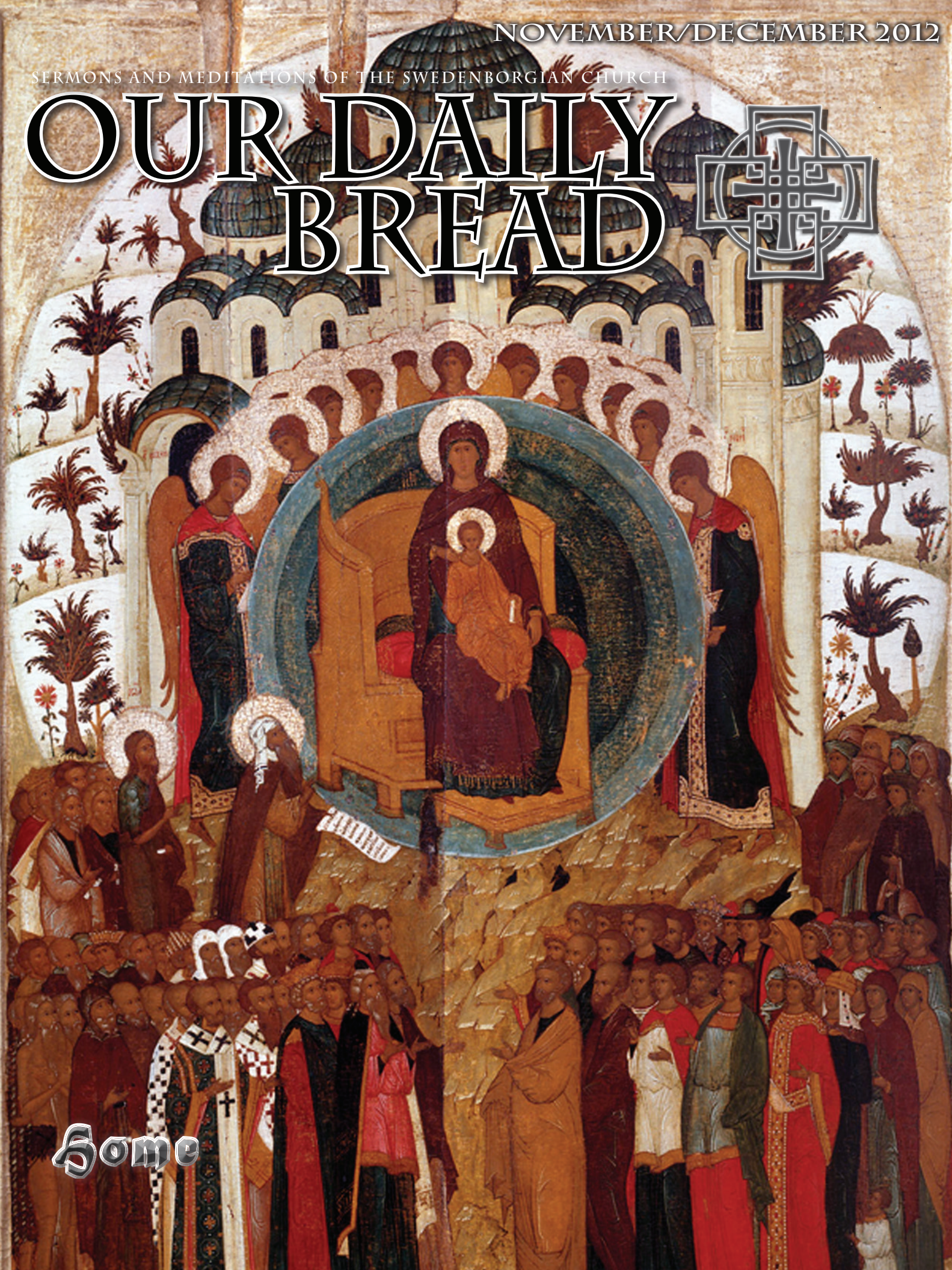


NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2012

SERMONS AND MEDITATIONS OF THE SWEDENBORGIAN CHURCH

OUR DAILY BREAD



Some

Prayer

*The sure provisions of my God
Attend me all my days;
O may Thy house be my abode,
And all my works be praise!
There would I find a settled rest,
While others go and come;
No more a stranger, nor a guest,
But like a child at home.*

~ Horatius Bonar (1808-1889)

*"My Shepherd Will Supply My Need"
(based on Psalm 23)*

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*Trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our Home.
- William Wordsworth*

The first weeks of this issue's scripture readings tell the story of Abraham, wanderer par excellence. That may seem odd, given this issue's focus on home. But Abraham's story is an *ur*-story, a story of origins. It is a tale about home—about leaving it, wishing for it, making it, and finding it. Like all good origin stories, it tells us where we come from, helps us understand why things are the way they are—and also stirs us to wonder what life would be like if the story had been otherwise. Maybe things could yet be different. Maybe our story and the world's story remain unfinished. Maybe, for better or worse, we aren't home yet. A startling thought? Yes. Unnerving? Yes. Awe-inspiring? Definitely.

It has been said that a good home gives us both roots and wings. This is as true of God, our divine Parent, as it is of the people (whether biological family or spiritual kin) who have offered us shelter and solace throughout our lives. We are tucked beneath God's mighty wings, held gently in the palm of his hand, throughout our days. At the same time, God blesses us with spiritual freedom. God's love for us is fierce, enduring—and spacious.

Like all good origin stories, therefore, Abraham's story is both comforting and unsettling, traditional and subversive, grounding and revolutionary. It is a story quite appropriate to the Advent and Christmas seasons, when we celebrate the human birth of our own Creator, our divine Home. May you, this season and always, feel yourself at home in God.

Many blessings, Leah Goodwin & Kevin Baxter

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NOV 4 THE PRODIGAL

Rev. Sarah Buteux

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." So he told them this parable:

Then Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands."' So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.

"Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with

prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!' Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.'"

Sermon

In the film *The Princess Bride* (my favorite movie of all time), there is a minor villain by the name of Vizzini who is so confident in his skills as a criminal mastermind that every time his accomplices inform him that things are not going according to plan, he responds with the exclamation, "INCONCEIVABLE!" (Vizzini is one of those rare individuals who can speak in all capital letters.)

When his assistant Inigo Montoya points out that their ship is being followed in the middle of the night through eel-infested waters, Vizzini responds, "INCONCEIVABLE!" The next morning, when Inigo points out that the same ship that has been following them is now right on top of them, Vizzini cries once again, "INCONCEIVABLE!"

When they cut the rope that the captain of the ship is using to climb the Cliffs of Insanity, then look over the edge and see that he hasn't fallen to his death but is clinging to the rocks below and, slowly but steadily, still coming after them, Vizzini exclaims, "HE DIDN'T FALL? INCONCEIVABLE."

At which point Inigo Montoya turns to him and very gently says, "You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means."

I love that line, just as I love preaching on Jesus' parables because so often they don't mean what you think they mean at all. The trouble with Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son, however, is that it means exactly what you think it means.

In today's parable, we are introduced to a father who had two sons, the youngest of whom—not to put too fine a point on it—was a total jerk. He was such a jerk that he didn't even have the decency to wait until his father had passed away before demanding his inheritance. In fact, in requesting his inheritance the way he did, he was in essence saying to his father and his brother, "You are already dead to me, so you might as well give me what's mine and get out of my way."

The younger son took his share of the family's assets, robbing the rest of them of the profits they might have made had their wealth and land been kept intact, turned his back on his own flesh and blood, and then, adding insult to injury, ran off to a distant

land and proceeded to squander the good gifts he had been given on “dissolute living.”

Of course you know what happened next. A famine arose in the land where he was living, and, although he found a job feeding pigs, his circumstances were such that the pods they were eating were better than anything he had filled his belly with for quite a while.

And so he sat there, contemplating his low estate and feeling quite sorry for himself, in spite of the fact that he had only himself to blame. Then, conniving as ever, he came up with a brilliant idea. “How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger!” he said. “I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.’”

It is important to note, at least at this point in the story, that even his confession is self-serving. The younger son isn’t looking for reconciliation or interested in making any sort of restitution. There is no evidence here that he has learned his lesson or at long last come to appreciate his family; he’s just looking for a good meal, and he figures that heading to his father’s house with a well-rehearsed confession is his best bet. He was a self-centered little scoundrel when he left home, and in spite of all that has taken place, he’s still a self-centered little scoundrel when he returns.

Imagine his surprise, then, when he arrived within sight of his ancestral home and was welcomed by his father, who came running out to meet him.

You should know that back in those days, no self-respecting patriarch would ever run. It would have been considered extremely undignified, so it gives you a sense of just how unabashed and uncompromised the father’s love for his son truly was.

Before a word is out of the prodigal’s mouth, his father embraces him and welcomes him home. I’d like to think that it was enough of a surprise to jolt the young man into a mode of true confession. “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son,” he said. I think it is quite possible that when those words finally did come out, they were both surprised at how much he actually meant them.

But before the younger son could say another word, the father called to his slaves and said, “Quickly [now], bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet.

And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And [immediately] they began to celebrate.”

Well, so far so good. For any of us who have ever managed to royally screw things up in life, this parable holds out a great deal of hope. If the parable ended here, we’d all probably be perfectly happy with it. Perhaps we’d be a little dissatisfied and question whether or not some penance might be in order, but it’s not until what happens next that that you realize happy endings aren’t always what they’re cracked up to be.

Actually, in some ways, this story is only just beginning, because it is at this point in the tale that the older brother decides to return home from his labors.

Remember the older son—the one who didn’t leave, the one who stayed by his father’s side and worked the land of his ancestors as a good son should? Well, the older son returns to the house to find that a party is going on and no one has even bothered to send for him. In fact, it would seem that everyone, but most notably his father, has forgotten for the moment that he even exists.

And why? Why is everyone so excited that they have overlooked him? Because his selfish, conniving, profligate, no-good jerk of a little brother has actually dared to come home.

Now, if he had returned to find his little brother on trial for his misdeeds or already robed in rags and cleaning out the latrines with a toothbrush, that would have been one thing. But to return and find his little brother decked out in fine robes, adorned with his father’s rings, sporting new sandals and dining on the fatted calf—well, let’s just say that this would be enough to send just about anybody over the edge.

Of course we know that this story is being told for the benefit of some Pharisees who object to Jesus’ eating with sinners, so it’s probably best to distance ourselves from anyone in the story who comes across as being even the least bit judgmental. But Jesus sure doesn’t make it easy to disagree with the elder son. His anger is perfectly justified, his outrage almost pure. It is not hard at all to understand why he would stand outside his father’s house in anger and refuse to go in to such a party.

In fact, he is so angry that when his father comes out to plead with him and make peace, he turns on him. “Listen!” he says. “For all these years I have

been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, [this son] who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him! For him!"

It is easy after this outburst to distance ourselves from the older son, dismiss him as nothing more than a thinly veiled, judgmental, self-righteous caricature of a Pharisee, but man, do I feel his pain and his confusion. His whole world has just been turned upside down and inside out.

"Sure, the son who was lost has just been found. Yeah, great, the one who was dead has come back to life, but what about me? Huh? What about the one who was responsible enough to stay put and not get lost? What about the one who not only stayed alive but put that life to good use for the sake of our home, our name, and our family? I honor everything we stand for, father, and you don't even think to give me so much as a goat. But he abuses everything we stand for, and you throw him a party just for showing up? My 'brother!' you call him. My *brother?*"

As Inigo Montoya would say, "You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means."

You know as well as I do that this sermon isn't going to end with me holding up the elder brother as a role model for Christ-like living, but before we acknowledge where the elder son goes wrong, take a moment to appreciate all that he has done right. Go ahead and feel his pain and his frustration and his outrage, for they are real and justified.

I respect the fact that for the elder son, words like "father," "brother," and "son" mean something because they are titles one earns, designations one is required to live up to. In the elder son's world, relationships might begin as nothing more than accidents of birth, but they are cemented, confirmed, and legitimized over time through one's actions.

There is a powerful logic at work here, one I don't necessarily disagree with. So just like the elder son, I really have to wrestle with the implications of the father's love for both his sons—and please notice that he really does love each of them. Neither one behaves particularly well and he loves them both the same, which is both the point and the problem at the heart of this parable.

In the words of Barbara Brown Taylor, "[The elder son] wants his father to love him as he deserves to be loved, because he has stayed put, and followed orders, and done the right thing. He wants his father to love him for all of that, and his father does love him, [only it is] not for any of that, any more than he loves the younger brother for what he has done.

"He does not love either of his sons according to what they deserve. He just loves them, more because of who he is than because of who they are, and the elder brother cannot stand it. He cannot stand a love that transcends right and wrong, a love that throws homecoming parties for prodigal sinners and expects the hardworking righteous to rejoice. He cannot stand it, and so he stands outside – outside his father's house and outside his father's love – refusing his invitation to come in." (*The Preaching Life*, p. 166)

What can we learn from this? Ultimately, we are meant to see that the elder son's stance is futile. He may feel justified for having followed the rules all these years, but at the end of the day he is not the one who makes the rules. This is not his house but his father's, and in his father's house relationships are not earned, they are givens; once a father, always a father, once a son, always a son. A son's actions may affect the quality of that relationship, he can withhold himself from the relationship, he can take it for granted, even abuse it, but he can never fully destroy it, because it simply is what it is.

And when you think about it in those terms, if God's love for his children is anything like this father's love for his two sons, than divine love has some pretty frightening implications. It means we can run, but we can't hide. We can refuse, but we will one day recant. We can fight, but reconciliation with God and with one another is eventually inevitable. We are all in this together for eternity, and we can only resist that fact for so long.

