomes the good of faith by willing it and doing it. *Arcana Coelestia n. 8080.3*

Wednesday, January 4

When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was nearer; for God thought, "If the people face war, they may change their minds and return to Egypt." *Exodus 13:17*

When [one who is in faith and not charity thinks] about faith and charity, which are the essentials of the church and of salvation, faith at once comes up, but not charity, because charity is opposite to evil of life; and therefore he also sets charity aside, and chooses faith alone. *Arcana Coelestia n.8094*

Thursday, January 5

So God led the people by the roundabout way of the wilderness toward the Red Sea. The Israelites went up out of the land of Egypt prepared for battle.

Exodus 13:18

The truths and goods of faith can neither be confirmed nor conjoined without temptations, and until these had been confirmed and conjoined, [those who were in faith without charity] could not be raised into heaven. *Arcana Coelestia n. 8099*

Friday, January 6

And Moses took with him the bones of Joseph, who had required a solemn oath of the Israelites, saying, "God will surely take notice of you, and then you must carry my bones with you from here." *Exodus 13:19*

The land of Canaan and Zion represented and signified the Lord's kingdom, and burial represented and signified resurrection. *Arcana Coelestia n. 2916.5*

Saturday, January 7

They set out from Succoth, and camped at Etham, on the edge of the wilderness. The Lord went in front of them in a pillar of cloud by day, to lead them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night, to give them light, so that they might travel by day and by night. Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people. *Exodus 13:20-22*

That Jehovah or the Lord appeared or went before in a pillar of cloud by day and in a pillar of fire by night, was because thereby was represented the state of heaven, for in heaven there are never-ceasing variations and changes of state; for the angels are continually being perfected, which cannot possibly be done without unceasing changes of states.

Arcana Coelestia n. 8108

Psalm 104:24-35

O Lord, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures.
Yonder is the sea, great and wide, creeping things innumerable are there, living things both small and great.
There go the ships, and Leviathan that you formed to sport in it.
These all look to you to give them their food in due season;
when you give to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are filled with good things.
When you hide your face, they are dismayed; when you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust.
When you send forth your spirit, they are created; and you renew the face of the ground.
May the glory of the Lord endure forever; may the Lord rejoice in his works—
who looks on the earth and it trembles, who touches the mountains and they smoke.
I will sing to the Lord as long as I live; I will sing praise to my God while I have being.
May my meditation be pleasing to him, for I rejoice in the Lord.
Let sinners be consumed from the earth, and let the wicked be no more. Bless the Lord, O my soul.
Praise the Lord!

Apocalypse Revealed 257-262 (selected sections)

It is an amazing thing to realize that everyone's states of life are completely hidden from us, whether these states are general ones or particular ones. For who here has the ability to know the states of life of anyone in heaven and on earth? It is the Lord alone who sees everyone's state from inmost to outmost and from beginning to end, and who provides for what that is.

Sermon

You open your hand and they are filled with good; you hide your face and they are troubled; you take away their breath and they die; you send forth your spirit and they are created. Psalm 104:28-30

When my wife and I were on a cruise last weekend, we took an early-morning walk along Bradley's Head,

where you get some amazing and very different views of Sydney Harbor. As we strolled along, I noticed several trees with large dark clumps in them fairly high up and realized that those lumps were termite nests. There I was, looking up at a whole self-contained world in which tens of thousands of individual termites were all doing what they do, each going about its business and all of them together keeping the state of the nest as it needs to be for the good of the whole colony.

If you could interview each termite, it would be fascinating to ask three questions: "What do you actually do?" "What does what you do actually do for the nest as a whole?" "How do you feel about the idea of . . . let's call it 'Someone' . . . who sees and knows exactly how the whole nest works?"

Well, of course, it is not such a big step to transfer that from the world of termites to us and our lives. But, of course, there is an important difference between the two. Termites simply do what they do automatically, as if it is inbuilt in each of them that their particular job is to pack more mud, run up and down the branch, open more ventilation holes, and carry newborns to the nursery—almost as if the whole nest itself has a complete understanding of everything it is there for.

We are not quite the same. Ask a typical thirteen-year-old girl what she plans on doing with her life, and you will see the difference straightaway. She may mention Justin Bieber, or she may say that some models get picked at thirteen, but she doesn't even have much idea about what's happening next weekend. Her parents are the nicest people, but they are more than a bit bothered by their daughter's outlook. Her mother wants her husband to make time to talk about things with their daughter, but he just says, "Oh, leave her alone. She's only thirteen, for goodness' sake!" And if you could zoom in and ask them how it's all going, they might well say, "God only knows!"

What an amazing comment! This couple doesn't have any direct connection with or any idea about what we call God. It is not on their radar screen—which certainly doesn't make them bad people, of course, far from it. But from somewhere quite obscure they have a trace element or a racial memory that there is something that is more than just them and their lot in life. They did once go to an aunt's funeral and hear mention of something called God that seems to be able to take everything into consideration, even why Auntie died. So there's a vestige that is enough

for them to come out with “God only knows” at times, especially when there’s no other satisfactory answer.

And while they might never realize it, they are absolutely correct. They are unwittingly well-qualified theologians. This truth is one of the cornerstones of religion: the point that, in a way we can never finally comprehend, what we call God has a complete and infinite coverage of absolutely everything, way beyond any scientist with an X-ray machine studying the goings on of a termite nest.

We can even add a few more pieces to this jigsaw called “God only knows.” God not only knows how it currently is, for example, for those parents of this girl, but how it got to be like that, before even the parents were born, never mind their daughter. And further back still. And God only knows how things can, might, could, and even will develop into what we call the future—every contingency plan and conceivable outcome. And God only knows the whole of the networking between all people, which makes Facebook look like the Stone Age. And God cares for it all even more than he sees it, and he has methods, unknown to us but often guessed at, for how with his involvement a person can be brought from bewilderment into lasting goodness and security.

But I must not tire you out. It is not even 11 o’clock in the morning, and it is the day of rest. So we can say that when it comes to ever such a lot of things in our own experience of life, we do not know, nor should we; we do not know, nor can we; and God only knows. Really, it is quite enough for us to hand that one on, free ourselves from agonizing, and acknowledge that Someone does know.

That might sound as if I am successfully doing myself out of a job. No, I am not, because it is also good for us to have some personal view of this God that makes good sense to us and that we can even use. Maybe it’s just one view, but let’s make it a satisfactory one, such as the idea that God keeps on leading us. That will do nicely.

This is our way of coping with the Infinite, which we mustn’t be scared of. Bring something about it down to your level, and at the same time simply accept that the Infinite is always more than you can cope with. Christmas, after all, is all about the birth of God into the world of us people. That’s exactly the same idea as I’m talking about, and if God can see the need to do that, so should we.

Having said all that, there are some other areas where the truth that God only knows—or, as our church’s teachings put it, that “the Lord alone sees everyone’s state from inmost to outmost and from beginning to end and provides for what that is”—can be directly helpful to us, and where we would flounder or even harm ourselves if we weren’t in proper touch with it.

For example, it is a truism that we tend to fall into judging other people or making quick assessments about them. I do it, you do it, it comes perfectly naturally to us—a good phrase when you realize that before we become properly connected with God, are reconfigured by God, and start looking carefully at what we can be like at times and dropping (or at least turning away from) some not-so-good things (which are basically all there in the ten commandments)—before all that we are “natural” kinds of people, because things just come to us naturally.

Even the word “before” is a bit unhelpful, because the truth is that we slip back into these natural reactions whenever we are not paying enough attention to what is better. Being “spiritual” is not like getting out of a swimming pool and saying, “Great! That was hard work, but I’m out now!”

So, we often judge. I recently judged a lady I felt I was trapped with for an hour—a rather self-opinionated lady who offered lots of comments putting down how things are today, how self-centered people are, what the world is coming to, and how television, computers, the government, and advertising are all just wrong. And to top all that, she found out I was a minister and wondered if I was Anglican because she has “ever such a lot to do with the church” (beaming all the while).

I was wrung dry. And I judged her because it was one way of coping. But of course I should not have judged her, because I don’t know anything about her and God only knows all that, and she was just being sociable in her own way and some of the things she mentioned were even a bit “right.” So I got myself out of the swimming pool, so to speak, but I know I will be back in it before long in some other situation.

And, harrowing as it was, I think I learned something for future reference, even though I have inflicted it a bit on you this morning. This phrase “God only knows” is a bit of a gem; it’s a safety net and worth the knowing. “There but for the grace of God go I” is another way of putting it, and whoever

When it comes to ever such a lot of things in our own experience of life, we do not know, nor can we; God only knows.

wrote the hymn “God Moves in a Mysterious Way” has done us all a huge favor.

Obviously, I am heading toward the main point of this sermon, which is (surprise, surprise) “Let us all do our very best, because that is what we *can* do, and God will deal with everything else.” But I think that is still not enough. It’s OK for the parents of that thirteen-year-old girl. But if you are in what I’d call a “working relationship with God,” then it will benefit you to find out and get to know some basic things about God, see how those truths decant through into your own situations in life, actually make some adjustments and keep a watch on them as well, watch for when you unwittingly fall back into the swimming pool and try to limit how often that happens, think from time to time how God is overseeing everything, be glad that you are in a working relationship with God but avoid any sense of superiority about that, and still do your best—the best you really do know! And in spite of it all, it’s still crucial that you be perfectly willing to say, when it’s the time to say it, that “God only knows.” Amen.

Prayer

Lord, we do not know what we ought to ask of you;
You alone know what we need;

You love us better than we know how to love ourselves.

O Father, give to us, your children, that which we know not how to ask.

We desire only to accomplish your will.

Teach us to pray.

Pray in us, for Christ’s sake.

- Francois Fenelon (1651-1715), adapted

Spirit of interceding grace,

I know not how or what to pray.

Assist my utter helplessness,

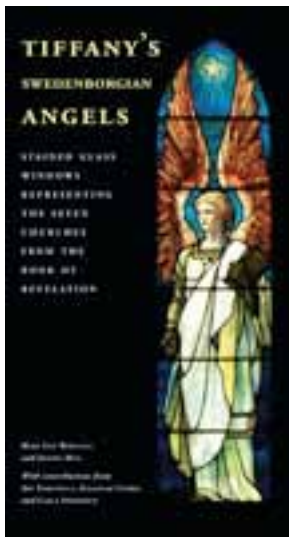
The power into my heart convey,

That God, acknowledging your groan,

May answer in my prayers His own.

- Charles Wesley (1707-1788)

Tiffany’s Swedenborgian Angels: Stained Glass Windows Representing the Seven Churches from the Book of Revelation



In 1902, a Swedenborgian church in Glendale, Ohio commissioned the seven windows as a gift for their sister church in Cincinnati. Each window depicts an angel that represents one of the seven churches described in the book of Revelation. The windows were designed and created in the studios of Louis Comfort Tiffany, and they reflect not only the rich symbolism found in the Bible but Tiffany’s hallmark color and brilliance. Tiffany’s love of revealing angels in stained glass shines through in every panel.

Based on biblical passages in the form of letters addressed to the seven cities of Asia Minor that open the book of Revelation, the windows illustrate the deep inner meaning of these messages. The angels themselves represent each of the seven cities; they also can be seen to symbolize the stages of the development of the Christian church as well as the stages of the spiritual evolution of a person.