Standing outside of his father's house, the elder son had the opportunity to learn a powerful and painful lesson. Grace is free; it just isn't cheap. It requires humility.

Sometimes it requires humbling ourselves and asking to be forgiven. At other times, those times when we haven't done anything wrong—or, worse, have been grievously wronged by others—it requires humbling ourselves enough to sit down with all the other sinners, acknowledging that they too have a place at the table, they too have been forgiven by God, and—if necessary—offering to forgive them as well.

The reality of God's grace means we're all going to end up at the same party, a party full of people we never dreamed we'd ever have to associate with. This parable teaches us that in the kingdom of God we're not going to get special treatment for being good. There is no extra credit, honor roll, or private skybox set aside for the truly holy. You're not going to get so much as a goat, if you think heaven is nothing more than a place where you can go off and celebrate your own accomplishments with your own special group of friends.

In the Father's house, there is only one table, there is only one feast, there is only one fatted calf. There is still enough to go around; the catch is that we have to share it with each other. This feast has been prepared that we all might be together, not that some might be set apart. For many of us, that can be a pretty hard truth to swallow.

For some of us, those of us who have had to put up with a host of people like the younger brother, such a thought might be nothing more than damned inconvenient. But for others among us, those of us who have been seriously hurt or caused very serious hurt, it may be nothing less than terrifying. I am sure there are people in your life you would rather have nothing to do with—and for good reason. It is also possible that some of these people are so abusive that for now, at least in this lifetime, it is best to keep your distance lest they hurt you further. But Jesus warns us this morning to be careful, lest we harden our hearts towards them beyond any hope of redemption or reconciliation in this life or the life to come.

We need to keep in mind that even the most hardened criminal was born a child of God. He or she may dwell in a distant land for now, but the father, our Father, in all his profligate love, is watching for their return as well.

Is it fair? No. Does it make sense? Not as far as I can see. But this isn't my house; it's God's. These aren't my rules; they're his. And, therefore, I need to trust that he knows what he is doing. I need to trust that when he uses words like "grace" and "love," "lost" and "found," "dead" and "alive," "my son," "your brother," "my daughter," "your sister," "my child," "my beloved," that he really knows what he is talking about; that his words do in fact mean what he thinks they mean. Amen.

Prayers

O Lord, you are not always the God we want, and yet you are always far more loving and gracious than even the finest among us deserve. Humble our hearts, protect us from ourselves, and lead us into your light, into your house, into the great feast you have prepared for all people. Help us to take our places at your table with our hearts and our minds open to you and to the possibilities that lie deep in the hearts of one another. Amen.

- Sarah Buteux

Almighty God, Father of the human race, forgive us our divisions; heal the wounds of bitterness, resentment, and injured pride. By your love, reconcile us to you, that we might be reconciled to one another. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

- Frank Topping

ODB Online Sign-up

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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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Daily Meditations

Monday, November 5

Terah took his son Abram and his grandson Lot son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, his son Abram's wife, and they went out together from Ur of the Chaldeans to go into the land of Canaan; but when they came to Haran, they settled there. The days of Terah were two hundred five years; and Terah died in Haran. *Gen 11:31-32*

The Ancient Church in general is now treated of, and it is shown that in the course of time its internal worship was falsified and adulterated; and consequently its external worship also, for the quality of the external worship is determined by that of the internal worship.

Arcana Coelestia #1283

Tuesday, November 6

Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." *Gen. 12:1-3*

"Blessing," when said of the Lord, signifies thanksgiving that from Him is every good of love and truth of faith, and thence heaven and eternal happiness to those who receive. *Apocalypse Explained n. 340*

Wednesday, November 7

So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother's son Lot, and all the possessions that they had gathered, and the persons whom they had acquired in Haran; and they set forth to go to the land of Canaan. *Gen. 12:4-5*

In all things of man both in general and in particular there is an image of a marriage; nor can there possibly be anything so small as not to contain this image within it, whether it be in the external man and each and everything belonging to it, or in the internal man and each and everything belonging to it.

Arcana Coelestia n. 1432

Thursday, November 8

When they had come to the land of Canaan, Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. Then the Lord appeared to Abram, and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built there an altar to the Lord, who had appeared to him.

Gen. 12:6-7

In celestial things there is the very light of the soul; because [it is] the Divine itself, that is, Jehovah Himself.

Arcana Coelestia (Potts) n. 1440

Friday, November 9

From there he moved on to the hill country on the east of Bethel, and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east; and there he built an altar to the Lord and invoked the name of the Lord. And Abram journeyed on by stages toward the Negeb.

Gen. 12:8-9

The celestial things of love are love to Jehovah and love to the neighbor, and innocence itself in these. From these, as from the veriest fountains of life, flow all other things both in general and particular, for all other things are merely derivations.

Arcana Coelestia n. 1450

Saturday, November 10

Now there was a famine in the land. So Abram went down to Egypt to reside there as an alien, for the famine was severe in the land. *Gen. 12:10*

"There was a famine in the land." That this signifies a scarcity of knowledges as yet with the Lord when a child, is evident from what has been already said. During childhood the knowledges in a man never come from that which is interior, but from the objects of the senses, especially from the hearing.

Arcana Coelestia n. 1460

A BLESSING IN THE MIDST

Rev. Dr. George F. Dole

Isaiah 19:18-25

On that day there will be five cities in the land of Egypt that speak the language of Canaan and swear allegiance to the Lord of hosts. One of these will be called the City of the Sun. On that day there will be an altar to the Lord in the center of the land of Egypt, and a pillar to the Lord at its border. It will be a sign and a witness to the Lord of hosts in the land of Egypt; when they cry to the Lord because of oppressors, he will send them a savior, and will defend and deliver them. The Lord will make himself known to the Egyptians; and the Egyptians will know the Lord on that day, and will worship with sacrifice and burnt offering, and they will make vows to the Lord and perform them. The Lord will strike Egypt, striking and healing; they will return to the Lord, and he will listen to their supplications and heal them. On that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and the Assyrian will come into Egypt, and the Egyptian into Assyria, and the Egyptians will worship with the Assyrians. On that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the Lord of hosts has blessed, saying, "Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my heritage."

Mark 9:30-37

They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again." But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another as to who was the greatest. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

Secrets of Heaven 2305

There are people who are of the opinion that innocence is the same as infancy because when the Lord was talking about little ones, he said, "Of such is the kingdom of heaven," and said that if we do not

become like little children we cannot enter the kingdom of the heavens. People who hold this opinion, though, do not know about the deeper meaning of the Word, so they do not know what "infancy" means. "Infancy" means the innocence of intelligence and wisdom, whose basic quality leads us to recognize that our life comes from the Lord alone . . . Real innocence, which is called "infancy" in the Word, never exists or dwells anywhere but in wisdom, so much so that the wiser we are the more innocent we are. The Lord, therefore, is innocence itself because he is wisdom itself.

11 NOV

Sermon

What does our world have to be grateful for today? Much more bad news than good occupies the headlines. If we lay this text over the present situation in the Middle East, the contrast between Isaiah's vision and the present reality could hardly be starker. Geographically, the Holy Land is little more than a bridge between Africa and Asia, and at present it is not a link but a bone of contention. The Lord's intent, Isaiah says, is that the temple in Jerusalem become "a house of prayer for all nations" (Isaiah 56:7), but at present no one seems to be listening, and the consequences of that deafness are tragic.

What do we have to be grateful for in these troubled times? To begin with, we have the vision. If we lose that, we are truly lost. We will spend all our energies on preventing the worst, motivated by fear, and little or none on reaching toward the best, motivated by faith, by hope, and by charity (1 Corinthians 13:13).

There is a fundamental principle involved that is applicable to all communities regardless of scale, and that is applicable to the inner dynamics of each one of us. It is quite beautifully exemplified in a statement in Swedenborg's *The Last Judgment* 12, describing the ideal community: "...in the most perfect form, the more constituents there are, the more people are involved in attention and agreement and the more intimate and unanimous is the union. The agreement and consequent union increase with numbers because each individual there comes in as a congenial intermediary between two or more others, and whatever comes in strengthens and unites."

No simple, geometrical way exists to diagram this, because one of the most obvious and significant facts about the social fabric in which we live and move and have our being is the fact that each one of us is a center. There are, of course, other relationships, many of them hierarchical. As children, we were in many ways subject to our parents, but that changes with

time. In the nine-to-five segments of their lives, some people are employees and some are employers. Other relationships are truly reciprocal. I recall a case in which one woman was giving another piano lessons and was being taught Hebrew in return—particularly memorable because the pianist was in her late eighties and the Hebraist was in her early nineties. We are able to move with relative ease from one kind of relationship to another if those relationships seem appropriate. Nicodemus, an eminent elder in Israel, willingly assumed the temporary role of student when he came to Jesus (John 3).

We can be quite sure, all the same, that Nicodemus experienced himself as a center around which there were the concentric circles, so to speak, of a far larger world. Just try, for a moment, imagining what this room looks like when seen through my eyes, or the eyes of some sitting somewhere else, even of the person sitting closest to you. It is most unnatural. Basically, the views of others are just as accurate as yours, and they are all different.

If we put this fact together with the picture we are given in *Last Judgment*, the picture of every new individual serving to strengthen and unite, we come to the conclusion that the more witnesses we have of this particular scene, the more complete and accurate a picture could be drawn. Every witness could add something unique.

This is a challenging parable of our situations in the fabric of human thought and feeling. We affect each other by the way we treat each other, and the way we treat each other is affected by the way we see each other. To others, each of us is a representative of the rest of the world, a kind of agent—only one representative, to be sure, but when we are in conversation with someone else, we are the primary or even the only representative on the scene. Each of us is then a link with the “outside world,” a kind of conduit, and each one of us is a selective conduit.

This brings us back to our text, to the image of Israel as a highway between those longtime rivals, Egypt and Assyria. What kind of traffic do we encourage? Do we try to keep channels of communication open between the best in both lands, or do we rather highlight the rivalry and channel it toward active enmity? Do we strengthen the fabric, or do we weaken it?

In any number of places and ways, our theology advises that “the good in the neighbor” is the neighbor whom we are to love (see, for example, *Secrets of Heaven* 8123). We are assured that good is present within absolutely everyone. We are also assured that

some of us turn away from it, at first partially and ultimately decisively. We cannot destroy it, because it is the Lord’s life flowing into the very core of our being. We *can* close ourselves off from it. All of us do so from time to time, when we are at our worst, and if we are honest with ourselves, we can understand how some of us can come to prefer hell to heaven.

When we get in touch with the best in others, we form a little link between the best in them and the best in us, and through us, with the best in others. When we arouse the worst, we do just the opposite. We strengthen the conviction that the world is essentially hostile and that survival is a matter of defeating it. There is enough evidence for both views to make them both quite plausible.

Something else is happening, too. By the way we look at and treat others, we are associating ourselves with those of like attitudes. We cannot avoid being centers, but in ultimate terms, in terms of heaven and hell, we are choosing where that center will be, what our own center will be. If we choose Isaiah’s course, if we choose to be “a blessing in the midst of the earth,” we are centering ourselves in that community; and on the principle that we are accepted into heaven when we accept heaven into ourselves, that is becoming our own internal center.

With that in mind, then, let us take a fresh look at our New Testament reading. His disciples were embarrassed because they had been arguing about which of them was greatest. Jesus did not settle the argument or scold them. The first thing he did was to present them with a paradox: “If you want to be first, you need to be last.” Then, Mark tells us, he placed a child in their midst (Mark 9:36).

Put that “midst” together with the “midst” of Isaiah’s vision, the one the midst of a small group of disciples and the other, Isaiah says, “the midst of the earth.” Geometrically, it is the same midst. Wherever we are centered, that is, we can envision ourselves as surrounded by one concentric circle after another. For the Israelite of Isaiah’s day who was looking for the best in some local environment, those concentric circles would reach out to include like-minded individuals in Egypt and Assyria. For the Jew in modern Israel, they would reach out to include like-minded Palestinians, Egyptians, and Iraqis. That is the point of contemporary efforts to bring Israeli and Palestinian young people together in small numbers, so that each can experience the humanity of the “other.” You may have seen in a recent newspaper the photograph of a “Friends Forever” group, teens from Catholic and Protestant families in Ireland spending

two weeks here, lifted out of the atmosphere of blind hostility that has had such tragic consequences for so long.

It is, I think, a true instinct that led to the focus of these efforts on the young. It reflects a longing to protect their innocence by forming ties with the innocent, strengthening the fabric of those who want to seek out the best in others rather than to be “the greatest” at the expense of others.

In that sense, each one of us is asked to find the little child within and center ourselves there. This brings us to our reading from Swedenborg, which tells us how to identify that child within. “Real innocence, which is called ‘infancy’ in the Word, never exists or dwells anywhere but in wisdom, so much so that the wiser we are the more innocent we are. The Lord, therefore, is innocence itself because he is wisdom itself.”

If innocence “never exists or dwells anywhere but in wisdom,” though, how can we equate it with infancy? Babies certainly are not wise. They have everything yet to learn. The key lies as much in what they do not have as in what they have. They do not have any sense that they know anything. They are sponges for learning. In doctrinal terms, they are “willing to be led by the Lord.” If the boundaries of innocence are also the boundaries of wisdom, they are squarely within those boundaries—not covering much territory, but rightly centered.

That is where we all started. That is the true center of each one of us now and forever, because the center of our being is that “inmost” where the love-and-wisdom, the life of the Lord, is constantly flowing in. When our third reading tells us that the basic quality of intelligence and wisdom “leads us to recognize that our life comes from the Lord alone,” it is not just straightening out our theology. It is pointing us straight into the unsearchable depths of our own being. It is giving those depths a name—“the blessing, the little child in our midst.”

What do we have to be grateful for?

Everything that we are. Absolutely everything.

Amen.

Meditations

He showed me a little thing, the size of a hazelnut, in the palm of my hand, and it was as round as a ball. I looked at it with my mind’s eye and I thought, “What can this be?” And answer came, “It is all that is made.” I marveled that it could last, for I thought

it might have crumbled to nothing, it was so small. And the answer came into my mind, “It lasts and ever shall because God loves it.” And all things have being through the love of God.

In this little thing I saw three truths. The first is that God made it. The second is that God loves it. The third thing is that God looks after it.

What is he, indeed, that is maker and lover and keeper? I cannot find words to tell. For until I am one with him I can never have true rest nor peace. I can never know it until I am held so close to him that there is nothing in between.

- *Julian of Norwich (1342-1416), Divine Showings*

God is the still point at the center. There is no doer but he.

All this he showed me with great joy, saying, “See, I am God. See, I am in all things. See, I do all things. See, I never take my hands from my work, nor ever shall, through all eternity. See, I lead all things to the end I have prepared for them. I do this by the same wisdom and love and power through which I made them. How can anything be done that is not well done?”

God wants us to know that he keeps us safe through good and ill.

We shall see God face to face, simply and wholly.

- *Julian of Norwich, Divine Showings*

The very act of sacred knowledge teaches us that the natural sense of the soul is single, but that it has been divided into two by Adam’s disobedience. It will become single and simple again when the Holy Spirit comes into it . . .

- *Diadochus of Photike (mid-fifth century)*

God of love, give us love; love in our thinking and our speaking; love in our doing and in the hidden places of our souls; love of our neighbors far and near; love of those we find it hard to bear and of those who find it hard to bear with us; love in joy, love in sorrow; love in life and love in death.

- *Archbishop William Temple (1881-1944)*

Daily Meditations

Monday, November 12

Abram went up from Egypt, he and his wife, and all that he had, and Lot with him, into the Negeb. Now Abram was very rich in livestock, in silver, and in gold. He journeyed on by stages from the Negeb as far as Bethel, to the place where his tent had been at the beginning, between Bethel and Ai, to the place where he had made an altar at the first; and there Abram called on the name of the Lord. *Gen. 13:1-4*

There is here described the state of the external man such as it was in childhood, when first imbued with knowledges [*scientifica et cognitiones*]: that it thence advanced more and more to conjunction with the internal man. *Arcana Coelestia n. 1536*

Tuesday, November 13

Now Lot, who went with Abram, also had flocks and herds and tents, so that the land could not support both of them living together; for their possessions were so great that they could not live together, and there was strife between the herders of Abram's livestock and the herders of Lot's livestock. At that time the Canaanites and the Perizzites lived in the land. *Gen. 13:5-7*

In worship the nature and quality of the disagreement between the internal man and the external are especially discernible, and this even in every single thing of worship; for when in worship the internal man desires to regard the ends that belong to the kingdom of God, and the external man desires to regard the ends that belong to the world.

Arcana Coelestia n. 1571

Wednesday, November 14

Then Abram said to Lot, "Let there be no strife between you and me, and between your herders and my herders; for we are kindred. Is not the whole land before you? Separate yourself from me. If you take the left hand, then I will go to the right; or if you take the right hand, then I will go to the left." *Gen. 13:8-9*

It is known to those who have been in temptations and combats, that they perceive in themselves things which disagree; from which, so long as there is combat, they cannot be separated; but still they desire separation, and sometimes to such a degree that they are angry with the evil, and desire to expel it.

Arcana Coelestia n. 1580

Thursday, November 15

Lot looked about him, and saw that the plain of the Jordan was well watered everywhere like the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt, in the direction of Zoar; this was before the Lord had destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah. So Lot chose for himself all the plain of the Jordan, and Lot journeyed eastward; thus they separated from each other. *Gen 13:10-11*

The cupidities of evil are of the will, and the persuasions of falsity are of the understanding; and when these two reign, the whole external man is destroyed; and when it is destroyed, it is also separated from the internal man. Not that the soul or spirit is separated from the body, but that good and truth are separated from man's soul or spirit.

Arcana Coelestia (Potts) n. 1587

Friday, November 16

Abram settled in the land of Canaan, while Lot settled among the cities of the Plain and moved his tent as far as Sodom. Now the people of Sodom were wicked, great sinners against the Lord. *Gen. 13:12-13*

As great as is the beauty of the external man when united to the internal, so great is its deformity when disunited. For considered in itself the external man is as nothing else than a servant to the internal.

Arcana Coelestia (Potts) n. 1598

Saturday, November 17

The Lord said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him, "Raise your eyes now, and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward; for all the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring forever. I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth; so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted. Rise up, walk through the length and the breadth of the land, for I will give it to you." So Abram moved his tent, and came and settled by the oaks of Mamre, which are at Hebron; and there he built an altar to the Lord. *Gen. 13:14-18*

The external things that do not agree are what impede the internal man, while acting into the external, from making it a one with itself. *Arcana Coelestia n. 1603*

Psalm 40

I waited patiently for the Lord; he inclined to me and heard my cry.
He drew me up from the desolate pit, out of the miry bog, and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure.
He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God. Many will see and fear, and put their trust in the Lord.
Happy are those who make the Lord their trust, who do not turn to the proud, to those who go astray after false gods.
You have multiplied, O Lord my God, your wondrous deeds and your thoughts toward us; none can compare with you. Were I to proclaim and tell of them, they would be more than can be counted.
Sacrifice and offering you do not desire, but you have given me an open ear. Burnt offering and sin offering you have not required.
Then I said, "Here I am; in the scroll of the book it is written of me.
I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart."
I have told the glad news of deliverance in the great congregation; see, I have not restrained my lips, as you know, O Lord.
I have not hidden your saving help within my heart, I have spoken of your faithfulness and your salvation; I have not concealed your steadfast love and your faithfulness from the great congregation.
Do not, O Lord, withhold your mercy from me; let your steadfast love and your faithfulness keep me safe forever.
For evils have encompassed me without number; my iniquities have overtaken me, until I cannot see; they are more than the hairs of my head, and my heart fails me.
Be pleased, O Lord, to deliver me; O Lord, make haste to help me.
Let all those be put to shame and confusion who seek to snatch away my life; let those be turned back and brought to dishonor who desire my hurt.
Let those be appalled because of their shame who say to me, "Aha, Aha!"
But may all who seek you rejoice and be glad in you; may those who love your salvation say continually, "Great is the Lord!"
As for me, I am poor and needy, but the Lord takes thought for me. You are my help and my deliverer; do not delay, O my God.

"Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a shout, 'Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.' Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' But the wise replied, 'No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.' And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us.' But he replied, 'Truly I tell you, I do not know you.' Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

Sermon

I have always been moved by the opening of Psalm 40: "I waited patiently for the Lord. The Lord inclined to me and heard my cry, drawing me up from the desolate pit, out of the miry bog, setting my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure. The Lord put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God."

I resonate with this Psalm whenever I feel I have been led through a difficult time. What a blessing it is to have come through doubts and confusions, to feel again on solid ground, to take confident steps, to sing a song of gratitude to God!

I have to confess, though, that I am not so good at the patient-waiting part. In fact, I hate to wait. I often carry around inside me an inner five-year-old, jumping up and down and whining, "I wannit now, I wannit now, I wannit now . . ."

Who enjoys standing in checkout lines? Who likes to be caught in traffic on the freeways? When the gift is bought and wrapped, why wait to give it? Once received, why wait to open it? And these are just the trivial examples.

At its worst, waiting is one of the most grueling of human experiences. We have medical tests done and wait for the results. A loved one is rushed to the hospital and we sit in the "waiting" room. And in this time of hostage taking, it is truly gut-wrenching to contemplate the waiting endured by those held captive and their families. Wait patiently? On any

given day, people are waiting to see whether they or their loved ones will get well, whether they or their loved ones will live. We often do well simply to wait in any way we can.

Here's an interesting fact about the fortieth Psalm: in the original Hebrew text, there is no word corresponding to "patiently." A more literal translation runs: "Waiting, I waited for the Lord..." Many translators have heard patience implied in that repetition, and that is certainly a possible understanding. I, however, have often thought that a more colloquial English rendition of the repetition would be something like "I waited and waited for the Lord..." That doesn't mean I was patient about it! In many situations, it would be inhuman to expect us to be so.

Waiting, whether in dread or in eager anticipation, whether in annoyance or in curiosity to see what comes next, is an inescapable part of the human condition. It is inescapable because as human beings we love, and we don't know the future.

Consider the first part of that statement: if we loved nothing and no one, not even ourselves, we wouldn't care about what comes next, so there would be nothing to wait for.

And neither do we know what comes next. I can't imagine what it would be like to know my personal future in detail. But I am sure that if I did, waiting would be a very different experience, if it existed at all.

These two basic truths about us as human beings—that we love and that we don't know the future—make it inevitable that we will find ourselves waiting. Caring about but not knowing what comes next, we fear the worst and hope for the best. Out of our love and our ignorance, we hope and we fear...and we wait.

While there are some kinds of waiting I wouldn't wish on anyone, I believe there is also a good and healthy kind of waiting, a waiting that is a much-needed spiritual discipline. This kind of waiting can be called "watchful waiting." We don't know what God has in store for us. It's full wonder, and mystery is always beyond us. We don't know God's timing either. We don't know when or where or how God's miracles in our lives will occur. So we remain alert as we wait, holding ourselves in readiness to recognize and seize the moments of grace as they arrive.

Jesus' parable about the foolish and wise bridesmaids calls us to this discipline of watchful waiting.

"Then the kingdom of heaven shall be compared to ten bridesmaids who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, they all slumbered and slept. But at midnight there was a cry, 'Behold, the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.' Then all those bridesmaids rose and trimmed their lamps. And the foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' But the wise replied, 'Perhaps there will not be enough for us and for you; go rather to the dealers and buy for yourselves.' And while they went to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast; and the door was shut. Afterward the other bridesmaids came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us.' But he replied, 'Truly, I say to you, I do not know you.' Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour." (Matthew 25:1-13).

The bridesmaids await the arrival of the bridegroom. This is one of several bridegroom sayings of Jesus recorded in the gospels. It was obviously an important mystical symbol for him. The arrival of the bridegroom is an occasion for joy and festivity. And while the bridegroom is present, there is no room for fasting or mourning. For us, the coming of the bridegroom prefigures the coming of Christ into our lives. In the Swedenborgian understanding, this arrival occurs not once but repeatedly as, piece by piece, we are remolded or "regenerated" into ever more capacious vessels for the expression of God's love and wisdom. In order to grow spiritually, we keep ourselves ready and alert as we wait for the next step in our dance with the Spirit.

Given that, it is interesting in this parable that the bridesmaids, foolish and wise alike, fall asleep. Sleep, here, in the sense of sound sleep, in the sense of being able to fall asleep and to sleep peacefully, is a great blessing. Sleeplessness, on the other hand, is one of the agonies of anxious waiting. That the bridesmaids fall asleep, that they are able to do this, speaks well of them. It reveals their faith, their confidence that the bridegroom is on his way. As we read in the traditional translation of Psalm 40, "I waited patiently for the Lord..." If there is a truth captured by this rendition of the Psalm, I think we find it here. Patient waiting

for the Lord is grounded in trust and therefore does not involve worry.

Outwardly, the foolish and the wise bridesmaids are waiting patiently in the same way. The difference is revealed when the bridegroom is announced. After their patient waiting, some of the bridesmaids are prepared and some are not. Some can immediately respond when the moment arrives and some cannot. This implies that even in the best and most confident of waiting, there still needs to be an element of tension—an alertness, a readiness. While we wait for Christ to enter again into our lives, we must keep our own lamps shining. Even as we recognize that the leaps forward, the moments of insight, the moments of grace, are Christ’s workings in us and come on the Spirit’s schedule, not ours, still we do everything in our own power to take care of ourselves spiritually. We are sure to provide ourselves in advance with a supply of oil. Christ comes to those who have prepared themselves.

Viewed outwardly, the wise bridesmaids are remarkably ungenerous. “We are unable to share with you,” they say. But once we understand that this parable is speaking symbolically of realities within each of us, their statement makes sense. The ten bridesmaids stand for the various characteristics, habits, tendencies, and traits that make each of us a complex human being. Whenever Christ enters into our lives, there is a moment of reckoning—a moment, if you will, of inner house cleaning. In every forward movement in our spiritual lives, we must leave parts of ourselves behind, be they habits, tendencies, likes and dislikes, entrenched opinions, and so on. They are precisely the parts of ourselves that are not “prepared” to follow the Lord. Ironically, the art of waiting includes knowing when not to wait anymore, when to stop waiting for everything within us to catch up. What cannot answer the call is left behind.

Psalms 40 and the parable of the foolish and wise bridesmaids speak to us of the blessing and the art of patient waiting. In waiting patiently, we live out the key traditional Christian virtues.

Patient waiting contains faith. In waiting, the faithful one continues to live in the present, confidently and joyfully. He or she trusts in the Spirit’s timing.

Patient waiting hopes. It believes in the original goodness of God’s creation and is alert for the signs of its progressive restoration and return to its Creator.

Patient waiting loves. It is love that inspires waiting, and it is love that gives us the courage to sustain the

tension and uncertainty found in even the best of waiting.