Tiffany’s Swedenborgian Angels guides the reader not only through the history of the windows, but the spiritual meaning of each one, weaving Swedenborg’s teachings with the luminous imagery of the angels themselves. If you have seen the exhibition, the book allows you to revisit the windows again any time; if you have not, it is a powerful introduction to a vivid piece of spiritual history.

Available at the Swedenborg Foundation: www.swedenborg.com

Monday, January 9

To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul. O my God, in you I trust; do not let me be put to shame; do not let my enemies exult over me.

Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame; let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous.

Psalm 25:1-3

Instead of “way” the angels perceive truth, and this in both the historical and the prophetic parts of the Word. For the angels no longer care for the historical things, as these are altogether inadequate to their ideas;

Arcana Coelestia n. 2333.4

Tuesday, January 10

Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths.

Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long.

Psalm 25:4-5

And therefore in place of them they perceive such things as belong to the Lord and His kingdom, and which also in the internal sense follow on in a beautiful order and well-connected series. *Ibid.*

Wednesday, January 11

Good and upright is the Lord; therefore he instructs sinners in the way.

He leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble his way. *Psalm 25:8-9*

For this reason, and also in order that the Word may be for the angels, all the historical things therein are representative, and each of the words is significative of such things; which peculiarity the Word has above all other writing. *Ibid.*

Thursday, January 12

All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep his covenant and his decrees.

For your name's sake, O Lord, pardon my guilt, for it is great. *Psalm 25:10-11*

Christians who have not lived in charity have closed heaven against themselves, and very many of them to such a degree that it cannot be opened; for they know truths, and deny them, and also harden themselves against them, if not with the mouth, yet in the heart.

Arcana Coelestia n. 4197

Friday, January 13

Who are they that fear the Lord? He will teach them the way that they should choose.

They will abide in prosperity, and their children shall possess the land. *Psalm 25:12-13*

Because heaven as a whole and in part, from the Lord's Divine Human, reflects a man, the angels say that they are in the Lord; and some say that they are in His body, meaning that they are in the good of His love. *Heaven and Hell n. 81*

Saturday, January 14

My eyes are ever toward the Lord, for he will pluck my feet out of the net.

Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted. *Psalm 25:15-16*

Love to the Lord is a universal love and consequently permeates everything in every detail both of the spiritual and of the natural life. This love has its seat in the highest things with man, and these descend by influx into the lower, and vivify them, just as the will enters into the whole of the intention, and thence into action, and as the understanding enters into the whole of the thought, and thence into speech.

True Christian Religion n. 416

JAN 15 THE QUALITY OF MERCY

Ms. Leah G. Goodwin

1 Kings 19:1-15

Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, "So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life like the life of one of them by this time tomorrow." Then he was afraid; he got up and fled for his life, and came to Beer-sheba, which belongs to Judah; he left his servant there. But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: "It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors." Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, "Get up and eat." He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. He ate and drank, and lay down again. The angel of the Lord came a second time, touched him, and said, "Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you." He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God.

At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there. Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He answered, "I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away." He said, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by." Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He answered, "I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away." Then the Lord said to him, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazeel as king over Aram.

Mark 6:1-13

He left that place and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. On the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, "Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" And they took offense at him. Then Jesus said to them, "Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house." And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. And he was amazed at their unbelief.

Then he went about among the villages teaching. He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. He said to them, "Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them." So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.

Sermon

For the past month, I have had a new man in my life.

I should point out that this new love of mine is three months old and wears diapers with Big Bird on them. His name is Luke, and I am his nanny. We have a date five days a week.

Now, Luke is a sweet baby, but he gets fairly testy come mid-afternoon—by which I mean that he emits bloodcurdling wails. So, most days, in an effort to divert him and retain my own sanity, I pop him in the baby knapsack, and together we tour Cambridge. Or at least I do. Luke never stays awake for more than half a block. Very quickly his bobbly little head droops, his arms slacken, and his pudgy feet dangle as he snoozes.

And boy, he *sleeps*. That baby can sleep through anything—jackhammers, sirens, car horns, you name it, he baby-snores through it. Sometimes it seems as though his peace grows more profound in direct proportion to an increase in the surrounding volume.

But what does wake him, and quite efficiently, is quiet. His eyes pop open, as if to ensure that the proper people are still around, that his little world is still safe. Noise, action, motion: these stimuli are Luke's existential placeholders. As long as there is motion, someone is holding him. As long as there is noise, there is a world to which he can awaken. Stillness, on the other hand, guarantees none of that. For Luke, sound reassures—and quiet bodes ill.

I submit that, weird though his sleeping habits may be, the kid has a point: we, in the twenty-first century, have a tense relationship with silence.

It's not that we don't like it; it's just that we never get it. We experience real stillness so rarely that we don't know what to do with it once the novelty wears off. The gadgetry and modern conveniences we live with all create their own whooshes, buzzes, hums, or low roars of their own—making enough ambient noise that, I would wager, the average child born in an industrial culture today never experiences utter silence.

And I suspect that Luke's well-honed instincts make a more fundamental point. Luke is a much-cuddled baby whose tiny realm admits very little cause for fear. If *he* is unnerved by the potential absence that silence suggests, how much more reason have we grown-ups to be afraid? All of us have lived in this world long enough to know that life is never stable, that presence inevitably yields to absence: the most fundamental certainties prove fragile; the deepest friendships sometimes founder; the heartiest, most beloved people wax old and die.

I hope that little Luke fears none of these things yet. But I know that *I* do, with a gut-clenching dread. And I know that that fear of absence, that horror of an emptiness too often heralded by silence, is what so unnerves me about today's gospel reading, about Jesus' encounter in his own hometown. It's disheartening enough, though not entirely surprising, that he is rejected by the people with whom he grew up. It makes a certain sense. Any performer will tell you that a hometown crowd can be as harsh as it is sympathetic—familiarity does, after all, tarnish the celebrity luster. And I imagine that Jesus, with his exorcisms, his all-too-familiar yet subtly different prophetic message, and the whole "Son of God" claim, faced a more dubious crowd than most.

But what makes no sense, what is thoroughly upsetting, is the story's next pronouncement. "He could do no deed of power there," says Mark, "and he was amazed at their unbelief."

He could do no deed of power there.

If God is omnipotent, how is it possible for the Christ, for God's own incarnated self, to attempt a miracle and come up empty?

Of all the times for Jesus' powers to desert him, standing in front of the Nazarene crowd—in front of childhood friends, tongue-clicking neighbors, and the like—seems a profoundly inconvenient, even heartless, moment.

And Christ's rejection at Nazareth is only one episode in a string of encounters in which Jesus' spiritual authority is muzzled. Sometimes it is Jesus himself who silences the attempts to announce his divinity; he forbids innumerable demons to speak his true name, and he spends the book of Mark warning the people he heals, and even his own disciples, not to tell anyone of his peculiar holiness. And in the end, all these denials, failures, and hushings-up turn out merely to foreshadow Jesus' last and most disgraceful earthly defeat—his death on the cross.

This train of events is hardly reassuring. But let us assume that Jesus was unable to perform those powerful deeds in Nazareth not because he *had* to fail, but because God *permitted* him to

fail.

Why? Why does God refuse to let Jesus manifest his divinity? Why would God deny himself the opportunity to prove his authority? Why is Christ left powerless in front of his own neighbors and eventually left to die? Why God's silence? How can a loving Lord refuse to speak?

I wonder if God's silence, somehow, is—sometimes—the quality of his mercy.

This idea is at first glance frankly offensive. It does not make sense, either. How can allowing someone to fail be an act of mercy?

Swedenborg suggests that the silence of a miracle left unperformed might be a demonstration of God's love toward the human race. Here is what he says:

"The inward things of faith...cannot be sown or implanted under compulsion, but only in freedom, thus not amid the terror and amazement induced by

*How can
God attempt
a miracle
and come up
empty?*

miracles. The things that flow in under compulsion... as when we are influenced by miracles, are of such a nature that they persuade us in ways that do not fit with our own state...Consequently, in the case of those who have not faith from any other source than miracles, the goods and truths which flow in are joined with falsities and defiled by evils...In a short time, they are either turned upside down or denied" (*De Miraculis* 4).

Miracles, according to Swedenborg, cannot make real faith; they can only strengthen faith that is already present, faith rooted in an individual's free acceptance of the Divine. Faith jumpstarted by a miracle has no spiritual ground in which to grow—because love and life for God can only grow in freedom, and miracles are so convincing that they compel.

Jesus "can do no deed of power" before this unbelieving crowd, then, not because he needs their belief to make his own power real but because the time, for them, simply wasn't right. What if Jesus had produced a miracle? Some people would most likely have been convinced of his message and his divinity—but what then?

Well, they would have lost their freedom. They would have been ensnared by the miracle they had witnessed, made slaves to the God who brought forth such a wonder, compelled to a faith that was a lie because it was not freely chosen. And slavery, as Swedenborg frequently points out, is of hell and not of heaven.

Jesus, powerful rhetoric notwithstanding, did not engage in spiritual arm twisting. He did not make it his divine business to exercise his infinite power toward convincing the people who, perhaps, needed it the most. And, in the end, he is crucified for allowing humanity that soul freedom.

God loves us so much, wants so much for us to know him, that he permits us not to love him. In Christ's failure at Nazareth, in the denial of his divinity that follows him to the cross, we witness the Lord's commitment to our spiritual freedom, to the wholeness of every soul. God's silence reveals itself for what it truly can be: his most profound expression of love.

We spend so much of our time begging God to let us see Him, to make himself known to us, presumably by transcendent means, and what we often get in reply is...silence. Sometimes it seems like a flat, anticlimactic silence, a silence that makes us wonder why we were naïve enough to bother asking in the first place. Or maybe, if we happen to be still

enough, or in desperate enough straits, that stillness is the "sheer silence" of God's presence—it is a silence substantive enough, loud enough, abiding enough after the nattering of our own panicked minds that we can hear it from deep within the bowels of whatever spiritual cave we may currently call home. It is a presence that embraces rather than invades, that broods more than it infiltrates. God's silence—not his absence, not at all, but rather an abiding presence so familiar, so gentle, so entwined in our souls that we forget it is there—that silence is the quality of God's mercy.

Carl Jung said once that "bidden or not bidden, God is present." We can summon God or dismiss Him, demand his presence or refuse to receive him, but really, we summon or forbid ourselves to encounter the One who is already there. We may doubt because the Lord moves mysteriously over the domain of our souls, but he is inscribed on every part of us. We may turn our faces from God's brightness, but the heavenly sun is still there, waiting, into eternity. "Even if a person loves nothing whatever but himself," says Swedenborg, "yet so great is the Lord's mercy—for it is Divine and Infinite—that the Lord does not leave a person, but continually breathes into that person His own life."

God created us. God dwells in us. *Look, he says. I have written you on the palm of my hand. Abide in me, for I abide in you. You are mine.*

And if I am silent, it is only because I know you so well that our love needs no words.

Amen.

Prayer

Lord, before ever you made us, you loved us.

Nor has your love slackened, nor ever shall.

In love all your works have been begun, and in love they continue.

In this love our life is everlasting,

And in this love we shall see you

And be glad in you forever.

- *Julian of Norwich* (1342-circa 1416)

Monday, January 16

“And you know the way to the place where I am going.” Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?”