If I could give you patience simply by telling you to be patient, I would. But I know that truly patient waiting is not something we can decide to do; nor can we force ourselves to be patient. We need to be patient with our impatience! To be able to wait patiently for the Lord is itself a gift of God’s grace, and we can only wait, be it patiently or impatiently, for that gift to come to us.

So I will pray. I pray for myself, and for all of you, and for everyone who is waiting today. May we be blessed with the gift of patient waiting (and sound sleep!). May it be given to us to remember that the Bridegroom is indeed coming. And may we ever hold ourselves in readiness, in hope, and in eager anticipation for the wonders that the Spirit still has in store for us.

Meditations

I sought the Lord, and afterward I knew
He moved my soul to seek him, seeking me;
It was not I that found, O Savior true;
No, I was found of thee.

Thou didst reach forth thy hand and mine enfold;
I walked and sank not on the storm-vexed sea;
’Twas not so much that I on thee took hold,
As thou, dear Lord, on me.

I find, I walk, I love, but oh, the whole
Of love is but my answer, Lord, to thee;
For thou wert long beforehand with my soul,
Always thou lovedst me.

- Anonymous

Give to us, O Lord,
the peace of those who have learned to serve you,
the peace of those who are glad to obey you,
and the peace of those who rejoice in your praise;
through Christ our Lord.

- St. Aidan (died 651)

Daily Meditations

Monday, November 19

The Lord dealt with Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah as he had promised. Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him. *Gen. 21:1-2*

As regards the state of union of the Lord's Divine spiritual in His Divine celestial, this is the very marriage itself of good and truth, from which comes the heavenly marriage; and this marriage is the Lord's kingdom in the heavens and on earth.

Arcana Coelestia n. 2618

Tuesday, November 20

Abraham gave the name Isaac to his son whom Sarah bore him. And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. *Gen. 21:3-5*

A [person] cannot be regenerated until adult age, because he then for the first time has the full exercise of reason and judgment, and thus can receive good and truth from the Lord. *Arcana Coelestia n. 2636*

Wednesday, November 21

Now Sarah said, "God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me." And she said, "Who would ever have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age." *Gen. 21:6-7*

When the Lord's Human was made Divine it was no longer an organ of life, or a recipient of life, but was Life itself, such as is that of Jehovah Himself.

Arcana Coelestia n. 2658.2

Thursday, November 22

The child grew, and was weaned; and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned.

Gen. 21:8

If the Word were the Word in regard solely to its historicals, that is, in regard to its external or literal sense, then all the historicals in it would be holy; and, what is more, many persons there mentioned would be regarded as holy. *Arcana Coelestia n. 3229*

Friday, November 23

But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac. So she said to Abraham, "Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac." The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son.

Gen. 21:9-11

With every man who is being regenerated there are two rationals, one before regeneration, the other after regeneration. The first, which is before regeneration, is procured through the experience of the senses, by reflections upon things of civic life and of moral life, and by means of the sciences and the reasonings derived from them and by means of them, also by means of the knowledges of spiritual things from the doctrine of faith or from the Word.

Arcana Coelestia n. 2657.2

Saturday, November 24

But God said to Abraham, "Do not be distressed because of the boy and because of your slave woman; whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be named for you. As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring." *Gen. 21:12-13*

What it is to act according to spiritual truth cannot be unfolded to the apprehension in the fullness in which it can be perceived by those who are in the internal sense; and therefore if we were to state what it is according to their perception, it would scarcely be acknowledged. *Arcana Coelestia n. 2665*

THE DIVINE LOCKOUT

Rev. Dr. George F. Dole

Genesis 3:14-24

The Lord God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, cursed are you among all animals and among all wild creatures; upon your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel."

To the woman he said, "I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you."

And to the man he said, "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree about which I commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it,' cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

The man named his wife Eve, because she was the mother of all living.

And the Lord God made garments of skins for the man and for his wife, and clothed them.

Then the Lord God said, "See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever"— therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken. He drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a sword flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life.

Revelation 1:10-18

I was in the spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet saying, "Write in a book what you see and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus, to Smyrna, to Pergamum, to Thyatira, to Sardis, to Philadelphia, and to Laodicea."

Then I turned to see whose voice it was that spoke to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the lampstands I saw one like the Son of Man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash across his chest. His head and his hair were white

as white wool, white as snow; his eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and from his mouth came a sharp, two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining with full force. When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead.

But he placed his right hand on me, saying, "Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, and the living one. I was dead, and see, I am alive forever and ever; and I have the keys of Death and of Hades.

Revelation Unveiled 82

"And I have the keys of hell and death" means that he alone is able to save.

"Keys" mean the power to open and close, here the power to open hell so that we can be brought out and the power to close it so that we do not go back in once we have been brought out. We are in fact born into all kinds of evil and therefore in hell, since evils are hell; we are brought out by the Lord, who has the power to open it.

The reason "having the keys of hell and death" does not mean the power to consign us to hell but the power to save us is that this follows immediately after the statement, "See, I am living for ages of ages," which means that he alone is eternal life. Further, the Lord never consigns anyone to hell. Rather, we consign ourselves.

Sermon

The Bible tells the story of a relationship between divinity and humanity, a story that begins with creation and ends with the descent of the Holy City. Like parentheses, in a way, the beginning and the ending hold the story together. We might think of them as marking it off from the rest of the world's literature, as establishing the boundaries within which its particular meaning is contained. A great deal happened in the world outside those boundaries—far more, certainly, than happened within them; but here is where we are called to focus our attention.

There is a rabbinical tradition that carries part of this message in quite a charming way. The first letter of the Old Testament is the letter *beth*, the first letter of the word *b'reshith*, "in [the] beginning." It is shaped rather like a backward "C," and since Hebrew is written from right to left, it is open toward what follows and closed to anything before it. We could say the same of an English text that began with the letter "C." A rabbinical explanation of this is that

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what happened before the story started is beyond our knowing. What we need to know is contained in what follows.

In a way, the closing words of the Book of Revelation serve a parallel function. What happens *after* the descent of the Holy City? "Let anyone who will take the water of life at no cost. . . Even so, come, Lord Jesus! The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all. Amen" (Revelation 22:17, 21-22). The story may close with an invitation, with a promise, but it is decisively closed.

There is a further symmetry to be seen when we lay the beginning and the ending side by side. The long tale does not end with a return to the garden but with the descent of a city. Different as the city is from the garden, though, they are both enclosures of blessedness. Everything that God made in the beginning was "very good" (Genesis 1:31), and nothing that in any way defiles will enter into the city (Revelation 21:27). In both garden and the city there are rivers (Genesis 2:10, Revelation 22:1), and in both garden and city we find the tree of life (Genesis 2:9, Revelation 22:2). It is a little like coming home after a lifetime in other lands and finding that home has changed a great deal while we were away, but somehow it is still home. The Holy City is what we were born for when we were born in the garden.

The mixture of sameness and difference between the garden and the city is quite beautifully caught in one pair of details. We read in Genesis (3:24) that after the expulsion from the garden the Lord God "placed the cherubim and a sword flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life." There is no going back to the state of primal innocence once we have left it. On the literal level, some few individuals may succeed in going back to a pre-technological simplicity of life and living off the land, but for the vast majority of us there is no realistic prospect of turning the clock back.

The Book of Revelation, though, tells us in effect that the cherubim guard only one of the ways to the tree of life. That same tree is found in the Holy City, and "its gates will never be shut by day, and there will be no night there." The problem presented by the cherubim is resolved by the openness of the New Jerusalem.

Just what is that tree of life, though? Perhaps the most concise explanation in our theology is found in *Divine Providence* (241): "We may conclude, then, that the tree of life in Genesis means the Lord as to his divine providence, and that the tree of knowledge means us as to our own prudence." If we take

seriously the statement that "our own prudence is nothing" (*Divine Providence* 191), we are at least intellectually aware that we are totally dependent on the Lord, as dependent as newborn babies. We are simply structures that are organized in such a way that they receive life, which is the essential theological meaning of the word "organisms."

We cannot see into the minds of infants to know when they begin to become conscious of themselves as distinct beings, but we can see the growth of a will to take charge. This makes for difficulties, to be sure, but we know that without it there can be none of the acceptance of responsibility that is central to maturity. When Jesus said that we are to become as little children (Matthew 18:3), he did not mean that we are never to grow up. He was talking about a kind of humility that does not take on full meaning until it coexists with the awareness that the Psalmist expressed in the words, "I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made." The humility the Lord wants of us is not some abject recognition of worthlessness, but a recognition of the nature and source of our priceless. Each of us might say, "Yes, I'm wonderful, but it's not my fault." As a matter of fact, when we try to redesign ourselves we tend to make a mess of it.

The description of the Holy City includes something like a paradox that begins to complete our sense of symmetry between the beginning of the story and its end. What is the point of the great, high wall if there are gates on every side and the gates are never shut? Or to put it another way, if no one enters in who "practices abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life" (Revelation 21:27), what keeps such people out?

Probably the simplest and most obvious answer has just been given: "And the city had no need of the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb" (Revelation 22:23). The light of God's glory is that one light that shows everything in its true colors. In that light, abomination looks abominable and falsehood looks false. In that light, deception vanishes the way night vanishes when the sun rises. How are we judged? The Gospel of John says it most concisely: "And this is the judgment—that light has come into the world and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light"—and why?—"so that it may be clearly seen

that their deeds have been done in God" (John 3:19-21).

This is what our reading from Swedenborg is saying when it says that "the Lord never consigns anyone to hell. Rather, we consign ourselves." The context in which it says this calls for our close attention. It is said in explanation of one item in the self-description of the risen and glorified Lord: "and I have the keys of hell and death."

I suspect that most of us instinctively read this as a statement of the power to keep the hells confined, but that is not the way our theology reads it. Here, it says, it means "the power to *open* hell," to open hell "so that we can be brought out, and the power to close it" for one reason only, "so that we do not go back in once we have been brought out."

There is a way of reading this that may complete the symmetry between beginning and ending. Let us imagine simply that ever since leaving the Garden of Eden, we have been on the wrong side of the door. The door we left by has been forever closed to us, but there are other doors, the gates to the Holy City. To enter one of these gates is to leave hell behind, so to say that these gates are always open is just another way of saying that the Lord is constantly opening the gates of hell to let us out. The Lord, and only the Lord, has the key.

The Lord *is* the key, because the essence of hell is our belief in the illusion that we are self-sufficient, that we do not need the Lord. Here, though, we need to proceed with some care. The essence of hell is not the illusion itself, but our refusal to recognize that it is an illusion, or in more careful theological terms, "an appearance." Our own prudence is nothing, we are told, but it does seem to be something, *and it should seem to be something* (*Divine Providence* 191). We are to shun evils *as if of ourselves*. A friend in Germany recently sent me an article in which a German neurologist argues insistently that our freedom is an illusion, that all the workings of our minds are determined by what has happened in the past; but the neurologist then goes on to say that this is not a belief we could live by. We need a sense of freedom in order to have the sense of accountability on which human society depends for its survival.

We are not, then, "evil people" because we are on the wrong side of the door. That is where we find ourselves, not where we have consciously chosen to be. The invaluable merit of the appearance that our own prudence is something is that it is the basis of a sense of responsibility. The problem with it—or one

problem, at any rate—is that it all too easily mushrooms into a sense of total and absolute responsibility, a burden so great that our only alternatives are denial or despair.

If the first law of divine providence is that we should act in freedom according to reason (*Divine Providence* 71ff.), this can be read as another way of saying that the Lord is constantly making sure that there is a way open to us out of the denial or despair that comes when we believe in the illusion of self-sufficiency. It is the way to the tree of life that is a way forward and not backward, a way to the recognition that the Lord is life itself and that we are designed as receptors of that life. That, surely, is the logic behind the statement in our third reading, "The reason 'having the keys of hell and death' does not mean the power to consign us to hell but the power to save us is that this follows immediately after the statement, 'See, I am living for ages of ages,' which means that he alone is eternal life."

Does all this make sense? It certainly leaves unsaid vastly more than it says. It does not cross all the *ts* or dot all the *is*, and it may actually put dots on some of the *ts* and crosses on some of the *is*; but there is surely a kinship between beginning and ending. After all, the One who has the keys of death and hell calls himself Alpha and Omega, Beginning and End, the First and the Last. Amen.

Meditation

As truly as God is our father, so just as truly is he our mother. In our father, God Almighty, we have our being: in our merciful mother we are remade and restored. Our fragmented lives are knit together and made perfect man. And by giving and yielding ourselves, through grace, to the Holy Spirit, we are made whole.

It is I, the strength and goodness of fatherhood. It is I, the wisdom of motherhood.

It is I, the light and grace of holy love.

It is I, the Trinity; it is I, the unity.

I am the sovereign goodness in all things. It is I who teach you to love.

It is I who teach you to desire. It is I who am the reward of all true desiring.

- *Julian of Norwich*, *Divine Showings*

Daily Meditations

Monday, November 26

So Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water, and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. *Gen. 21:14*

With those who are becoming spiritual, good and truth are implanted by the Lord in the affection of memory-knowledges; and this so that they desire to know and to learn what is good and true for the purpose and use of becoming rational and of becoming spiritual; for the affection of memory-knowledges is the mother through whom is born the rational in which is the spiritual. *Arcana Coelestia n. 2675*

Tuesday, November 27

And Hagar departed, and wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-sheba. When the water in the skin was gone, she cast the child under one of the bushes. Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot; for she said, "Do not let me look on the death of the child."