John 14:4-5

To all appearances, we are leading and teaching ourselves, while the truth is that we are being led and taught by the Lord alone. If we convince ourselves only of the appearance and not of the truth along with it, we cannot get rid of our evils as sins.

Divine Providence n. 154

Tuesday, January 17

Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also.

John 14:6-7

To say that we are led and taught by the Lord alone is to say that the Lord is the only source of our life, since it is the intentions of our life that are led and the intelligence of our life that is taught.

Divine Providence n. 156

Wednesday, January 18

“Very truly, I tell you, the one who 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

God is goodness itself and truth itself, and everything good and true comes from him. In fact, nothing that is good and true can come from any other source than from the one who is goodness itself and truth itself. *Divine Providence n. 155.6c*

Thursday, January 19

“They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.” *John 14:21*

If we go on to say that when we are being led by the Lord everything that has to do with our volition and discernment, with our love and wisdom, with our feelings and thoughts, rests in what is good and true, it follows that everything we then intend and think, every exercise of our love and wisdom, everything that moves us or occupies our thoughts, comes from the Lord. *Ibid.*

Friday, January 20

“You heard me say to you, ‘I am going away, and I am coming to you.’ If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I. And now I have told you this before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe.

John 14:28-29

Since the goal of the Lord’s divine providence is a heaven from the human race, it follows that the goal is the union of the human race with the Lord. It follows also that the goal is that we should be more closely united to him. and thereby be granted a more inward heaven. *Divine Providence n. 45*

Saturday, January 21

“I will no longer talk much with you, for the ruler of this world is coming. He has no power over me; but I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father. Rise, let us be on our way.” *John 14:30-31*

This law of divine providence follows from the two preceding ones, namely, that we should act in freedom and in accord with reason, and that we should do this for ourselves, even though it is being done by the Lord, that is, in apparent autonomy. *Divine Providence 129*

Deuteronomy 30:11-20

Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. It is not in heaven, that you should say, "Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?" Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, "Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?" No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.

See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

Matthew 25:31-46

"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you

something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.' Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?' Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

Heaven and Hell 509

There are many kinds of punishment in the world of spirits, and there is no respect of rank, for whether someone was a king or a servant in the world. Every evil brings its own punishment with it. They are united; so whoever is involved in something evil is involved in the punishment of the evil as well. Still, no one suffers any punishment for evil things done in the world, only for current evil deeds. It boils down to the same thing, though, and makes no difference whether you say that we suffer punishments because of our evil deeds in the world or that we suffer punishments because of our evil deeds in the other life, because after death we all return to our life, which means that we are involved in the same kinds of evil. This is because our nature is determined by the kind of physical life we led.

Sermon

When the Son of man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Matthew 25:31-33

This is a familiar and typical image of divine judgment, and it would be idle to pretend that it is not a useful one. There is a difference between heaven and hell, and it applies to us. As is often the case, though, its use is a limited one. We are taught very clearly that, to stay within the image of our text, it is

we ourselves who voluntarily move to the right hand or the left. The Lord calls everyone to the right side and sends no one to the left.

A different image might help. Picture a road that comes to fork because of a huge, impassable obstacle. Some travelers choose to go one way, some the other. From one point of view, it is the obstacle that separates them. So we could say that the absolute, uncompromising perfection of the Lord separates the sheep from the goats by leaving us no choice but to choose. It is the Lord's life constantly flowing in us that keeps us moving. It is we who choose the direction of that motion, but this is the result of our divinely given freedom.

One radical consequence of this thought is given voice in our third reading: the thought that after death we will not suffer punishment for evil deeds done in this world. Rather, the cumulative effect of evil deeds is that they become habitual. We do not leave them in the past, so to speak, but bring them with us into the present.

By any theory of retributive justice, the thought that we are not punished for past sins seems unfair. Accounts must be settled. You did wrong, you must pay the price. There is a very logical way of looking at this, though, in which it is retributive justice that is unfair, and grossly so. It is grossly unfair, that is, to hold people accountable for anything over which they have no control. We have no control whatever over the past. We are absolutely powerless to undo what we have done or to unsay what we have said. There is no way the victim of murder can be "unmurdered."

However, that is not the end of the story. Our past actions have both external and internal effects. We may not be able to undo the action or unsay the words, but we can try to repair the harm they have done. That is not changing the past; it is changing the present, so to speak. That is where we can make things different, so that is where our responsibility lies. It may well be that circumstances will limit how much we can do, that some forms of reparation may be beyond our capabilities, but that is no excuse for not doing what we can.

So much, very briefly, for the external effects of past actions. The internal ones are at least as important. For example, if we make reparations simply to escape more painful consequences, our distorted value system is reinforced rather than changed. We will

in fact be looking for ways to commit the same sin without getting caught. If we want to live a successful life of crime, it probably makes sense to spend some time in prison and learn from the pros—at the state's expense. We'll probably also make some very useful professional connections and have some promising openings waiting for us when our term is up. We'll also have a clean slate as far as the accounting system goes.

Turning to the other side of the ledger, the asset side, the accounting mentality all too readily gives rise to self-righteousness. Look at all the good things I've done. Don't I deserve a few privileges? Haven't I earned the right to a few little sins? I've stuck to my diet all week—surely I deserve some junk food. Sorry, but the same law about not being punished for past misdeeds inevitably implies not being rewarded for past good deeds. After all, they too are in the past, completely beyond our control. The only question that really matters, that matters forever, is what we have brought from them into the present. Has this kind of behavior become habitual? Does it feel right and natural to us? Do we enjoy it?

The cumulative effect of evil deeds is that they become habitual. We do not leave them in the past but bring them with us into the present.

The thought that good deeds pile up merit points so that we can indulge ourselves in little sins betrays a truly alarming fact, namely that the little sins are what we really enjoy. Evil is the reward we claim for having done good? When you put it that way, its absurdity becomes obvious.

Again, though, why then is there so much in the Bible that speaks the accounting language? The familiar belief in a vicarious atonement is the belief that by his death on the cross, Jesus "paid the price" for our sins. The very word "redemption" comes from a Latin word that means "to buy back"—which, incidentally makes it strange that the deliverance of the Israelites from Egyptian slavery is referred to as a redemption. Nothing in that story suggests that God paid Pharaoh for the release. If we superimpose the vicarious atonement story on the Egyptian story, then God the Father plays the role of the Pharaoh, the merciless tyrant from whom we must be redeemed.

Conversely, if we transfer the Exodus definition of redemption to the incarnation, we come out with something much more like our own view of things, namely that the Lord redeemed us by defeating the forces that were enslaving us, and the hells play the role of Pharaoh. The accounting word, "redemption,"

may be retained, but the accounting image simply vanishes.

Why, then, do we run across the accounting image so often in the Bible? Actually, it has its obvious uses. They rest in the fact, welcome or not, that this is a language we understand. For many if not most people, the other language is bewildering. The thought that we are not to be punished for past sins or rewarded for past good deeds strikes us as terribly unfair. We are thoroughly used to the system of rewards and punishments. What would happen to our economy if we weren't paid for good work and penalized for bad? We have laws about things like that, and we have those laws because experience has taught us that we need them. We may complain about government regulation, but the plain fact is that most laws are prompted by things that have gone wrong. To take an extreme case, if there were no murders, we would not need laws forbidding them.

In the overall system of our theology, such laws function as "external restraints" that keep us from doing too much harm while we are, it is to be hoped, developing internal restraints. There is a very clear and simple description of Secrets of Heaven 81 to the effect that worldly-minded people are kept in line by fears—fears of the law, of loss of life, profit, and reputation, all of which are outside ourselves. Spiritually minded people are guided from within, by the inner restraints of conscience, while heavenly-minded people are guided by their own feeling for what is good and true and have no sense of restraint whatever. If we put this together with the familiar teaching that we are all born worldly-minded and designed to become spiritual and even heavenly, we have here a concise picture of a genuine need for external restraints and an equally genuine need to outgrow them.

To illustrate this, we might look at the phenomenon of retirement. Given an adequate retirement income, we are no longer paid for what we do. Rather, our income enables us to do what we want to do. If the only reason we have worked was for pay, then we no longer have any reason to work. If we have come to find worth in our work and to love being useful, then we will find ways to be useful simply because we want to. People who have looked forward to retirement solely as an escape from responsibility are likely to find their lives meaningless. They will have been kept active solely by "external restraints," and with the disappearance of those restraints, they will have neither chart nor compass to guide them.

So it is truly a blessing to be told that heaven is "a kingdom of uses" (*Heaven and Hell* 112); and it was a particular delight to find in a recent issue of *New Church Life* excerpts from a little story to this effect by none other than Mark Twain. It tells of a tough old sea captain who arrives in heaven and is given "a harp and a hymn-book and a cloud-bank" and figures that this is sure enough heaven. After playing his harp and singing the only tune he really knows for a few hours, he gets pretty tired, hands his harp and hymn-book to some enthusiastic newcomers, and meets an old friend who has been there a while. The old friend tells him, "Nothing that is harmless and reasonable is refused a body here, if he asks it in the right spirit. So they are outfitted with these things without a word. They go and sing and play just about one day, and that's the last you'll see of them in the choir. They don't need anybody to tell them that that sort of thing wouldn't make a heaven—at least not a heaven that a sane man could stand a week and remain sane. The cloud-bank is placed where the noise can't disturb the old inhabitants, and so there ain't any harm in letting everybody get up there and cure himself as soon as he comes. Now, you just remember this—heaven is as blissful and lovely as it can be; but it is just the busiest place you ever heard of.... Eternal Rest sounds comforting from the pulpit, too. Well, try it once, and see how heavy time will hang on your hands."

The key question, then, is simply, "What do I love to do?" Some of the clearest evidence we have to go on is how we feel about what we have done. One of the greatest problems with the accounting mentality is that it so readily fosters the feeling that once the accounts are settled the slate has been wiped clean, so we can forget about the past. This is out-and-out disastrous. The past is immensely useful, if we use it well. As far as learning from experience is concerned, it is all we have to learn from. The philosopher George Santayana had a remarkable gift for one-liners, and one of his best is "Those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it." In order to learn from it, though, we have to stand outside it and look at it. If we remain emotionally mired in it, we cannot really see it for what it is. The first step in the regeneration process is repentance, which includes self-examination. Repentance must ask, "What have I done?" Self-examination asks, "What kind of person am I?" Together they point to what we are to do and why we are to do it.

Our theology, then, is telling us to live in the present and learn from the past. Easier said than done, perhaps, but surely well worth the effort. Amen.

Monday, January 23

Then, just as the Lord our God had ordered us, we set out from Horeb and went through all that great and terrible wilderness that you saw, on the way to the hill country of the Amorites, until we reached Kadesh-barnea. *Deuteronomy 1:19*

Our discernment can accept what is good and what is evil, what is true and what is false, but our essential volition cannot. This must be focused on what is evil or what is good and not on both, because our volition is our essential self. It is where our life's love is.

Divine Providence n. 284

Tuesday, January 24

I said to you, "You have reached the hill country of the Amorites, which the Lord our God is giving us. See, the Lord your God has given the land to you; go up, take possession, as the Lord, the God of your ancestors, has promised you; do not fear or be dismayed." *Deuteronomy 1:20-21*

The goodness comes to be like a wine that has become vintage wine after fermentation, or beer that has become clear. If the evil wins, though, then the goodness and its truth are moved to the sides and become murky and dark like half-fermented wine or half-fermented beer. *Ibid.*

Wednesday, January 25

All of you came to me and said, "Let us send men ahead of us to explore the land for us and bring back a report to us regarding the route by which we should go up and the cities we will come to." The plan seemed good to me, and I selected twelve of you, one from each tribe. *Deuteronomy 1:22-23*

In our discernment, what is good and what is evil are kept apart like an inside and an outside, so we can be inwardly focused on evil and outwardly on good. However, when we are being reformed, the goodness and the evil are brought face to face. *Ibid.*

Thursday, January 26

They set out and went up into the hill country, and when they reached the Valley of Eshcol they spied it out and gathered some of the land's produce, which they brought down to us. They brought back a report to us, and said, "It is a good land that the Lord our God is giving us." But you were unwilling to go up.

Deuteronomy 1:24-26a

Then a clash occurs, a battle that is called a temptation if it is severe. If it is not severe, though, it happens like the fermentation of wine or beer. If the goodness wins, then the evil and its distortion are moved to the sides much as dregs settle to the bottom of the bottles. *Ibid.*

Friday, January 27

Where are we headed? Our kindred have made our hearts melt by reporting, "The people are stronger and taller than we; the cities are large and fortified up to heaven! We actually saw there the offspring of the Anakim!" I said to you, "Have no dread or fear of them." *Deuteronomy 1:28-29*

That the Lord combats and overcomes the devil that is with man when he is in the combats of temptations, although it does not so appear to the man, is a constant truth. *Arcana Coelestia n. 1664.8*

Saturday, January 28

The Lord your God, who goes before you, is the one who will fight for you, just as he did for you in Egypt before your very eyes, and in the wilderness, where you saw how the Lord your God carried you, just as one carries a child, all the way that you traveled until you reached this place. *Deuteronomy 1:30-31*

For not even the smallest thing can be brought upon a man by evil spirits that is not by permission; and nothing, however small, can be averted by angels, except from the Lord. *Arcana Coelestia n. 1664.8*

JAN **29** HEARTS WIDE
OPEN TO THE RIVER
Rev. Kathy Speas

Psalm 1

Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; but their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate day and night. They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper. The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away. Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous; for the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.

Jeremiah 17:5-10

Thus says the Lord: Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals and make mere flesh their strength, whose hearts turn away from the Lord. They shall be like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see when relief comes. They shall live in the parched places of the wilderness, in an uninhabited salt land. Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord. They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit. The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse—who can understand it? I the Lord test the mind and search the heart, to give to all according to their ways, according to the fruit of their doings.

Luke 6:17-26

He came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.

Then he looked up at his disciples and said: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. "Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. "Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. "Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that

day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets. "But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. "Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. "Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep. "Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.

Sermon

Is it just me, or is there anyone else here who wants to throw something when they hear, "If you just believe in God, prosperity will come your way," or "God gives us exactly what we deserve," or "Poor, hungry, suffering people should feel blessed, not angry"?

I especially hate hearing those things when I'm feeling like a dead old bush in a salt land. You cannot convince me by any theological argument that Jesus is calling us to feel like our faith is faulty, or to feel doomed if we ate breakfast or managed to get all our bills paid this month. I don't always know what God's message to us through Jesus was exactly, but it wasn't "if bad things happen to you, you are being rewarded according to your conduct." And it certainly wasn't "suffering is a real gift from God."

Swedenborgian Christianity inspired me to reach far beyond the words in the Bible, far beyond the surface of scripture. Beyond the history, beyond the language. Emanuel Swedenborg, the eighteenth-century mystical Christian theologian and scientist whose writings inspired the creation of the Swedenborgian denomination, wrote that the literal words of the Bible are a container, a shell, a vessel for the truth, much as our bodies are containers for our souls. Swedenborg wrote about "the inner" or "spiritual" sense of the Bible—the soul of the Bible, if you will. The images in the Bible represent different spiritual states, different experiences we go through on an eternal path of spiritual growth, cycles of re-generation and re-formation that bring us closer and closer to the divine love and wisdom that is the God we know by many names—closer and closer to divine love and wisdom, farther and farther from the illusion of our own separateness. The Bible, beyond its morality and judgment, beyond its historical constraints, is a dreamscape of images of individual and collective human spiritual life. It bears us away from the experiences of our limited, individual, separate selves and toward the infinite, expansive, eternal life in which we all participate—away from separateness and into love.

How do the images in today's scripture move us away from separateness and into love?

Swedenborg saw Jeremiah as representing the spiritual state in which God is not visible to us, those times in life when we simply cannot perceive the divine presence that we know to be there. And in that state, we lament, we moan, we try to make sense of the injustices in the world; we strain to control them, to get a hold of things. We rail against ourselves, against our world. Do you ever do that? Do you ever "go Jeremiah" when you read the newspaper or struggle in your own spiritual life?

There's an image of water that runs through all these texts. This water is Divine Truth. Rivers are a fundamental source of life—an image of God, if you will, flowing into us at every moment. It appears to us that we reach out and connect to God, that we come to church or meditate or sing or pray or do yoga, in order to achieve a union with the Divine, but really, the river of God flows into us all the time. God is not something we achieve, accomplish, or strive for. God is something we remember—something we stop and remember. We put ourselves aside and remember. Worship is whatever opens your heart to the awareness of the river of light. God flowing in. A river nourishing the roots of our beliefs, allowing the trees of our minds to flourish in due season and stay alive even in seasons of drought, even when the heat is on. This is an image of how the spiritual principles that guide our lives, the truths we choose to live by, bring our divine and loving natures to fruition, even when everything around us seems dead. The river flows in; it brings the seeds, waters them. The tree doesn't decide to grow of its own accord; it is fed, fed by the river. And it feeds back into the river when it sheds its leaves and when it finally falls.

The word used in the Psalm and Jeremiah, and in the Luke passage too, for "blessed" means "happy." It doesn't mean "favored over others in God's sight" or "saved." It means "happy." It refers to well-being. There is a poetry in these images that tells us that happiness doesn't come from making things happen the way we want, from getting a grasp on things, or even from figuring them out. Happiness comes from opening our hearts to the river and allowing it to flow through us and out into the world. Blessed are we when we let go of what we think we need to do in order to make ourselves happy and simply acknowledge the life-affirming energy flowing in.

And Jeremiah and Jesus both warn us: depend on our own sense of control, our own certainty and security, and we're headed for the emotional rocks. Close our hearts to the divine river, and our spirits will wither, parched, weeping, hungry. Hungry for life. Comparing the inflowing of God to the water of truth that we can create—well, it's like comparing the Grand Canyon or the mighty Columbia to a plastic backyard swimming pool.

It struck me that in Luke, the people come to Jesus to be healed of illnesses, to drive out demons, and he responds with "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the Kingdom of God. Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Blessed are you when people hate you, when they exclude you and insult you." Within this outward message of social justice is a deeper call. It is a call to consider what we make our own in life. When the author of Luke writes "yours is the Kingdom of God," he (or she) uses words that mean "make God's universe your own." Songwriter Tom Waits expresses a Swedenborgian view of this in a line from one of his songs: "All that you love is all that you own." What you love is what you own. Jesus calls us to be careful about what we love. He calls us to make God's values, not the world's values, our own. He calls us to make compassion our own. He calls us to make justice our own. He calls us to make peace our own. He calls us away from the ways in which we make security our own. Away from making accomplishment our own. Away from making winning our own. Away from our separateness and into the river

of life.

Scholar Neil Douglass-Klotz translates the Beatitudes from the Aramaic that Jesus spoke in a way that conveys the soul of the scripture. Let us take a moment before we hear these words to breathe, to center ourselves in God's presence, to be aware of divine life flowing into us. In our heartbeats. In each breath.

"Tuned to the Source are those who live by breathing Unity; their 'I can' is included in God's. Healthy are those who devotedly hold fast to the spirit of life; holding them is the cosmic Ruler of all that shines and rises.

"Healed are those who persistently feel inside: 'If only I could find new strength and a clear purpose on which to base my life;' they shall be embraced by birthing power.

*God is not
something
we achieve,
accomplish, or
strive for. God
is something we
remember.*

“Healed are those in emotional turmoil who weep for their frustrated desire; they shall see the face of fulfillment in a new form...they shall feel their inner flow of strength return.

“Blessings to those who are dislocated for the cause of justice; their new home is the province of the universe.

“Then, feel at the peak of everything and be extremely moved, for your natural abundance, already in the cosmos, has multiplied all around you. Drink a drop or drench yourself; no matter where you turn you will find the Name inscribed in light. Let your ego disappear, for this is the secret of claiming your expanded home in the universe.”

Prayer

God, Spirit of Creative Transformation, Source and Creator,

We come together today to celebrate the gift of life. We see your life-giving presence in the emerging

spring, the lengthening days, and in the other lives around us. We are grateful for all the ways you sustain our bodies and spirits, through cycles of fullness and hunger and fullness again. We praise your name.

Help us to remember and recognize you, Spirit Eternal. Help us to see and feel the river of life and love that flows into us at every moment. Help us to surrender to the divine, deep current that nourishes our roots, allowing us to stand and grow just where we need to be; help us to surrender to the rushing stream that uproots us as though we were boulders when we need to be shaken loose and moved from a place where we are stuck. Help us to join together in the ever-changing yet constant stream of your love, buoyed aloft on your strong but gentle surface. Nourish us, move us, carry us.

O God, you are the light of our world. Fill our minds with your peace, our hearts with your love, and our hands with your mercy.

Amen.

ODB Online Sign-up

The vast majority of *Our Daily Bread's* funding comes from the Swedenborgian Church. In these troubled economic times, we are all forced to make budget cuts and live within our means. We would love to send a paper version of ODB to everyone who would like it, but we are not able to do that. If you wish to receive the magazine in print, it is essential that you subscribe!

But please do not forget that you can download ODB on your computer and print it on your printer. The electronic delivery is free, and it is also more reliable than the USPS, which delivers it when it fits into their schedule (the magazine is not sent first class).

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Step Two: Click on the signup icon for “Messenger and ODB” (you can sign up for just ODB if you prefer).

Step Three: Enter your email address.

Step Four: Select *Our Daily Bread* & fill in the required information.



Monday, January 30

Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.

Isaiah 55:1

The primary thing of the rational with man is truth, consequently it is the affection of truth, to the end that man may be reformed, and so regenerated.

Arcana Coelestia n. 2189

Tuesday, January 31

Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. *Isaiah 55:2-3*

As for a love of eminence and wealth for their own sake (which is identical to love for ourselves, or strictly speaking, to a love of being in control that arises from self-love), it is a love for our own self-importance, and our sense of self-importance is wholly evil.

Divine Providence n. 215.7

Wednesday, February 1

Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. *Isaiah 55:6-7*

However, a love of eminence and wealth for the sake of service is a love of service. This is the same as a love for our neighbor, since the purpose of our actions is the goal that prompts them. It is the first and primary element, and everything else is intermediate and secondary. *Divine Providence 215.6b*

Thursday, February 2

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

Isaiah 55:8-9

[This is] the nature of a love of eminence and wealth for their own sake and the nature of a love of them for the sake of service: a love of eminence and wealth for their own sake is a love for ourselves—strictly speaking, a love of being in control that arises from self-love; and a love of wealth and money for their own sake is a love for this world—strictly speaking, a love of gaining ownership of what belongs to others by fair means or foul.