Gen. 21:15-16a

Everyone's life is nothing but affection or love. Hence it is evident what is the state of those who are desolated as to the goods and truths with which they are affected, or which they love, namely, that their state of grief is more severe, because more internal; and in the deprivation of good and truth they do not regard the death of the body, for which they do not care, but eternal death. *Arcana Coelestia n. 2689.2*

Wednesday, November 28

And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept. *Gen. 21:16b*

The affection of evil and the thought of truth never conjoin themselves together. With those in whom there is an appearance of this conjunction, there is really no such conjunction, but only the thought of truth without the affection of it; and therefore with such persons truth is not truth, but only something of sound, or of the mouth, from which the heart is absent.

Arcana Coelestia n. 2689.4

Thursday, November 29

And God heard the voice of the boy; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, "What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him." *Gen. 21:17-18*

They who are being reformed are reduced into ignorance of truth, or desolation, even to grief and despair, and that they then for the first time have comfort and help from the Lord, is unknown at this day, for the reason that few are reformed.

Arcana Coelestia n. 2694.2

Friday, November 30

Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. She went, and filled the skin with water, and gave the boy a drink. *Gen. 21:19*

[God] opens the interior sight or understanding; which is effected by an influx into man's rational, or rather into the spiritual of his rational. This is done by the way of the soul, or the internal way, unknown to the man. *Arcana Coelestia n. 2701*

Saturday, December 1

God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow. He lived in the wilderness of Paran; and his mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt. *Gen. 21:20-21*

The Lord is indeed present with everyone; for life is from no other source, and He governs the most minute things of it, even with the worst of men, and in hell itself; but in various ways according to the reception of life. With those who receive the life of the love of His good and truth in a wrong manner, and pervert it into loves of evil and falsity, the Lord is present, and overrules their ends as far as possible for good; but His presence with them is called absence, and indeed in the same degree in which evil is distant from good, and falsity from truth. But with those who receive the life of the love of the Lord's good and truth, He is said to be present, and indeed according to the degree of reception. *Arcana Coelestia n. 2706*

HOME IS WHERE THE HEART IS

Rev. Sarah Buteux

2 DEC

Genesis 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67

So he said, "I am Abraham's servant. The Lord has greatly blessed my master, and he has become wealthy; he has given him flocks and herds, silver and gold, male and female slaves, camels and donkeys. And Sarah my master's wife bore a son to my master when she was old; and he has given him all that he has. My master made me swear, saying, 'You shall not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, in whose land I live; but you shall go to my father's house, to my kindred, and get a wife for my son.' "I came today to the spring, and said, 'O Lord, the God of my master Abraham, if now you will only make successful the way I am going! I am standing here by the spring of water; let the young woman who comes out to draw, to whom I shall say, "Please give me a little water from your jar to drink," and who will say to me, "Drink, and I will draw for your camels also" —let her be the woman whom the Lord has appointed for my master's son.' "Before I had finished speaking in my heart, there was Rebekah coming out with her water jar on her shoulder; and she went down to the spring, and drew. I said to her, 'Please let me drink.' She quickly let down her jar from her shoulder, and said, 'Drink, and I will also water your camels.' So I drank, and she also watered the camels. Then I asked her, 'Whose daughter are you?' She said, 'The daughter of Bethuel, Nahor's son, whom Milcah bore to him.' So I put the ring on her nose, and the bracelets on her arms. Then I bowed my head and worshiped the Lord, and blessed the Lord, the God of my master Abraham, who had led me by the right way to obtain the daughter of my master's kinsman for his son. Now then, if you will deal loyally and truly with my master, tell me; and if not, tell me, so that I may turn either to the right hand or to the left." And they called Rebekah, and said to her, "Will you go with this man?" She said, "I will." So they sent away their sister Rebekah and her nurse along with Abraham's servant and his men. And they blessed Rebekah and said to her, "May you, our sister, become thousands of myriads; may your offspring gain possession of the gates of their foes." Then Rebekah and her maids rose up, mounted the camels, and followed the man; thus the servant took Rebekah, and went his way.

Now Isaac had come from Beer-lahai-roi, and was settled in the Negeb. Isaac went out in the evening to walk in the field; and looking up, he saw camels coming. And Rebekah looked up, and when she saw

Isaac, she slipped quickly from the camel, and said to the servant, "Who is the man over there, walking in the field to meet us?" The servant said, "It is my master." So she took her veil and covered herself. And the servant told Isaac all the things that he had done. Then Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah's tent. He took Rebekah, and she became his wife; and he loved her. So Isaac was comforted after his mother's death.

Sermon

When you go to a conference or start a new job or go off on vacation—any place where you are meeting people for the first time—people ask you things like "What's your name?" "What do you do?" "Where are you from?" But what everybody really wants to know, and what they will actually most likely remember, is where you're from.

Maybe you've noticed this too. I think we have an easier time remembering where people come from than we do remembering what their names are. You know, you go out to lunch with your spouse later on and you say, "Remember that girl with the blond hair, the one from Texas?" Her name is long gone, but you remember where she's from because when you know where a person is from, you think (whether this is true or not) that you know something about that person.

"Oh, he's from Myrtle Beach; he must love to golf."

"They're from California; they must enjoy computer programming and surfing."

"They're from Colorado; I bet they're rock climbers or crunchy granola types."

"New York? Gosh, I hope they're not Yankees fans!"

"Where are you from?" is a pretty loaded question, and as the world grows smaller and smaller and our opportunities for mobility grow greater and greater, that question gets progressively harder to answer and understand. How many of you were born and raised here in the Pioneer Valley? Okay, so for you perhaps it's not so complicated. For others of you, though, the question could have multiple answers, depending on how many times you have moved.

And then there's the whole problem of trying to understand what it is that the person asking the question really wants to know. Is he or she asking you where you live now? Where you were born? Where you spent the bulk of your time growing up? About that place that, for you, was most formative? What do we even mean anymore when we ask this

very common, very loaded, and increasingly complex question?

“Where are you from?” Sometimes it’s hard to say.

Looking at our scripture reading for this morning, I began to wonder what Abraham would have said if you had asked him this question. Of course, I really don’t know how he would have responded, because he did move around a lot; but I think if you pressed him, he probably would have said, “Ur.”

The response “Ur” would not have been a grunt or a one-syllable plea for you to please speak up. “Ur” was a place, “Ur of the Chaldeans.” It was the land of Abraham’s father, which they all left at some point for a place called Haran.

But Abraham didn’t stay in Haran. At the age of seventy-five, in obedience to a call from God, Abraham picked up his belongings, his wife Sarah, and their nephew Lot, and they left Haran for Canaan. But as soon as they arrived in Canaan, the land God had promised Abraham, they had to leave and head down to Egypt because there was a famine. Over the next hundred years (and we know the number, because we know Abraham lived to be 175), he and his household wandered all over, in and out of Canaan, wherever the Lord led, and there was food and water available for their flocks and their household.

It was, of necessity, a nomadic existence. So you can see that the question of where he was from might have been difficult for Abraham to answer. But I still think he would have said, “Ur.” I think that Abraham, over that century of wandering, probably never lost the feeling that he was a stranger in a strange land, a man wandering far from home. Perhaps some of you can relate.

You see, in a spiritual sense all of Canaan was his. It was the land the Lord had promised to him and to his descendants. But in a practical sense, it was never his at all. In the chapter before this one, there is a very poignant scene where Abraham buries his wife Sarah—but in order to do so, he needs to purchase a cave from the locals. I think perhaps that tomb was the only piece of land that Abraham ever technically owned.

And so, with all this in mind, I am not at all surprised that when the time came to find a wife for Isaac, Abraham sent his servant, not to Haran or Egypt, not to Mt. Moriah, Beer-sheba, or Beer-lahai-roi, but back to Ur, Ur of the Chaldeans, back to his kin, to his brother’s household. I think when the time

came to find a wife for his son, Abraham sent his servant home.

There is something deeply precious about this part of the story. It tells us that where we are from may be as much a spiritual place as a physical one, a place defined as much by blood and bone and ancestry as it ever could be by geography.

Abraham sent his servant home, home to Ur, and you know the rest of the story. The servant meets Rebekah, and she is the answer to his prayers. Her family, of course, doesn’t want her to go right away, but the servant is eager to return. He feels that Yahweh has blessed this marriage, and he wants to complete his task.

Rebekah seems to understand this too. She may be from Ur, but she too seems to feel that her destiny lies with Isaac. She doesn’t waver but goes forward bravely and leaves her home, her family, her kin, to become part of the story of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. She leaves her home to create a new one, and in so doing she becomes, quite literally, the mother of Israel.

It’s a beautiful story—one in which we can see that the idea of home is not only primal but also fluid. Home is a concept everyone carries within, and therefore something different for everyone. Home is the place where you can say anything you want, because no one is listening to you anyway! Home is the place where you can be who you are, because everyone loves you anyway. Home is not just the place where you were born, or even the place where you now reside. Perhaps it is not even a physical place at all, but something else entirely—a state of being, or, if you will, a place of the heart.

In some sense, I think we are all from some place we are trying to get back to—a place of innocence we would return to if we could, only we can’t quite find our way, and we wouldn’t know what to do there with our older and wiser selves, even if we could get there.

That’s where grace comes in, those moments of grace when we catch a glimpse of what was and what will be, those mystical moments when we brush up against God almost in spite of ourselves and realize that the place we are searching for—our source, our origin, our true home—is not so much a place as it is a person.

A person who has been whispering from our very beginning, “Come...come unto me, all you who are weary... and I will give you rest.” “Come, take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle

and humble of heart." "Come, for he who cometh to me shall never hunger. Come, for she who believes in me will never thirst." Come. Just as you are. Back to me. Back to this table. Back home.

As I was meditating on these ideas of communion and homecoming, I was reminded of an interview I once read with a woman named Rosalyn Williams. For Rosalyn, the concepts of home and the beauty of the Lord's Supper are inextricably intertwined.

This has a lot to do with her experience growing up in the 1960s. As a young African American woman in that tumultuous decade, Rosalyn would often babysit for white families in her neighborhood. When she did and her time there would extend through a meal, she remembers that she always set a place for herself in the kitchen while the family ate in the dining room.

All this changed, however, when Rosalyn went to babysit at the home of Bob and Ellen Thayer, the new pastors of the First Congregational Church in her town. When they asked her to stay for dinner, Rosalyn automatically set her own place in the kitchen. But this time it was different.

"Ellen said, 'What is this?' I said, 'That's my place,' and Ellen picked up [my place setting] and moved it into the dining room, and I just was really stunned by that. Then she asked me how I liked my steak. I didn't have any idea how you'd answer, I was so shocked. So I said, you know, 'Cooked!'"

Shortly after that dinner, Martin Luther King came to speak at the Thayers' church. Rosalyn went home afterwards and read *Stride Toward Freedom*. For the first time, she realized that she mattered, and not only to herself and her people; she mattered to America. "King not only said that we count, but that we count most profoundly because we hold clues to the soul of America, to redeeming that soul."

These two events—taking her place at the Thayers' dining-room table and hearing MLK speak at their church—marked a turning point in Rosalyn's life. She came to see that not only did she matter, but she also had as much right and as much responsibility to take her place in society as any other person, regardless of gender, color, politics, or religion.

Rosalyn said, "From my various families (not just biological but through my experience with the Thayers), I have learned that home is where I'm invited to the table. Home is pretty critical for me because of my upbringing—it is the big myth I strive for."

She paused in the interview and then quoted Douglas Meeks: "Home is the place where there will

be a place for you at the table, what is on the table will be shared, and you will be placed under obligation.' Continuing, she added, "Communion has always been really important to me, because it's a leveler. There is nobody with any more sin or less sin than anybody else when you're around that table, and the whole world is invited there."

And then, remembering the Thayers, she said, "When people pour themselves out for you, that really is home and family; it teaches you the miracle of transformation and makes you really understand what could happen if you could pour yourself out for somebody else" (Daloz/Parks, *Common Fire*, pp. 125-126, 130).

For Rosalyn, Communion is a form of homecoming, a symbol of home, and perhaps it can be that for us as well.

I know we all sometimes come to the Communion table with very little awareness of what we are about to do. We come because it just happens to be the first Sunday of the month, and here we are in church.

But a gift awaits us here. The desire for home is a fundamental part of what it is to be human. It is the gift Abraham and Rebekah and Rosalyn were searching for, and a gift we long for too. If we can quiet our hearts this morning, perhaps this time we will taste and see that this gift is right before us in the Holy Supper we have come to celebrate together.

For when we come to this table with the right spirit, when we come and lay our burdens down—as He has said that we can—when we give over our worries and our concerns, confess our sins and lay them down as well, then we can come—if only for a moment—back into that place of innocence, that place of new beginnings, that place where we are who we are—nothing more, nothing less—imperfect children of a perfectly loving God, beloved children who have found a place we can all call home.

Prayer

Oh Lord, we come now and pray that you would receive us, that you would cover us in the shadow of your wings and hold us close. Help us to lay down those things that separate us from the fullest experience of your loving presence in our lives, that we might find our rest and our peace in you. Amen.