Divine Providence n. 215.6b

Friday, February 3

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

Isaiah 55:10-11

Divinity is present in everything that has been created because God the Creator, who is the Lord from eternity, brought forth the sun of the spiritual world from his actual self, and by means of that sun brought forth the whole universe. *Divine Providence n. 5*

Saturday, February 4

For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle; and it shall be to the Lord for a memorial, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off. *Isaiah 55:12&13*

Divine love (and therefore divine providence) has the goal of a heaven made up of people who have become angels and are becoming angels, people with whom it can share all the bliss and joy of love and wisdom, giving them these blessings from the Lord's own presence within them. *Divine Providence 27.2*

Matthew 25:14-30

“For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money. After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, ‘Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.’ His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.’ And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, ‘Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.’ His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.’ Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, ‘Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.’ But his master replied, ‘You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

Sermon

Someone once said that every sermon is a little bit heretical. I think I’ve told you all that before, but it bears repeating because it is so very true. Every sermon is a little bit heretical because no matter how biblical or scholarly or carefully crafted a sermon may

be, there is always more that could be said. There are always questions left unanswered, contradictions left unexamined, and truths left unexpressed.

And, as if that admission weren’t shocking enough, I’m going to go one step further and suggest that the same could also be said for Jesus’ parables. No one parable is going to give us all the answers. No one parable can possibly tell us all we need to know. Some will give us more than others, but no story can possibly say it all.

Take the parable of the wise and foolish virgins, for instance. Those young ladies teach us a great deal about the importance of being ready, but they don’t teach us a thing about how to share. The shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine to search for one lost sheep teaches us a whole lot about God’s love but very little about responsible herding practices.

And all those parables we read about kings, landowners, slaves, and servants—well, they say a heck of a lot about actions and consequences, but not a one challenges the social order enough to suggest that, say, slavery be abolished. That took some reading between the lines. That required people to take a step back and look at the biblical picture as a whole.

So you see, no one sermon and no one story says it all. Even Jesus’ parables are a little bit heretical.

And I think this is good news. In fact, it may be the only good news we’ll be hearing this morning, because today we’re taking a closer look at the parable of the talents, and this story has a little something to offend everyone. Am I right? This story is harsh, nasty, and totally unfair.

To begin with, did you notice that the game is stacked against the little guy from the very beginning? Not only are the slaves given different sums, but notice that the Bible says they are given different sums *in accordance with their level of ability*.

So right away we know that the master knows that the third slave isn’t the sharpest crayon in the box. The master gives him less to start out with because he knows this guy has less to work with, and yet this same master still holds him up to the same level of expectation as the others when he returns. That isn’t just unfair; it’s kind of cruel.

Not only that, the master chastises the third slave for not at least putting his money in the bank and gaining interest, which is odd when you think about it because lending money at interest—yes, that same practice that allows people like you and me to use credit cards, obtain mortgages, and send our kids to

college—was actually considered a sin in both the Old and New Testaments.

Yes, that's right, a sin. Making money by lending money was a big no-no. God does not believe that anyone should have to mortgage away their future in order to get what they need for today—be it shelter, health care, education, or food—and God abhors the idea that others would profit from another's desperation, which may explain why the third slave didn't give his money to the bankers.

Instead, he ran off and hid his money in the ground. And yet here he is getting punished for making the courageous and countercultural decision to obey the law of God.

And then there is the supposed moral of this sorry little tale.

"For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance," says the Master, "but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

All those who have are going to get more? All those who don't are going to get even less? Since when? What is going on here? This is Jesus talking, right? I mean, it's his mouth that's moving, but he's not making any sense.

Whatever happened to the meek inheriting the earth? What about the poor? Didn't Jesus say that theirs is the kingdom of heaven? What about grace, forgiveness, mercy? What about the first being last and the last being first? Something is amiss here. In fact, a whole lot is missing here.

This can't be the whole story, and indeed it isn't. You are going to need to consult the rest of your Bible to understand how to live as a Christian. Likewise, you're going to have to read this parable in the context of that same Bible if you really want to understand what it means. And we're going to get to that, but first I want you to understand fully how upsetting this story has been for people throughout the ages.

According to the Rev. Peter Gomes, "This tale so affected Karl Marx that he . . . reversed its implications and came up with his classical theory of socialism: 'From each according to his ability; to each according to his needs'" (*Sermons: Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living*, p. 200).

Likewise, this parable was so upsetting to people in the early church that they just went ahead and rewrote it. In later apocryphal versions of the story the first slave invests and increases the money, the second hides and preserves it, and the third goes out and gambles it away. The first two are rewarded by the master when he returns, and the third is justly punished for misusing the master's money (*Pulpit Resource* vol. 33, no. 4, p. 30, William H. Willimon).

People liked that version of the story. Not only did it make sense, it also taught a little something about money and responsibility. Only problem is, that it's not the story Jesus told. If you take it out of context and mess with it, you can make the Parable of the Talents mean just about anything you want.

But here's the thing. When you look at it in the context of Jesus' life and ministry, you come to realize something quite striking and not a little disturbing. You come to realize that this isn't actually a parable about money at all. Jesus is not taking this moment to teach us a little something about sound fiscal management, the rewards of industriousness, or even the virtues of capitalism.

And just for the record, while we are on the subject of what this parable is not about, it is not an exhortation about using your talents to play the guitar, the harp, or the kazoo to glorify God. We've all heard that sermon, no doubt because the word play was just too tempting, and it puts a positive spin on a difficult parable, but it too misses the mark.

Folks, Jesus isn't the first-century equivalent of Suze Orman, here to teach us a lesson or two about investing. And he's not Barney, by which I mean he's not a big lovable purple dinosaur come down from heaven to remind us to practice the piano. He's the Messiah, and there is something else that he's trying to say.

The Parable of the Talents is actually about the end of time, the end of Jesus' time on earth and hence the time between His ascension and His return. It is a parable about the Kingdom of God in the meantime. Jesus is telling us what we are to do while the master is away.

I realize that this makes Jesus the master in the tale, and I don't like that anymore than I would imagine you do, but here's the thing: Jesus is not asking us to like it. Jesus is asking us to pay attention, because like the master, he's about to go.

Even Jesus' parables are a little bit heretical.

We are reading from chapter twenty-five this morning. Jesus will be arrested in chapter twenty-six. His earthly ministry is about to come to a close. He knows that he is about to be taken away and crucified, so he tells his followers that the kingdom of God will be like a man who summoned his slaves and entrusted them with his property before he went off on a very long journey.

When you look at this story in its rightful context, all of a sudden it becomes clear. The talents in this parable aren't money, nor do they represent our special God-given abilities. The talents represent the gospel—everything Jesus has lived for and everything for which he is about to die.

This is a story about the truth: the radical, life-changing, mind-altering, captive-freeing, blind-seeing, lame-dancing, mute-singing, temple-crumbling, establishment-challenging truth of Jesus Christ. Jesus is ready to pass this truth on to his disciples—a great blessing, to be sure, but also a tremendous responsibility and a serious liability. The truth is, the third slave was right to be afraid, because these ideas, well, they're about to get Jesus killed. But Jesus is telling us that if this is going to work, then there can be no room for fear. (Thanks to Anthony B. Robinson for this idea: "The Wages of Fear," *Christian Century*, Oct. 27, 1993).

He's saying, "Look, if you take all I have said and you run with it, if you are willing to risk everything to bring this new way of thinking and living and loving out into the world, then the kingdom of God has a shot, and when I return we can rejoice together in what has been accomplished. But if you take this truth about how we ought to think and live and love and run off to hide somewhere with your head in a hole until I come back, then none of this is going to fly. You can't wait till I come back and make it all better. You can't wait till I come back and make it all safe, because if you wait, I won't have anything to come back to. I won't know you on that day, and you won't know me."

Jesus is desperate here, desperate for them to understand. He's about to be tried and crucified before their very eyes, and he knows how very hard this will be for them to endure.

He knows that, even among those closest to him, one will betray him; that his bravest friend will deny him; that the very people he has come to save, the

very people listening to him right now, will denounce him in just a few days' time.

And yet they are all he has, and so he gives to each one according to their ability.

Each slave was handed a sum of vast potential. The third slave was afraid of what he received, and rightly so. The miracle of this parable is that the first two were not, at least not so afraid that they let their fear stop them from trying to multiply that which they had just been given.

Jesus knows that the world is a fearsome place, but he asks those who would serve him to step up anyway. He asks that we step up and risk everything we have been given for the sake of the kingdom.

It's not easy. It's not fair. It doesn't make sense. It goes against our most basic instincts for self-preservation, but this is what he asks of all those who would follow him.

This is, as far as I can tell, the meaning of the Parable of the Talents. It is an interesting message for us to contemplate in our day and age, in this country where our religion is not only protected but stands in some shape or form as the dominant ethos.

With all the dangers before them, the disciples who walked with Jesus needed to hear this message. So too did the martyrs of the early church, but what of you and me living in this time and in this place?

There is no risk associated with being a Christian in our culture. All the crosses and lions and vats of boiling oil were put away long ago. But that is not all that got put away. I think part of the reason we find it as easy to be Christians as we do is that, like that third slave, we have taken a large sum of Jesus' truth and buried it deep away. Just like that third slave, we have taken the aspects of Jesus' teachings like turning the other cheek, loving our enemies, blessing those who persecute us, not repaying evil with harm, forgiving debts, relieving the suffering of the poor, living for today and not worrying about tomorrow, and hidden them away until such time as it is safe to bring them out.

If we take a good, hard look at how we live in this country, I believe we will find that we maintain our prosperity and our security, not just as individuals but as a nation, by burying or hiding away much of the truth that Christ entrusted to us.

I wish to God this parable were about money or putting our talents to good use. But it's not. It's about being willing to risk our very lives for the King.

Yes, we all want peace, but we won't risk disarming until we know that all our enemies have done so first. Jesus' teachings about not repaying evil with harm will just have to stay buried a little longer.

Sure, we'll put an end to poverty, once we know that our jobs and our supply of cheap goods and cheap labor are secure. We'll risk loving our enemies someday, when we are sure and certain they pose us no threat. We'll stop worrying about tomorrow as soon as we have no real reason to worry.

Like the third slave, we keep the truth we know we ought to be living by buried deep because we know it's not safe yet to bring it out into the light. The risk of multiplying some of the talents we have been given by putting them to work in the world is just too high. We have too much to lose. We're afraid to act, and for good reason, so we sit on the truth until such time as things change, until such time as it is safe. We're waiting—not acting, just waiting. Waiting around for the master to return.

Fred Craddock tells a story. It's a story about a village where the school bell would ring every morning at 8:30 to call the children to class. In this village, the boys and girls left their homes and their toys reluctantly, creeping like snails into the school, not late, but not a second early.

Thankfully, the bell rang again at 3:30, releasing the children so they could rush back to their homes and their games. This is how it was every day with every child, except one.

She came early to help the teacher prepare the room and the materials for the day. She stayed late to help the teacher clean the board, dust the erasers, and put away the supplies. And during the day she sat close to the teacher, all eyes and ears for the lessons being taught.

One day, when the noise and inattention were worse than usual, the teacher called the class to order. Pointing to the little girl in the front row, she asked, "Why can you not be as she is? She comes early to help. She stays late to help. All day long she is attentive and courteous."

"It isn't fair to ask us to be as she is," said one little boy.

"Why ever not?" asked the teacher.

"Because she has an advantage," he replied.

"I don't understand. What is her advantage?" asked the puzzled teacher.

"She's an orphan," he almost whispered as he sat down. (Fred B. Craddock, *Craddock Stories*, p. 16).

Here in America we have much in common with that little boy. If you have nothing to risk you have nothing to lose, but God knows we have so much. It isn't fair for Jesus to ask this of us; it isn't fair for him to ask us to risk our own well-being, our sense of security, or our quality of life. But he does anyway.

I wish to God this parable were about money. I wish to God this parable were about putting our talents to good use. But it's not.

It's about being willing to risk our very lives for the King.

It's about taking his truth out into the world and daring to try and change this place, no matter what the cost, no matter what the risk.

This is the meaning of the parable.

May God grant us the courage to bring the truth of Christ's gospel back out into the light and become the good and faithful servants God is calling us to be.

Prayers

O Lord, this is a hard parable for hard times. This is a difficult truth for difficult times. But Lord, use us anyway. Don't give up on us. Light a fire deep within our hearts. Help us to remember, Lord. Help us to remember just where we have buried some of these truths that you gave to us so long ago, and grant us the courage, grant us the will, grant us the resolve to take that which we have been given and dare to multiply it for your glory, that this world might be changed, that this world might be healed, that this world might become the kingdom you created it to be. Amen.

Stir us up to offer you, O Lord, our bodies, our souls, our spirits,

In all we love and all we learn, in all we plan and all we do,

To offer our labors, our pleasures, our sorrows to you;

To work through them for your kingdom, to live as those who are not their own, but bought with your blood, fed with your body;

Yours from our birth-hour, yours now, and yours forever and ever.

- Charles Kingsley (1819-1875)

Daily Meditations

Monday, February 6

Happy are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the Lord.
Happy are those who keep his decrees, who seek him with their whole heart
,who also do no wrong, but walk in his ways.
Psalm 119:1-3

Christians who are in mutual charity, and still more those who are in love to the Lord, are in direct good while living in the world, because they are in truths Divine; and therefore they enter into heaven without such instruction, provided there have not been in their truths falsities. *Arcana Coelestia n. 4197*

Tuesday, February 7

You have commanded your precepts to be kept diligently.
O that my ways may be steadfast in keeping your statutes!
Then I shall not be put to shame, having my eyes fixed on all your commandments. *Psalm 119:4-6*

The particulars of doctrine cause no disagreement, provided they look to one end, which is to love the Lord above all things and the neighbor as oneself; for then they are particulars of these generals.
Arcana Coelestia n. 1288

Wednesday, February 8

How can young people keep their way pure? By guarding it according to your word.
With my whole heart I seek you; do not let me stray from your commandments. *Psalm 119:9&10*

To be taught from the Word is to be taught by the Lord Himself, because it is to be taught from Good itself and from Truth itself, or from Love itself and from Wisdom itself, which are the Word, as has been said; but everyone is taught according to the understanding appropriate to his own love; what is taught beyond this does not remain. *Divine Providence n. 172.5*

Thursday, February 9

When I told of my ways, you answered me; teach me your statutes.
Make me understand the way of your precepts, and I will meditate on your wondrous works.
Psalm 119:26-27

The natural person who does not believe in Divine providence thinks to himself, "What is Divine providence when evil people are raised to higher positions of honor and acquire more wealth than good people, and when those who do not believe in Divine providence meet with many more like successes than those who do believe?" *Divine Providence n. 175*

Friday, February 10

My soul melts away for sorrow; strengthen me according to your word.
Put false ways far from me; and graciously teach me your law. *Psalm 119:28-29*

The natural person ascribes nothing to God but everything to nature. For one who attributes nothing to God attributes nothing to Divine providence either, as God and Divine providence are inseparably connected.
Ibid.

Saturday, February 11

I have chosen the way of faithfulness; I set your ordinances before me.
I cling to your decrees, O Lord; let me not be put to shame.
I run the way of your commandments, for you enlarge my understanding.
Teach me, O Lord, the way of your statutes, and I will observe it to the end. *Psalm 119:30-33*

Those who fight against evils and untruths and are reformed are actually in charity and faith therefrom, and continue in them even to the end of life.
Apocalypse Revealed n. 146

WRESTLING WITH GOD

Rev. Julian Duckworth

come out of him, and never enter him again!" After crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out, and the boy was like a corpse, so that most of them said, "He is dead." But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he was able to stand.

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Genesis 32:22-32

The same night he got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had.

Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip. Therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the thigh muscle that is on the hip socket, because he struck Jacob on the hip socket at the thigh muscle.

Mark 9:17-27

Someone from the crowd answered him, "Teacher, I brought you my son; he has a spirit that makes him unable to speak; and whenever it seizes him, it dashes him down; and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid; and I asked your disciples to cast it out, but they could not do so." He answered them, "You faithless generation, how much longer must I be among you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him to me." And they brought the boy to him. When the spirit saw him, immediately it convulsed the boy, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth. Jesus asked the father, "How long has this been happening to him?" And he said, "From childhood. It has often cast him into the fire and into the water, to destroy him; but if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us." Jesus said to him, "If you are able!—All things can be done for the one who believes." Immediately the father of the child cried out, "I believe; help my unbelief!" When Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, "You spirit that keeps this boy from speaking and hearing, I command you,

Arcana Coelestia 7298

It's part of the laws of order that no one should become instantly convinced of the truth or immediately be so sure of it that he is left in no doubt at all about it. The reason for this is that when truth is impressed on a person like that, he becomes so fully convinced of it that it can't be broadened or qualified in any way. So as soon as some truth is presented, some opposing idea giving rise to doubt is also presented. In this way they are led to think and ponder over whether it is indeed something true, gather reasons that support it, and so introduce that truth into their mind by the use of reason.

Sermon

The idea of wrestling with God sounds a bit strange until you add a bit more information. What about us wrestling with the idea of God existing at all? What about wrestling with the expectations we think God has of us, or the difficulty of our needing to be free agents and yet having to obey God's commands? How about wrestling with the idea of a loving, merciful, and all-powerful God and a world we often see as unjust, unfair, full of suffering, full of a lot of *innocent* suffering, and struggling—wrestling—to square those two things together—one of the biggest questions of all time? That sounds like a lot of good reasons to be involved in a wrestling match with God.

We're not going to have time today to look at the pros and cons of all those big questions. Each one would fill up a whole sermon. Instead, we're going to look at the fact that we *are* caught up in such struggles and also that we can develop a positive, healthy approach to it all. But be very careful with this: it *isn't* saying that struggling with our faith is "good for us" or that "we are here in order to struggle" or that God "sends struggles to see if we are up to it all." That puts God in a very poor light, and it tends to make us look a bit like victims. Yet a lot of people still come up with that idea as if it explains everything, even though we can't get behind the mystery of it. People will still say to someone who is really troubled with all kinds of doubts, "You need to have *more faith!*" I know what they're saying, but I don't find that particularly

helpful. It's like saying, "Have more faith in a God you can't understand or even accept."

Faith without any inquiry or explanation is rather futile. It's a bit like burying your head in the sand come what may, or screwing your eyes shut and hanging on to the hope that everything will work out fine in the end. That kind of faith doesn't ask you to think, only to believe. Imagine that you are driving home quite a long way, and you glance at the petrol gauge and notice you are dangerously low on petrol. Telling yourself you probably have enough in the tank to see you home is one way of dealing with it, but driving off the highway to get some petrol from somewhere while you still can is another way of overcoming the problem.

We do have things called "minds." Our minds are not just information storage units; they can put a number of ideas together to see if they make sense. We can think things through and come to some conclusion about things. We call that "reasoning." Sometimes, when we reason about something, we don't have a definite end result at the start; it begins to shape up as we bring different points into what we're inquiring about. It can sometimes be the other way round, of course, but we should call that arguing the point, rather like they do in a debate.

The main thing is that we have this ability to think. So, when we link that with God or with life after death, we mustn't lose sight of what we've got to help us and only go on about having enough faith. But be careful here, too. We have the ability to think about it so that we can look at the reasons why there is a God, why life is eternal, why people suffer through no fault of their own, but we certainly can't come up with the proof of it. Perhaps a good word to use for this is the *evidence* for these things, and the way that this evidence *confirms* their probability. And we must realize too that we can't disprove them any more than we can prove them.

This is where the wrestling comes in. We wrestle with trying to weigh up the evidence for God against the evidence for no God. It's all a bit intellectual, and it certainly isn't easy. I'll give you two bits of evidence for God and then two bits of evidence for no God. One of the most common things people put forward for God is the incredible order of creation. There it all is, and it all works amazingly well, on the big scale and the microscopic scale. Chance couldn't have done that like that, so it suggests there is a God. Another

good one is the fact that people have always had some deep intuitive sense that God exists, right from the very beginning; there isn't a culture anywhere in the world that doesn't in some way include a higher being of some kind.

Now for the opposite view: there can't be a God, people say, because he never really does anything. If I pray to God for a big win on the lottery, then I think the right answer should be No. But if I pray to God for something that lines up with God's will—let's say becoming a better person—it doesn't happen, and if anything does, it feels like it's coming from inside me and it was there all the time anyway. So why do we need God?

The other "problem with God" is that evil—or great wrong—exists in the world. A Greek philosopher called Epicurus once put the problem like this: "Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able to? Then he is not omnipotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Then why is there evil? Is he neither able nor willing? Then why call him God?"

That's how the never-ending debate for and against God runs. They almost seem to cancel each other out, which may be why a lot of believers put such great emphasis on faith and the exhortation to "have *more faith*"—because that approach bypasses all the weary arguments.

One of the ways I would try and give some evidence for God would be to avoid the "is there a God or isn't there a God?" wrestling match and look at what we can actually know about God. I would come up with things to do with goodness, love, healing, will power, changing for the better, and all those positive, real things in our lives that we see and feel. The very fact that we *can* forgive and get over things is so huge, and it is not what we are like by nature. So where do we get that ability from? Well, we get it from God. But I would even go further than that and say that all these wonderful possibilities we can use *are* God.

That may sound a bit strange, perhaps, but it's really very simple. We are used to saying that God is Love. Everyone would agree with that! What we mean is that God loves us because he is a loving being. But it also suggests that when we come across real love in life, we are seeing God in a visible way—so we can also say that Love is God. When people make out that God doesn't really do anything, how about telling them that every time someone acts lovingly,

God didn't make a cotton-wool world, but a world that forces us to look for answers and work toward solutions.

feels forgiving, shows they care, makes amends, puts themselves out for someone else—all of which must be happening somewhere in the world thousands of times a minute—God is that decision we make, God is that urge to get it right—which, as we said earlier, certainly doesn't come naturally to us! What I'm really saying here is that God doesn't have to be the heated argument that people sometimes indulge in. There he is, right in front of us, in some beautiful act of kindness, which is the best place to find him.