Daily Meditations

Monday, December 3

At that time Abimelech, with Phicol the commander of his army, said to Abraham, "God is with you in all that you do; now therefore swear to me here by God that you will not deal falsely with me or with my offspring or with my posterity, but as I have dealt loyally with you, you will deal with me and with the land where you have resided as an alien." *Gen. 21:22-23*

The things of the memory are like things dead unless the man is such that from conscience he lives according to them. When he does this, then at the same time as they are things of memory they are also things of life; and only then do they remain with him for his use and salvation after the life of the body. Knowledges [scientiae et cognitiones] are nothing to a man in the other life, even though he may have known all the arcana that have ever been revealed, unless they have affected his life. *Arcana Coelestia n. 1197*

Tuesday, December 4

And Abraham said, "I swear it." *Gen. 21:24*

Now as "to swear" is only an external corresponding to the confirmation that belongs to the mind of the internal man, and is therefore significative of that, so in the Word of the Old Testament it is said to be lawful to swear by God, yea, that God Himself is said to swear. *Apocalypse Explained n. 608.2*

Wednesday, December 5

When Abraham complained to Abimelech about a well of water that Abimelech's servants had seized, Abimelech said, "I do not know who has done this; you did not tell me, and I have not heard of it until today." So Abraham took sheep and oxen and gave them to Abimelech, and the two men made a covenant. *Gen. 21:25-27*

As in every church of the Lord there are those who are internal men and those who are external, and the internal are those who are in the affection of good, and the external those who are in the affection of truth.

Arcana Coelestia n. 3447.2

Thursday, December 6

Abraham set apart seven ewe lambs of the flock. And Abimelech said to Abraham, "What is the meaning of these seven ewe lambs that you have set apart?" He said, "These seven ewe lambs you shall accept from my hand, in order that you may be a witness for me that I dug this well." *Gen. 21:28-30*

As regards the state of union of the Lord's Divine spiritual in His Divine celestial, this is the very marriage itself of good and truth, from which comes the heavenly marriage; and this marriage is the Lord's kingdom in the heavens and on earth. For this reason the Lord's kingdom is so frequently in the Word called a "marriage," and is compared to a marriage.

Arcana Coelestia n. 2618

Friday, December 7

Therefore that place was called Beer-sheba; because there both of them swore an oath. When they had made a covenant at Beer-sheba, Abimelech, with Phicol the commander of his army, left and returned to the land of the Philistines. *Gen. 21:31-32*

The reason (a secret one) is that all conjugal love (and through this all celestial and spiritual love) comes from the marriage of Divine good and truth, and of Divine truth and good, in the Lord. What further arcana are enfolded in these words: that "Jehovah visited Sarah as He had said," and that "Jehovah did unto Sarah as He had spoken," cannot be declared, because they are inexpressible; for they comprise the very state itself of the union of the Lord's Divine with His Human. *Ibid.*

Saturday, December 8

Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beer-sheba, and called there on the name of the Lord, the Everlasting God. And Abraham resided as an alien many days in the land of the Philistines. *Gen. 21:33-34*

Appearances of this are presented by the Lord before the angels by means of heavenly lights, and are illustrated by means of ineffable representations; but they cannot be presented before men, because it would have to be done by means of such things as belong to the light of the world, into which such arcana do not fall; nay, by a description based on such things they become more obscure. *Ibid.*

COMING HOME

Ms. Chris Laitner

9 DEC

Isaiah 61:1-4; 8-11

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; to provide for those who mourn in Zion— to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, to display his glory.

They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations. For I the Lord love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing; I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them. Their descendants shall be known among the nations, and their offspring among the peoples; all who see them shall acknowledge that they are a people whom the Lord has blessed.

I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.

John 1:6-8; 19-28

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, "I am not the Messiah." And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" He answered, "No." Then they said to him, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,'" as the prophet Isaiah said. Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. They asked him, "Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor

the prophet?" John answered them, "I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal." This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

Sermon

Advent is a time of preparation, of planning and moving to "get there." In the Christian calendar, it is the period including the four Sundays before Christmas Eve or Christmas Day. More and more Christian churches are using the Advent wreath with its five candles to mark this period of preparing for and journeying toward Christ's birth.

The round evergreen wreath, an ancient symbol of everlasting life shaped to represent the absence of beginning or end, is often thought to symbolize God—everlasting and ongoing. The wreath surrounds four outer candles, which stand for hope, peace, love, and joy; these four candles form a ring around a taller center candle called the Christ Candle, which is lighted either on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day.

On the fourth Sunday prior to Christmas, the first candle, the one representing hope (in the sense of expectation), is lighted and remains burning during the service. Each subsequent week, a new candle is lighted, and those that were lighted on previous Sundays are relighted. On Christmas (or Christmas Eve), when the Christ candle is lighted, the other four candles are also lighted. All five are lighted for any worship service through Epiphany on January 6.

A lighted candle creates light and heat, so the progressive addition of candles increases the amount of light and heat brought on the Advent journey. From our teachings, we have learned that heat and light in the Word signify love and wisdom and that the light of the spiritual sun is divine truth, while heat is divine good. Natural heat and light (symbolized by the candles) serve as clothing and a support to spiritual heat and light, whereby they may be conveyed to man. Thus, while the Advent wreath in its entirety serves as a symbol of the waiting and preparation for Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, the candles in the Advent wreath particularly signify the people's preparation to receive the divine love and wisdom that comes to mankind through that birth.

Preparation is also a significant theme in our Bible lessons today. In Isaiah, we read about rebuilding and repair; we also find reference to the earth as a garden bringing forth its buds and flourishing. Emanuel Swedenborg reminds us that this rebuilding and

restoration indicates the continuance of the Church on earth and that likening the earth to a garden has connection to the presence of angelic wisdom in the process of preparation. The lesson from Isaiah ends with the promise that the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring forth before all the nations.

The reading from the Gospel of John contains the familiar introduction to John the Baptist, who explained that he was the forerunner of the One (capitalized) to come, and that John's own job was to prepare the way through announcement and cleansing baptism. The people that John baptized were those who were ready to be opened to the receipt of the Lord's advent. They, in their newly baptized freshness, are like the places ready for rebuilding, and also like the earth bringing forth new growth in the reading from Isaiah. The gospel lesson concludes with the promise of One to come who is far worthier than John and other mere humans. This is the promise of the Lord's birth.

Swedenborg tells us that John the Baptist was sent before to prepare the people for the reception of the Lord by baptism, because baptism represents purification from evils and falsities and signifies regeneration by the Lord through the Word. The gospel of John, rather than dealing with the external events of the Lord's advent, deals with the Lord's life in its divine, rather than its human, aspect. John touches on the reality of the reception of Jesus' birth as the coming of divine love and wisdom into the hearts of mankind.

In preparation for today's talk, I went to the Common Lectionary, a cyclical listing of Bible readings used by many Christian churches. The readings are set up in three-year cycles—A, B, and C—and the selections for each Sunday include readings from the Old and New Testaments, the Psalms, and the Epistles (the letters). Today's readings are the Old and New Testament readings for Year B of the Protestant Lectionary.

One of my favorite books, authored by Joyce Rupp, is called *May I Have This Dance?* It has twelve chapters, each of which represents a month of the calendar year. Each chapter contains a poem, some biblical references, some prayers, and some meditative or thoughtful activities, all loosely associated with that particular month's position in the year. I had just looked at the end of the section for December, which Rupp calls the month of "homecoming," when I found my inspiration for the title of this sermon. The idea of homecoming was still in my mind, and I had had a kind of instant flash of houses with warm golden

light streaming out of their windows and glistening on just the right amount of snow in the evening light. I had jotted down the words "Coming Home"—and they became my sermon title.

By the next morning, I had realized a couple of really important things. The first thing, which I arrived at after careful reading of the Bible lessons, was that it was going to be a pretty large stretch to connect them to the idea of "coming home." The second thing, after I had carefully reread the "December" chapter in the Joyce Rupp book, was that the author and I were in definite disagreement over the attitude of the season. Rupp's focus was on being lost, feeling hopeless, and longing for home, colored with a sense of exile. At that moment, I knew that I really had some work cut out for me if I wanted to connect preparation-based Bible readings to the announced title of "Coming Home."

So, I waited – and I tried to wait patiently – for a connecting idea.

The first inkling came with the memory of Tom Bodett's voice in the old Motel 6 ads where he says, "We'll leave the light on for you," depicting a sense of warm invitation. Then I spent a little mental time wandering around Currier and Ives-like pictures of wintry Christmas-decorated houses. Suddenly I thought of the opening words from the theme song from the first *Home Alone* movie: "Candles in the window, shadows painting the ceiling..." As a retired choral director, I have wonderful memories of junior-high-school choirs singing this song that speaks of precious moments, special people, happy faces—and everyone home together.

The final thought that sparked a connection between the readings and my given title was a memory of meeting the poet Edgar Guest (he died in 1959), who was a peripheral member of the Detroit Church of the Holy City where I grew up, and who was also an acquaintance of my grandfather's. From the time I was very young, the first line of Guest's poem, "Home," was part of our family slogan: "It takes a heap o' livin' in a house to make it home." As I grew up, I learned to understand the "livin' the dyin' the laughin' and the cryin'"—and even the leaving—that truly creates a home.

OK, so now I was on a roll. I found a line from the Wordsworth poem "To a Skylark," that established a kinship between heaven and home—and that helped me understand the connection between preparing to receive the divine and the idea of home.

We are all created for heaven, and it is through our choices in life that we grow spiritually toward that

promise. Our physical lives are our season of Advent, our time of preparation and of “getting there.” The light and warmth of the candles—the Lord’s love and wisdom—both sustain and lead us on our journeys. The end of the journey is home: a Bethlehem stable, a family home, heaven.

On this Sunday, two weeks prior to Christmas, I’d like to place before you the idea that Christmas, the goal of Advent’s preparation, can also be an active verb, an action word. The preparation and the journey are the large activities preceding the homecoming of Christmas, but the essence of Christmas, of Jesus’ advent into the life of humanity, is the basis of a whole new way of being—and being is more than simply existing; being is a way of living.

I’m old enough that Roy Rogers and Dale Evans are part of my history, and old enough that I can sing “Happy Trails to You” all the way through. Today, I close with something that Dale Evans Rogers said: “Christmas is love in action. Every time we love, every time we give, it’s Christmas.”

May the blessings of this holy season be with all of you. Amen.



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Daily Meditations

Monday, December 10

Sarah lived one hundred twenty-seven years; this was the length of Sarah's life. And Sarah died at Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan; and Abraham went in to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her. *Gen. 23:1-2*

All and each of the representatives and significatives in the Word, in the highest sense regard the Lord; hence is the very life of the Word; and as they regard the Lord, they regard His kingdom also, for the Lord is the all in His kingdom; the Divine things which are from the Lord in His kingdom make the kingdom.

Arcana Coelestia n. 2904.3

Tuesday, December 11

Abraham rose up from beside his dead, and said to the Hittites, "I am a stranger and an alien residing among you; give me property among you for a burying place, so that I may bury my dead out of my sight." The Hittites answered Abraham, "Hear us, my lord; you are a mighty prince among us. Bury your dead in the choicest of our burial places; none of us will withhold from you any burial ground for burying your dead."

Gen. 23:3-6

The Lord's presence is predicated according to the good, that is, according to the quality of the good; the quality of the good is according to the state of innocence, of love, and of charity, in which the truths of faith have been implanted or can be implanted.

Arcana Coelestia (Potts) n. 2915

Wednesday, December 12

Abraham rose and bowed to the Hittites, the people of the land. He said to them, "If you are willing that I should bury my dead out of my sight, hear me, and entreat for me Ephron son of Zohar, so that he may give me the cave of Machpelah, which he owns; it is at the end of his field. For the full price let him give it to me in your presence as a possession for a burying place."

Gen. 23:7-9

Those who are being regenerated and being made spiritual are in the greatest obscurity as to truth. Good indeed flows in with them from the Lord, but not so much truth; wherefore between the Lord and the good with man there exist parallelism and correspondence, but not with the truth. *Arcana Coelestia n. 2935.2*

Thursday, December 13

Now Ephron was sitting among the Hittites; and Ephron the Hittite answered Abraham in the hearing of the Hittites, of all who went in at the gate of his city, "No, my lord, hear me; I give you the field, and I give you the cave that is in it; in the presence of my people I give it to you; bury your dead." Abraham agreed with Ephron; and Abraham weighed out for Ephron the silver that he had named in the hearing of the Hittites, four hundred shekels of silver, according to the weights current among the merchants. *Gen. 23:10-11, 16*

[Those who are in the first state of reformation] do not believe that they are reformed by the Lord but by themselves. *Arcana Coelestia n. 2946*

Friday, December 14

So the field of Ephron in Machpelah, which was to the east of Mamre, the field with the cave that was in it and all the trees that were in the field, throughout its whole area, passed to Abraham as a possession in the presence of the Hittites, in the presence of all who went in at the gate of his city. After this, Abraham buried Sarah his wife in the cave of the field of Machpelah facing Mamre (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan. The field and the cave that is in it passed from the Hittites into Abraham's possession as a burying place.

Gen. 23:17-20

The celestial things of innocence and love, and the spiritual things of charity and faith, are in the like ratio as are the heat and light the angels have.

Arcana Coelestia n. 2973

Saturday, December 15

This is the length of Abraham's life, one hundred seventy-five years. Abraham breathed his last and died in a good old age, an old man and full of years, and was gathered to his people. His sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah, in the field of Ephron son of Zohar the Hittite, east of Mamre, the field that Abraham purchased from the Hittites. There Abraham was buried, with his wife Sarah. *Gen. 25:7-10*

In the spiritual, or in the spiritual church, one faculty has been separated from the other, that is, the understanding from the will; and the man is reformed by the Lord as to the intellectual part, and in this there is formed a new will and a new understanding

Arcana Coelestia n. 2930

THE LORD'S HOME

Rev. Kevin K. Baxter

2 Samuel 7:1-16

Now when the king was settled in his house, and the Lord had given him rest from all his enemies around him, the king said to the prophet Nathan, "See now, I am living in a house of cedar, but the ark of God stays in a tent." Nathan said to the king, "Go, do all that you have in mind; for the Lord is with you."

But that same night the word of the Lord came to Nathan: Go and tell my servant David: Thus says the Lord: Are you the one to build me a house to live in? I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle. Wherever I have moved about among all the people of Israel, did I ever speak a word with any of the tribal leaders of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, "Why have you not built me a house of cedar?" Now therefore thus you shall say to my servant David: Thus says the Lord of hosts: I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep to be prince over my people Israel; and I have been with you wherever you went, and have cut off all your enemies from before you; and I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may live in their own place, and be disturbed no more; and evildoers shall afflict them no more, as formerly, from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel; and I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover the Lord declares to you that the Lord will make you a house. When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me. When he commits iniquity, I will punish him with a rod such as mortals use, with blows inflicted by human beings. But I will not take my steadfast love from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever.

Luke 1:26-38

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is

with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

16 DEC

Sermon

Why have you not built me a house of cedar?

Our reading from 2 Samuel today depicts a God who is a bit annoyed: after generations and generations, the seat of God, the Ark of the Covenant, does not have a safe repository to call home.

My brother has a theory (I'm not sure where he picked it up) about human values and priorities. He stated at one point, "You can tell the God people worship by looking at the tallest building in a city." In the Middle Ages, that would have been the church. We certainly can see this phenomenon in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Italy—think of the Vatican. There are probably examples that argue against what he says, but there is something to it also. After all, the thing—or things—we value need people to manage and staff them, which in turn means offices and gathering spaces. In addition, certain places will become visible monuments of our care and love.

How striking Bill's comment was to me when the Twin Towers fell, and how even more poignant it was when I spied, on a drive down the eastern seaboard, the growing skeleton of One World Trade Center. The tallest buildings in the world are built by banks and oil giants, and these buildings' interiors reflect the values those institutions hold dear. Meanwhile, throughout our country, and especially in our cities, church building after church building is slowly crumbling.

But I digress. I do not want to talk, tempting though it is, about society's going awry by focusing on building banks and commercial structures while churches fail. After all, we read in the book of Revelation that there is no temple in the New Jerusalem, for the Lord is the temple.

In our tradition, we understand the story of the tabernacle to be a narrative that describes our relationship to God. Our reading from 2 Samuel focuses on a time when the first command to shift the Lord's home from a tent to a structure occurs, though it takes some time to accomplish this transition. And you might have noticed a parallel between the two readings, but our second reading is also about a home for the Lord: Mary's womb and the physical world. In some ways, these readings are bookends. The command to build the temple and the birth of the Lord are the two ends on the timeline of the temple's life.

The laws and regulations of the Levitical code generally focused on purity, and the center of purity was the temple that David was instructed to build (though the fulfillment of that task is ultimately reserved for Solomon). This is a shift to a more permanent external structure, a structure that cannot be picked up and moved around.

We might think about building the temple spiritually, as a shift to codified rules, rather than as being only about the structures. The building of the temple is the rise of a glorious, solid statement of the Lord's truth. Before this time, even though God had given the Ten Commandments, the people had not necessarily understood them deeply. The priestly caste was a relatively young institution. It was much like the early days of the United States, when we had declared independence but had not yet developed the Constitution or the federal government.

The birth of the Lord is the beginning of a ministry that, while it does not deny temple worship, moves the center of faith to the individual's judgment and life actions. The meaning of this is clear when the Lord refers to himself as the temple that will be destroyed and raised up in three days.

These two steps are part of the journey of the temple. The temple begins as an object without physical presence and ends the same way—but at the end, at the point we read about in the book of Revelation, we have gone through tents, two massive construction projects, and the Life of Christ. The absence of a temple at the story's end is far different from the absence of a temple at the story's beginning.

Jesus' comment about raising a fallen building serves as an external reminder that we should examine our lives. What are our priorities and values?

I have recently been reading about the need to keep the Lord at the center of our lives and our being. Now, when I say "center," I mean our ultimate focus and goal. This tradition teaches that a life in which the Lord is not the final goal leads a person toward damnation. That statement is probably shocking, as I do not often use such strong language about hell. So let me unpack that a bit. First off, I do not mean damnation in the sense of punishment, but rather in the sense of a person removing him- or herself from the Lord's presence—which means removing oneself from the very essence of life.

How does this happen? The logic behind it is quite clear. Without a belief in something larger than ourselves, all we can understand is self. If we do not believe in the Lord or a greater power, how can we rise beyond our own selfishness? The reason for being good is, from this perspective, not tapping into a greater sense of relatedness to the Lord's kingdom but boosting my own happiness. What is the fundamental basis for happiness, outside of sensory experience?

For a person who seeks the Lord, happiness is about more than sensory pleasure. It is about finding your purpose, seeking to utilize to the utmost the gift of life you have been given. The person who looks to the Lord desires relationships defined by a connection to both a higher power and the neighbor. The mind rises above the sensory world, which opens up the possibility that we can grow beyond ourselves. David was king because of his lineage—he was told that his descendents would rule Israel. On the text's literary level, the pre-gospel texts express a strong belief that the Lord will express his favor or displeasure regarding a good or evil life in this world: to the person or the person's children. This materialistic understanding of faith is not absent in the gospels, but it is less prominent. But the divide here is emphatically not between Judaism and Christianity. Just as some groups of Christians embrace what is known as the "prosperity gospel," many Jewish traditions and individuals understand the messages of their scriptures to run deeper than that sort of materialism. I want also to be clear: I do not point this out to talk about other people and their faiths, but rather to educate you, my congregation, on your own lives. The scriptures are ultimately not about other people and their qualities. They are about us.

In our temple journeys, we move from a place of external worship to a place of intentional worship, and finally to a place of unconscious, involuntary inner worship. We build buildings and temples in our hearts and lives. We must ask ourselves, "In my life, what am I focusing on building?" Are we, spiritually speaking, building tall bank buildings or temples, or are we creating a unified community in

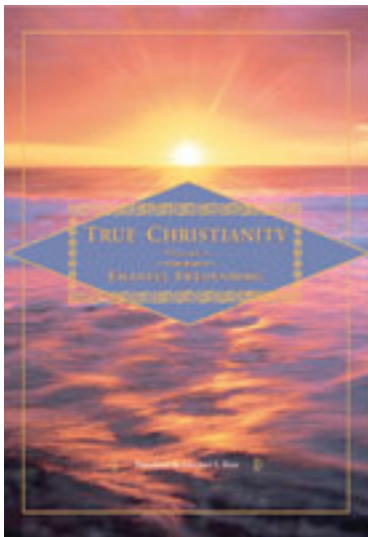
service of the Lord? Our spiritual temples and our banks cannot be separated, because they are all part of one interdependent whole serving the Lord.

We might say that we are simply invested in exploring and learning, that we are shifting tabernacles. Or, if we were to invest a great deal of energy in our tradition's doctrine, because doctrine is truth, we might see ourselves as the temple. It is even possible that you are struggling with finding ways to see charity and use in doctrine, in which case you might feel more closely linked to Jesus in the gospels. But who knows? There may even be a person who has transcended any such thoughts and so has perfectly integrated faith and life that every action they perform represents their love of the Lord. I doubt, however, that many of us will reach this state in this world.

We often prioritize one stage of spiritual temple building over another and then judge people—or ourselves—for the stage they're at, but I want to make it clear that such thinking comes from a dark place. At every stage, people find God in our lives in the way they understand him. No one category is better than another in the eyes of the Lord. Our faith elevates us beyond this earthly existence. Each person of faith has made and is making a home for God.

What is your home for the Lord? Simply a place you think about on Sundays? Or is it something that impacts your life more fully? Is it time for you to build the Lord a new home?

Book Corner: *True Christianity 2*



The New Century Edition of the Works of Emanuel Swedenborg

ISBN: 978-0-87785-502-6

Author: Emanuel Swedenborg

Translator: Jonathan S. Rose

Length: 704 pages

Description: In the final years of his life, Emanuel Swedenborg wrote *True Christianity*, an opus that served both to contextualize his theology within contemporary Christianity and to serve as a road map for the new spiritual age that would follow. This second volume covers topics such as freedom of choice, repentance, the transformation of a person's inner being during spiritual awakening, the rites of baptism and the Holy Supper (Communion), and the second coming of the Lord.

This new translation is part of the New Century Edition of the Works of Emanuel Swedenborg, an ongoing project to render Swedenborg's theological works in clear, contemporary language that reflects the simple and engaging style of the original Latin. The deluxe hardcover and paperback editions include extensive notes on historical aspects of the text and reference tables; they also have an index to both volumes.

This work is also available in hardcover.

Daily Meditations

Monday, December 17

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.

Isaiah 11:1-2

The Holy Spirit is the Divine Truth and also the Divine Energy and Operation proceeding from the one God in whom is the Divine Trinity, that is, from the Lord God the Savior. The Holy Spirit signifies strictly the Divine truth, thus also the Word; and in this sense the Lord Himself is the Holy Spirit.

True Christian Religion n. 139

Tuesday, December 18

His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins. *Isaiah 11:3-5*

A person can have a conscience of good and a conscience of justice. A conscience of good is that of the internal man, that of justice is that of the external man. A conscience of good is acting according to the commands of faith out of internal affection, but a conscience of justice is acting according to civil and moral laws out of external affection.

New Jerusalem and Heavenly Doctrine n. 134

Wednesday, December 19

The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. *Isaiah 11:6-9*

However numerous the truths of faith are, and however diverse they appear, they make one from the Lord, who is the Word, the God of heaven and earth, the God of all flesh, the God of the vineyard or church, the God of faith, light itself, the truth, and life eternal.

True Christian Religion n. 354

Thursday, December 20

On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious. On that day the Lord will extend his hand yet a second time to recover the remnant that is left of his people, from Assyria, from Egypt, from Pathros, from Ethiopia, from Elam, from Shinar, from Hamath, and from the coastlands of the sea. *Isaiah 11:10-11*

The truths of the natural man are true knowledges, which are under the intuition of the rational man, and the cognitions of truth which are under the intuition of the spiritual man; the cognitions of truth are such as the natural man knows from the Word, while true knowledges are such as the natural man sees from the rational, and by which he is accustomed to confirm the truths of the church. *Apocalypse Explained n. 406*

Friday, December 21

He will raise a signal for the nations, and will assemble the outcasts of Israel, and gather the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth. The jealousy of Ephraim shall depart, the hostility of Judah shall be cut off; Ephraim shall not be jealous of Judah, and Judah shall not be hostile towards Ephraim.

Isaiah 11:12-13

All those who had lived in the good of charity and had worshiped God under a human form were brought into heaven; these had been preserved under heaven until the Lord came, and when He had glorified His Human they were brought in.

Apocalypse Explained n. 433

Saturday, December 22

And the Lord will utterly destroy the tongue of the sea of Egypt; and will wave his hand over the river with his scorching wind; and will split it into seven channels, and make a way to cross on foot; so there shall be a highway from Assyria for the remnant that is left of his people, as there was for Israel when they came up from the land of Egypt. *Isaiah 11:15-16*

Not a single word, nor even a single iota can be omitted in the sense of the letter of the Word, without an interruption in the internal sense, and therefore, by the Divine Providence of the Lord, the Word has been preserved so entire as to every word and every point.

New Jerusalem and Heavenly Doctrine n. 260

PEACE AMID CHAOS

Rev. Dr. David J. Fekete

Luke 2:1-20

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

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

Sermon

The Christmas story is one of peace amid chaos. But sometimes we are caught up in the frenzy of buying and shopping. We fight our way through crowds, traffic, and parking lots. In all the hubbub, we can lose sight of why we are doing all this. We can lose touch with the peace at the heart of the Christmas message.

Not too long ago, I was driving on 97th Street. I had two malls to get to in just one hour. So there I was, panicking, wanting traffic to move faster, hoping that I could find what I was looking for before the malls closed. As I was driving, I was listening to Earl Klugh, a great jazz guitar player. A beautiful, serene song came on. It was such a peaceful, pretty song that I wondered about Mr. Klugh himself. I wondered what kind of spirituality he was in touch with that such a blessed piece of music could flow through his soul into his practiced fingers. As I listened, my tension dissipated. For a few minutes, amid my frantic shopping spree, I found peace as I listened to that serene song, driving down 97th Street on my mission to get to two malls in an hour.

This experience led me to ponder further the Christmas story. I thought about how the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem was a moment of peace amid utter chaos. I imagine that the pushing and shoving of Christmas shopping is nothing compared to what was happening in Palestine back in the time of Jesus' birth. The Bible offers some interesting historical details about that time. Luke tells us that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus for the whole known world to be enrolled—what we would call a census. (Our history books tell us that Augustus was the first emperor of Rome.) And Luke provides another historical fact: he adds that this was when Quirinius was governor over Syria. Caesar took this census for one reason: he wanted a roll of all his subjects so that he could tax them.

Everyone had to go to the city of his family's origins. Joseph went to Bethlehem because he was a descendant of King David, and David had been born in Bethlehem. Imagine the mob scene that must have occurred in Bethlehem at this time. We are told that the Holy Family had to sleep in a barn because all the inns were occupied. Can you imagine what was going on in the hotels in Bethlehem? Can you imagine the pushing and shoving that must have gone on as people crowded the hotels in search of the last rooms to be had for the night? How many hotels did Mary and Joseph go to before they resigned themselves to the fact that all the inns were full? Perhaps they counted themselves lucky that they found that barn to sleep in. And they did all this while Mary was heavily pregnant and ready to deliver.

In the midst of this mob scene, Jesus was born. The Prince of Peace entered the world amid all of this chaos! I can imagine that the presence of that little baby brought calm and serenity to the Holy Family

as they gazed upon His tender, tiny features. I can imagine the holy awe that God's infant form evoked, and the sphere of innocence and love radiating from this one sacred baby.