The story goes that during the night Jacob wrestled with God and won. That's the whole point of the story—that Jacob beat God in a wrestling match. And when you think about it, that must always be what God wants for us in any wrestles we have with why life is as it is, why bad things happen to good people, why lives get cut short, and why people sometimes do terrible things to other people (remembering that today marks ten years since 9/11). God doesn't dish these things out; he makes a world in which they can happen. He didn't make a cotton-wool world, but a world that forces us to look for answers and work toward solutions. He wants us to take this on

and win. He wants us to come up with our very own trump card because it means we're making the best use of our lives.

There is all the difference in the world between saying "You must have more faith" and living your life from faith as your starting point. I'd say don't start with God. Start with the things you know—faith in people, faith in goodness, faith in things working out—and don't just think these things, live by them yourself. You will be amazed at how it all opens out and starts coming together! God can come into an open mind, a good life, and a loving heart. Before very long, you won't need to summon up more faith, because faith is now summoning you and God seems very real.

Jacob wins the wrestling match, and because he does, God wins as well. And to mark that win, God changes Jacob's name to Israel—"Prince with God"—and the name that echoes down the ages to the present day comes into being because Jacob took God on and came out on top. Amen.

Memoirs of Swedenborg and Other Documents

By Carl Robsahm



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Memoirs of Swedenborg

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First written in Swedish more than 200 years ago, Carl Robsahm's *Memoirs of Swedenborg* is without doubt the most compelling eyewitness account of Emanuel Swedenborg to be published in any language. Drawing on reminiscences from his own long-standing friendship, as well as information from reliable witnesses and other associates, Robsahm offers a picture of Swedenborg as a man of intelligence and humour. Rich in detail and generosity, this memoir is now a classic in its own right and the primary resource for all subsequent biographers.

The current edition—edited and selected by Stephen McNeilly and revised and annotated by the Swedish scholar Anders Hallengren—contains eight other historical documents and eyewitness accounts, three of which are from the hand of Swedenborg himself. Taken together, these intimate testimonies and autobiographical fragments offer an unparalleled insight into the life and character of the man Jorge Luis Borges once described as "the most extraordinary man in recorded history."

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Daily Meditations

Monday, February 13

But the Lord answered him and said, "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?" *Luke 13:14-16*

[The sabbath is] a day of instruction in Divine things, and thus also a day of rest from labors and of meditation on such things as relate to salvation and eternal life, as also a day of love towards the neighbor.

True Christian Religion n. 301

Tuesday, February 14

Someone asked him, "Lord, will only a few be saved?" He said to them, "Strive to enter through the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able." *Luke 13:23-24*

Since the Lord does want to be united to us for the sake of our salvation, he has provided a means of mutuality. For us, that means is the appearance that the good we intend and do freely and the truth that we think and speak rationally from these intentions originate in us. *Divine Providence n. 92.3*

Wednesday, February 15

"When once the owner of the house has got up and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and to knock at the door, saying, 'Lord, open to us,' then in reply he will say to you, 'I do not know where you come from.'" *Luke 13: 25*

After death, people who have done good in the belief that it came from them cannot accept the fact that everything good comes from the Lord. They mingle with hellish demons and eventually unite with them.

Divine Providence n. 93

Thursday, February 16

"Then you will begin to say, 'We ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets.' But he will say, 'I do not know where you come from; go away from me, all you evildoers!'" *Luke 13:26-27*

It is one thing to act freely and rationally and another thing to act in true freedom and with true rationality. Only people who have allowed themselves to be regenerated by the Lord can act in true freedom and with true rationality. Others act freely and in keeping with a kind of thinking that they shape into an image of rationality. *Divine Providence n. 98*

Friday, February 17

"Then people will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God. Indeed, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last." *Luke 13:29-30*

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

Divine Providence n. 100

Saturday, February 18

At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." He said to them, "Go and tell that fox for me, 'Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work.'" *Luke 13:31-32*

Everyone knows that we think, intend, speak, and act with every appearance of autonomy, and everyone can see that if it were not for this appearance we would have no volition and discernment. We would therefore have no motivation and thought and no acceptance of anything good and true from the Lord. This means that without this appearance we would have no acknowledgment of God, no charity and faith, no consequent reformation and regeneration, and therefore no salvation. *Divine Providence n. 174.2*

FEB 19 GLIMPING THE MYSTERY

Rev. Eric Hoffman

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 9:28-36

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.

Sermon

One of the best things about autumn is the stargazing. Have you been outside then and seen the planet Mars in the southwestern sky? It's the time of year when it's still warm enough to go outside in the evening, but cool enough so that we get some crisp,

crystal-clear skies. The winter constellations are beginning to appear earlier and earlier, so you can see some very interesting stars without having to stay awake too late. If you can get away from the city lights, it's even clearer. Out on the prairie at night, it seems like the sky just goes on forever. Areas of the sky where we didn't think there were any stars we discover are actually dusted with these faint little jewels billions of miles away—so far away that it takes those stars' light billions of years to reach our eyes.

There have been plenty of times when I've been lying out there under the sky and found myself overwhelmed by the vastness of the universe and the simple, singular beauty of all creation. It's sort of the same feeling you get when you hear some really fantastic music. Have you ever had a piece of music just lift you out of yourself and remind you of how wonderful just living can be? I'm not sure exactly what does that, but it is an awesome experience—to be enveloped by music so beautiful that it brings tears to your eyes, to hear music that expresses a truth so well that, for a moment, it raises the level of your awareness. Even though both feet are firmly planted on the ground, you realize that you're dancing with angels.

Music has a way of doing that sometimes, as can a sky full of twinkling stars, or the flickering light of a campfire. These things can guide our attentions to the deeper realities of our lives. And when we're in that peaceful, reflective state, inspirations and insights come so easily to us, and sometimes the underlying patterns and possibilities of our lives become clear to our perceptions. Some of the things God has been telling us all along finally hit home. We catch a glimpse of the mystery—and it's a transfiguring experience.

If only that feeling could last a little while longer! But unfortunately, the music ends, the campfire dies, and the stars become hidden by the light of the sun. And it's probably just as well. I don't think we can sustain that level of rapture for very long. But one thing I have discovered: that if you have enough of those transfiguring, life-giving experiences, pretty soon you can generate that feeling from memory. You aren't dependent on the external stimuli. You can close your eyes and see the stars and feel the grandeur of the universe. You can hear that music in your head and feel your heart quicken, and your mood begins to lift.

I believe that all the music and stars do is remind us of who we are and put us in touch with a deeper part of ourselves that is just as beautiful and awesome:

God's presence in us. I believe that when we are moved in response to something that we see or hear, it is the divine spark in us rising to the surface and harmonizing with the deeper truth of that something. Since I have moved to Minnesota, several people have shared with me that there have been times when they've been reading Swedenborg and some string of words on the page has moved them into a deeper understanding of the inherent spirituality of their life. A couple of you have even been moved to tears. All the words are doing, whether they come from Swedenborg or another author that has been truly inspired, is reminding us of something that's been written in our souls since the Creation. The angel in us is rising to meet the angel that wrote those words. I'm certain that many of you can relate and agree that it is an awesome experience.

But it doesn't have to be something as grand as the night sky or a symphony orchestra or Swedenborg to elicit that response in us, because God is present in the smaller, more mundane things as well. God is present in the craftsmanship of the objects around us. God is present in every leaf and flower and blade of grass. God is especially present in every person. We can allow the divine in us to respond and "shine in our faces" when in the presence of each other.

If you've ever been in the same room as someone who is exhilarated by life, then you know what I'm talking about. Children are especially skilled at bringing out the divine in us, simply by being who they are and being fascinated by the world around them. I once saw a child in the waiting room of a doctor's office who was totally and completely thrilled by all the toys that were sitting on the table there. Every single thing his parents showed him brought squeals of delight and laughter, to the point where everyone in the room, regardless of their illness, was filled with joy by watching him. Just this last week, my daughter was downstairs with her grandmother. My daughter was taking Lincoln logs out of their bin and tossing them on the floor. Her grandmother was picking them up and tossing them back in the bin, and my daughter thought, for some reason, that this was the funniest thing in the world. Every time the logs would hit the bin, she would explode into the purest laughter I think I've ever heard. It was intoxicating!

I heard another man just recently tell about looking into his rear-view mirror to see his four-year-old son sitting in the back seat, gazing out of the window with a peaceful smile on his face. He asked his son, "What are you thinking about?" His son replied, "Candy." When was the last time you let yourself enjoy a

peaceful meditation about candy? When was the last time you allowed yourself to feel that happy about something that, to our adult minds, is so trivial?

Latch on to that feeling. Whatever gets your heart to spread its wings, don't ever forget it. There may be a plethora of things in this world that seem more important and can absorb all of our attention and energy, but don't let them make you forget the music that lifts you, the stars that lead you, the laughter that brings your spirit to the surface for all to see and makes you glow. That feeling will take you places and show you things worth remembering.

Prayers

Come, my Way, my Truth, my Life:

Such a Way as gives us breath:

Such a Truth as ends all strife:

Such a Life as killeth death.

Come, my Light, my Feast, my Strength:

Such a Light, as shows a feast:

Such a Feast, as mends in length:

Such a Strength, as makes his guest.

Come, my Joy, my Love, my Heart:

Such a Joy, as none can move:

Such a Love, as none can part:

Such a Heart, as joys in love.

- George Herbert (1593-1633)

O burning mountain, O chosen sun,

O perfect moon, O fathomless well,

O unattainable height, O clearness beyond
measure,

O wisdom without end, O mercy without limit,

O strength beyond resistance, O crown of all
majesty,

The humblest you created sings your praise.

- Mechtild of Magdeburg, 1207-1294

Daily Meditations

Monday, February 20

So King Jehoram marched out of Samaria at that time and mustered all Israel. As he went he sent word to King Jehoshaphat of Judah, "The king of Moab has rebelled against me; will you go with me to battle against Moab?" He answered, "I will; I am with you, my people are your people, my horses are your horses."

2 Kings 3:6-7

[Moab represent people] with whom natural good exists but who regard other people as worthless in comparison with themselves. They are not unlike fruit which is not unattractive on the outside but which within is moldy or rotten. *Arcana Coelestia n. 2468.2*

Tuesday, February 21

Then he asked, "By which way shall we march?" Jehoram answered, "By the way of the wilderness of Edom." So the king of Israel, the king of Judah, and the king of Edom set out; and when they had made a roundabout march of seven days, there was no water for the army or for the animals that were with them.

2 Kings 3:8-9

When the church is [without charity], then evils and falsities reign, which hinder the reception of its doctrine, which is the doctrine of love to the Lord and of charity towards the neighbor, with its truths; and when doctrine is not received, there is no church, for the church is from doctrine. *Apocalypse Explained n. 730*

Wednesday, February 22

Then the king of Israel said, "Alas! The Lord has summoned us, three kings, only to be handed over to Moab." *2 Kings 3:10*

For with them [Moab] a general good exists which does not look unattractive; but things of a particular kind which enter into that good are filthy. This is not so to begin with but becomes so gradually, for such people easily allow themselves to be impregnated with whatever go by the name of goods and consequently by whatever falsities which, because they are confirmatory, they imagine to be truths.

Arcana Coelestia n. 2468.2

Thursday, February 23

Elisha said to the king of Israel, "What have I to do with you? Go to your father's prophets or to your mother's." But the king of Israel said to him, "No; it is the Lord who has summoned us, three kings, only to be handed over to Moab." *2 Kings 3:13*

The reason is that the Lord never flows immediately into truths with man, but mediately through his good; for good is of his will, and the will is the man himself; from the will the understanding is brought forth and formed. *Apocalypse Explained n. 739*

Friday, February 24

Elisha said, "As the Lord of hosts lives, whom I serve, were it not that I have regard for King Jehoshaphat of Judah, I would give you neither a look nor a glance. But get me a musician." And then, while the musician was playing, the power of the Lord came on him.

2 Kings 3:14-15

"To sing a song" signifies confession from joy of heart, because joy of heart, when it is in fullness, expresses itself in song; this it does because when the heart, and in consequence the thought also, is full of joy, it pours itself forth in singing, the joy of the heart itself through the sound of the singing, and the joy of the thought therefrom through the song.

Apocalypse Explained n. 326

Saturday, February 25

And he said, "Thus says the Lord, 'I will make this wadi full of pools.' For thus says the Lord, 'You shall see neither wind nor rain, but the wadi shall be filled with water, so that you shall drink, you, your cattle, and your animals.'" *2 Kings 3:16-17*

The kind of joy of the thought is expressed by the words of the song, which concur and agree with the matter that is in the thought from the heart; the kind of joy of the heart is expressed by the harmony, and the measure of this joy is expressed by the exaltation of the sound and the words in it. All these flow as if spontaneously from the joy itself, and for the reason that the whole heaven is formed according to the affections of good and truth, the highest heaven according to the affections of good, and the middle heaven according to the affections of truth. *Apocalypse Explained n. 326*

FEB 26 INTERPRETING THE PRESENT TIME

Rev. Kevin K. Baxter

Isaiah 5:1-7

Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; he expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes. And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it? When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes? And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns; I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it. For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!

Luke 12:49-56

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

He also said to the crowds, "When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, 'It is going to rain'; and so it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, 'There will be scorching heat'; and it happens. You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?"

Sermon

Our readings this week fall into the category of apocalyptic literature. This category can be identified by the making of broad statements about the poor quality of the current times or of a certain people and by a fairly clear statement predicting some sort of dramatic action or event in the near future.

For instance, our reading from Isaiah talks of the "people" of Jerusalem and Judah, comparing them to a vineyard that has been taken over by wild grapes rather than the cultivated variety. Isaiah is prophesying that God will destroy the people of Judah. The passage depicts for the reader, using the vineyard image, the sweeping destruction of the people of Judah.

What does this story hold for us? Is it just a recording of a historical proclamation to a certain group of people at a certain time? No, it has to be more than that; it is scripture. Is it a warning about what will happen if God is displeased with us?

On the literal level, the story is not about us at all. We do not live in Judah or in Jerusalem, so clearly the literal level of the story is not what we should be focusing on.

When I first read this passage, I really didn't see what was so bad about wild grapevines. After some research, I found out a couple of things. First, a wild grape vineyard is not profitable: it is likely to contain several different types of grapes that all need to be harvested at different times and cannot really be used profitably. Moreover, wild grapes are not trained to grow any particular way, which makes it difficult to walk through them for harvesting. Finally, wild grapevines often overtake trees and other useful crops. We might say, taking a correspondential approach, that a wild grapevine does not care about anything or anyone other than its own desires. It does not care about working with the larger community of vines or the vineyard owner. In essence, we can understand a wild grapevine as unruly selfishness.

If we are not reading this passage literally, we need to re-understand what it means to be a person of Jerusalem or Judah. Jerusalem, as the home of the temple and the learned scholars of the Isaiah's day, alludes to the church, and Jerusalem being likened to a wild grapevine suggests that the church is corrupt. Judah, the southern kingdom of Israel, is a place of devotion and love. Jerusalem and Judah, when mentioned in a pair as they are here, represent perversions in our thoughts about God and in our desires.

But this passage from Isaiah should not be understood as a warning to us, the readers. It is simply a descriptive statement about a stage in our spiritual existence. There is really no question as to whether a person is going to experience this state or not. We all do! At some point in our lives, we want God to benefit us and be on our side alone. We all go through periods in which we love truths and ideas that benefit us more than anyone else. We all want God to make creation revolve around us. It's normal.

In fact, I would even argue that such desires are healthy—to a point. These stages of selfishness we go through are stages that can lead to a healthier spiritual life.

Across the street, in William James Hall, the Harvard psychology folks have conducted research about delayed gratification. Their study showed that the children who successfully put off fulfilling their desire for a coveted object were more successful and happier later in life. The kids who understood and were actually able to practice delayed gratification had an easier time with hardship and understood abstracted good better than the kids who did not.

But to get to that point, these children had to be presented with a dilemma. They had to make a decision either to grab what they wanted now or wait for the promise of something better. The study started off like this: the researchers put a toy or a piece of candy on the table and told the child that if they waited until the researcher returned, he or she would receive an even tastier treat.

Throughout our lives, we learn that we cannot control the world. We learn that our desires do not always lead us to happiness. Most of us learn that instantly following our desires leads us into difficult places. This is the “destruction of the vineyard” we hear about in our Isaiah passage.

Our reading from Luke covers much the same subject, but with a slight twist. The reading from Isaiah is missing a certain character that the story from Luke contains—namely the Lord and the audience he is speaking to. This passage in Luke comes from a series of lessons in which Jesus is being tough on the disciples. In fact, it follows on the heels of the lesson about the master and his waiting servants. In other words, this story presupposes a bit of important knowledge.

This story presupposes that the reader understands intellectually the Lord's commandments about loving the neighbor as oneself and loving God above all others. It takes for granted that the reader has been exposed to the concept that the divine good and the earthly good are separate things, but does not really understand it.

It's tempting to count ourselves among the people who “get it,” right? Sadly, though, that's unlikely. It is only through experience and learning that we begin to have a notion of what spiritual truth is, and it is probably only when we enter fully into the spiritual world that we will understand spiritual truth fully.

For now, we must understand that our actions lead to consequences we do not always understand. We must realize that we might be wrong, we must have humility, we must be present and watchful about what we do and why we do it.

But amid all this doom and gloom there is good news—gospel. Oddly, this good news comes in the seemingly disturbing announcement that the Lord comes to bring division. We could understand this as the Lord bringing war, but why? Why would an all-powerful God do that? It is like a child who builds a sand castle just to crush it. Sure, a child does that, but is that the picture we want to have of God?

I see this idea of division as being like a parent who watches his child walk for the first time. The parent knows the child will fall, but he also knows the child must fall in order to learn to walk. This is a picture of a God who is cautious, attentive, and present and yet limits his involvement for the sake of the betterment of his child. Many are offended by this analogy because the horrors of our world are unimaginable—hardly the equivalent of a child's tumble while toddling—which is why we must labor to end such horrors. But it's part of our job to work at understanding that the Lord's love embraces all victims of evil with infinite love and total healing in the next world.

If we live a life in which we judge others based on their beliefs rather than seeking the good in them, we are like bad fathers who lack compassion for their little ones. On the other hand, if we encourage evil and good equally, we are like bad mothers who fail to do everything in their power to bring out the good in their children while discouraging the bad.

But we each have both a bad father and a bad mother in us—truths that we stick to or weakness in

We all want God to make creation revolve around us. It's normal. Such selfishness can even lead us to a healthier spiritual life.

our hearts that leads us to deny the truth. But the Lord is continually coming to us, bringing division. This is a good thing: God's love and wisdom are continually reaching into our lives to help us reform—to lead us toward goodness, when necessary, through guilt and negative feelings. The point is not to punish us but to allow us to reflect on what caused these feelings and do better next time.

Many times in my life, I have believed that acquiring something—a toy car, a computer, an iPhone—would make me happy. In a similar vein, many times I have thought that my way was the only way. How about you?

If we seek to rid ourselves of things like self-absorption, the Lord will be able to enter into our hearts more fully. But to do that, we must look beyond today. We must look beyond the struggle and the conflict toward what God's love has promised—even when we do not fully know what that promise involves. Amen.

Prayers

My Lord, I have nothing to do in this world, but to seek and serve thee;

I have nothing to do with a heart and its affections, but to breathe after thee;

I have nothing to do with my tongue and my pen, but to speak to thee, and for thee, and to publish thy glory and will.

- Richard Baxter, 1615-1691

O blessed Lord, who hast commanded us to love one another, grant us grace that having received thy bounty, we may love everyone in thee and for thee. We implore thy clemency for all; but especially for the friends whom thy love has given us. Love them, O thou fountain of love, and make them to love thee with all their heart, that they may will, and speak, and do those things only which are pleasing to thee.

- St. Anselm

O Lord, let me not live to be useless.

- John Wesley (1703-1791)

Monday, February 27

“At that time Michael, the great prince, the protector of your people, shall arise. There shall be a time of anguish, such as has never occurred since nations first came into existence. But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone who is found written in the book. *Daniel 12:1*

By “Michael” is not meant any archangel; but ministries in heaven are meant; the ministry signified by “Michael” is performed by those who confirm from the Word, that the Lord is the God of heaven and earth, and that God the Father and He are one, as the soul and body are one; also that men ought to live according to the commandments of the Decalogue, and that then men have charity and faith. *Apocalypse Revealed n. 548*

Tuesday, February 28

“Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever. *Daniel 12:2&3*

Jehovah gave us the Word that tells us about God, heaven, hell, and eternal life, and that he himself came into the world to redeem and save us. All this and much more, and the divine providence within it all, people see from spiritual light within earthly light.

Divine Providence n. 189

Wednesday, February 29

“The man clothed in linen, who was upstream, raised his right hand and his left hand toward heaven. And I heard him swear by the one who lives forever that it would be for a time, two times, and half a time, and that when the shattering of the power of the holy people comes to an end, all these things would be accomplished. *Daniel 12:7*

That “garments of fine linen” are truths from the Divine, is because a garment made of fine linen was of purest white and lustrous; and truth from the Divine is represented by garments of such whiteness and luster. The reason is, that the shining whiteness and luster of heaven is from the light that is from the Lord, and this light is the Divine truth itself. *Arcana Coelestia n. 5319*

Thursday, March 1

“Many shall be purified, cleansed, and refined, but the wicked shall continue to act wickedly. None of the wicked shall understand, but those who are wise shall understand. *Daniel 12:10*

By means of the understanding, love, that is, the man, sees what the evils are that defile and corrupt the love; he also sees that if he flees from those evils as sins and turns away from them, he loves the things that are opposite to those evils; all of which are heavenly.

Divine Love and Wisdom n. 419

Friday, March 2

“From the time that the regular burnt offering is taken away and the abomination that desolates is set up, there shall be one thousand two hundred ninety days. *Daniel 12:11*

For all worship has matters of doctrine for its rules; and these matters of doctrine are truths insofar as they are from good; and they are falsities insofar as they are from evil; for truths have their essence and life from good, and on the other hand falsities have their death from evil. *Arcana Coelestia n. 9192*

Saturday, March 3

“Happy are those who persevere and attain the thousand three hundred thirty-five days. But you, go your way, and rest; you shall rise for your reward at the end of the days.” *Daniel 12:12-13*

With those who are being regenerated, that is, who the Lord foresees will suffer themselves to be regenerated, these truths are greatly multiplied, for these persons are in the affection of knowing truths. *Arcana Coelestia n. 5376*

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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.

Save the Date

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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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