With the birth of Jesus, Luke's narrative immediately takes us to the quiet of the Judean night, where shepherds are watching their flocks under a starlit sky. An angel appears to them, announcing the joyful news of the birth of the Savior, Jesus Christ. A choir of angels praises God and sings about peace and goodwill among humanity. In all the crowding and worldly interest concerning taxes and the census, a sacred moment transpired, in which peace and goodwill among humans broke forth from heaven.

This same story plays out in our lives today. We can become overwhelmed with life in this material world. We can become overcome with despondency over the bills we have to pay, with an income that barely stretches from paycheck to paycheck. We can become fixated on the material toys we want to acquire: nice cars, a big-screen TV, designer clothes, computers with massive memories and lightning speed, and other goods. We can become lost in the things of this world, which is only a temporary home for us. We can lose sight of what is truly lasting. We can lose sight of the eternal blessings that are always available to us when we turn to them.

The Christmas season reminds us of some of those eternal blessings. We gather around those we love and celebrate the joy of family and friends. We are filled with the spirit of giving. The interchange of receiving and giving gifts is a symbol of the way love works—the way love flows out from us to others and back to us to complete the circle. These are some of the eternal blessings that make life really matter. These are the blessings we should pause to remember, however we find ourselves materially.

The Christmas story also plays out in our lives in a still more profound way. At times, sorrow and turmoil dominate our lives. We may lose a job. We may experience the heartbreak of the loss of a loved one. Sometimes the life we have constructed for ourselves and settled into becomes disrupted, and everything we thought we could depend on comes crashing down all around us. In a single sentence, the poet Robert Frost captures how vulnerable we are to the forces of chaos. In the poem called "Home Burial," Frost writes, "Three foggy mornings and one rainy day/ Will rot the best birch fence a man can build." The life we build for ourselves is subject to many, many forces beyond our control; it is as a fence that can be rotted by three foggy mornings and one rainy

day. The good things in our lives are so tenuous that Martha Nussbaum wrote a book about the subject titled *The Fragility of Goodness*.

But one source of stability will hold us up in the midst of any chaos the world can threaten us with. That one source of peace and comfort is the baby born in the midst of the Judean crowds. No matter what we experience in life, Jesus is with us. When we celebrate joy, Jesus redoubles our joy. When we are troubled, Jesus comforts us. When we feel abandoned, Jesus is our friend. Having come into this world, Jesus walks with us in this world. In whatever way we are walking, we never walk alone. In whatever we face, we face Jesus. Jesus tells us that life in this material world may not be quiet and comfortable all the time. In John 16:33, He says, "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."

In Jesus, we have peace. In Jesus, we have love. In Jesus, we have life. In all the rushing around of the season, let us be mindful of why we celebrate. As we sit down for Christmas dinner, let us be mindful of the love of our families and friends who gather together for the season. As we exchange gifts, let us remember the circle of love that surrounds us even after Christmas—the giving and the receiving. In our celebrating and in our trials, let us remember that one night in the Judean countryside when peace came to this troubled world. And let us ask that peace into our lives—tonight, throughout the season, and in our lives forever.

Prayers

We bless you, Lord, that we were made to love, as the stars were made to shine. Grant that such love may never die within us, but being daily rekindled in our soul, may burn in our hearts and forever renew our whole being. This we ask through Christ our Lord.

- Florence Allshorne (1887-1950)

Today a Virgin gives birth to Him who is above all being,

And the earth offers a cave to him whom no one can approach.

Angels with shepherds give glory, and Magi journey with a star,

For to us there has been born a little Child,
God before the ages.

- Romanus the Singer (mid-sixth century)

Monday, December 24

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage."

Matthew 2:1-2

All good that is good in the natural man flows in from the spiritual man, that is, through the spiritual man from the Lord. Without such influx there is no good in the natural man. *Apocalypse Explained n. 449*

Tuesday, December 25

When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. *Matthew 2:3-4*

These three degrees of life in man are opened successively; the first degree by a life in accordance with what is equitable and just; the second degree by a life in accordance with the truths of faith from the Word, and in accordance with the consequent goods of charity toward the neighbor; and the third degree by a life in accordance with the good of mutual love and the good of love to the Lord. *Arcana Coelestia n. 9594*

Wednesday, December 26

They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'"

Matthew 2:5-6

The reason why the Lord was born there and not elsewhere, is that He alone was born a spiritual celestial man, but all others natural, with the capacity or ability to become either celestial or spiritual by regeneration from the Lord. The reason why the Lord was born a spiritual celestial man was that He might make His Human Divine, and this according to order from the lowest degree to the highest, and might thus dispose into order all things in the heavens and in the hells.

Arcana Coelestia n. 4594

Thursday, December 27

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." *Matthew 2:7-8*

When a person has an affection for truth out of concern for doctrine because he is intent on becoming intelligent, he is also moved at the same time by a desire for reputation and glory. This desire is inevitably present in that former state, and its presence is allowed so that it may lead on into the next, because that is what people are like. But when he has an affection for truth out of concern for life, he casts aside glory and reputation as his ends in view and instead embraces the good of life, that is, charity towards the neighbour.

Arcana Coelestia n. 6247

Friday, December 28

When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. *Matthew 2:9-10*

"Stars" signify the knowledges of good and truth, thus goods and truths, is from the appearance in the spiritual world; for there the Lord appears as a sun, and angels from afar off as stars. Angels appear thus from their reception of light from the Lord as a sun, thus from their reception of Divine truth, which is from the Lord, for this is the light of heaven.

Apocalypse Explained n. 72

Saturday, December 29

On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Matthew 2:11-12

The truths of faith which have been inscribed on the life are in the will, and those things which are in the will are in the internal man, for by means of the truths of faith the internal man is opened, and communication is effected with the heavens. *Arcana Coelestia n. 10199*

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken." A voice says, "Cry out!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever.

Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!" See, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep. Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.

Arcana Coelestia 2535

Seen by itself, prayer is talking with God and at the same time some inner view of whatever is being prayed about. What happens is that something like a flow of ideas comes into the person's mind or thought that opens his state towards God. It always varies according to each person's state and what is being prayed about. If the prayer comes from faith and love and is about spiritual things, then there's something like a revelation, which shows itself as feelings of hope, comfort, and some inner joy.

Comfort, yes, comfort my people! says your God. Speak comfort to Jerusalem, and cry out to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned.

I sometimes think that the most important thing a sermon does (and perhaps also a worship service) is bring some comfort to those who are there. I was once told that directly, and it's my experience that dealing with the Lord's love and providence or talking about things like hope and forgiveness and trust, or why we don't need to succumb to worries or how to deal with anxiety—these are the things that seem to help the most. To put that another way, these are the things that people generally come to church for: to be comforted, reassured, and encouraged. One of our ministers said that sermons are really longer ways of saying, "Be good, be good. Amen." But perhaps it's even truer to say they are variations on the theme of "It's OK, it's OK. Amen."

And yet it's really not enough just to comfort people and leave it at that. There's the other part of life or human nature which also needs attending to, like being too self-centered or being stuck in certain attitudes or habits which don't help and which we'd be better off without, for our sakes and for other peoples' sakes. All that side needs dealing with, whether you get it through something like a sermon or—even better—if you yourself start doing a bit of spiritual work on yourself. That's the more uncomfortable side of things—being challenged or stirred up—but even that side needs a bit of comfort injected into it to help us know that we can alter certain things about ourselves, that it is worth keeping going with once you start, and perhaps most of all that God is there helping us in this—let's call it "new"—way of living.

New things, whether it's a new job or a new house, are always a bit unsettling, so if you really do set out to be something of a new kind of person with new attitudes and new outlooks, you are just as likely to find it unsettling and to wonder what's coming, and so this comfort again becomes very important. It's OK, it's OK, Amen.

There does seem to be quite a bit of disquiet around at the moment generally, which also increases the need for comfort and reassurance. I'll reel off a few unsettling things as examples, but of course you know them already, and maybe they have been very much on your mind and making you uncomfortable.

Over and above whatever is going on in your own personal life, there are things like climate change, water management, terrorism, the huge changes in technology, and a generally much more rapid way of life.

Not much comfort there. It looks rather scary, in fact, like a planet running out of control. I am fairly convinced that some of it is media bombardment, because we live in a time when the media hits us full on. But I'm also fairly convinced that all those issues I reeled off are pretty serious ones which we need to realize are there. And yes, I am also fairly convinced, pragmatically speaking (but also spiritually speaking!), that we are able to keep pace with these big issues and find ways, or be given ways, to handle them. We are very much aware of these issues now—nobody can claim we don't know—and when it is like that, when it's really up front, we find ways of coping. Some really creative, ingenious, brilliant people are out there, and they might not be praying about the state of the world, but they are staring at it very hard and looking for ways of dealing with its problems. I find that very comforting—not cozily so, because someone's taking care of it all, but because human minds—God-given human minds, don't forget—are capable of creating solutions.

I link that with the idea that prayer, which is “talking with God,” doesn't just mean you let off steam as you talk your anxieties out with God: it also generates a flow that comes in *from* God, so that you start to see things you didn't see before. Perhaps that is what prayer really is! We tend to limit it to the idea that we are addressing God in some way, when in fact prayer generates a powerful creative flow into us from God. So when we talk about human ingenuity in dealing with big issues, we shouldn't leave God out of it at all. The world's rocket scientists and experts may or may not be praying as we define it, but they are certainly turning their minds to the issues and beginning to get solutions...from God!

I also find comfort in another, parallel, area. I keep hearing about people who take part in a meditation or retreat of some kind—silence in the Blue Mountains (I could be silent in the Blue Mountains!), fasting in the Southern Highlands, chakra cleansing, and so on. We could say they are just taking a personal break or opting out of normal life, but that's rather cynical. I find the idea that people are taking such retreats comforting. We're talking about thousands of people, big numbers. I see it as a collective reclaiming of spiritual life by people who are caught up in the fast lane but know there's another level to life. The faster

life gets, the more they know this level is necessary. It becomes manifest—very black and white—when life is at fever pitch.

But it is the *collective* sense of this movement toward retreat-taking that I find most comforting. It's like a groundswell, a huge upsurge among people to reclaim human life. You see it politically in places like the Ukraine and Estonia; you see it environmentally everywhere, and you see it personally as people make time to do it. And people say things like, “If everyone in the world prayed at exactly the same moment, everything would change.” I don't think it would work mechanically like that. But when everyone in the world is praying in the new way our teachings describe, in the way I mentioned earlier—not us to God, but God to us—then yes, everything will change. And I find that very comforting.

If this new-prayer principle is right, then the current global level of things is very positive. On one level, it is critical and alarming; on another level, it is going to unify us. A thousand years ago, people lived in villages from which they rarely, if ever, strayed; nobody knew what was over the hill, never mind on the other side of the world. Then people began forming clusters. A hundred years ago, nations were set against nations and big institutions and power blocks against each other. A war here didn't much impinge on people over there. And a lot of the blocks are breaking down or have gone. But today it's gone global, which basically means that we are all in it together, individually affecting the whole and being affected by it. And if you follow me and can accept it, it's the best possible situation for God to do things as God wants them to happen, but also and necessarily, through us all. If you go into any school playground at 9 a.m., the kids are milling around in groups until the whistle goes, and then they come together so that the teacher can speak to them all. Imagine a teacher trying to pass a message to the whole school, milling group by milling group!

In the New Church, we have a word for this overall kind of development. It's actually a really bad word, because nobody but us ever uses it, and we shouldn't use that sort of jargon. Anyway, the word is “vastation.” I guess it comes from the longer word “devastation,” which we all know. But vastation doesn't mean collapse or disintegration in the Armageddon sense of devastation. It means something breaking down, weakening, losing its grip or power, so that from that situation something new and better can come about. And it can be personal to you, or it can be worldwide. So vastation is purposeful and positive—and if you

understand it, yes, it can even be comforting. People talk about a “paradigm shift” or a “new emergence” or the “age of Aquarius,” but what they mean is what we call vastation, a clearing away and new things coming about. Jeremiah talks about things breaking down so that they can be rebuilt. That’s vastation. But the thing about vastation is that it usually hurts; it can feel frightening and bewildering. And right now we are right in a period of vastation, with a lot of our historical presumptions stripped away. That’s *not* very comforting, if by comfort you mean a safe haven and a shelter from the storm. The only comfort I can offer you on that score is to remind you about eternity. You and I are going to live forever. But right now, we are right here.

So, while I really do think that people need comfort and reassurance and that an activity such as church, with its awareness of the Lord, should be nurturing and protective, don’t let it be like a lollipop and sugary sweetener. If we really do trust God, we don’t run to Him and hide; we turn to Him and pray in that newer sense, so that God has one more operator here who joins in the groundswell of human life. And if I tell you that the word “comfort” from our Bible passage today doesn’t mean comfort in the sense of “refuge” but “give strength,” then you are armed to take the world further—and that comforts us all. Amen.

Daily Meditations

Tuesday, January 1

Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, “Out of Egypt I have called my son.” *Matthew 2:14-15*

Monday, December 31

Now after the wise men had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.” *Matthew 2:13*

The truths and falsities of the natural man are called cognitions and knowledges; but when the truths themselves have acquired life, which is effected by a life of faith, which is charity, they belong to his spiritual man. These with their affections and pleasantnesses do not appear to man’s manifest sense and sight, as the cognitions and knowledges of the natural man do, for the reason that so long as a man lives in the world he thinks naturally and speaks naturally, and this a man sensibly feels and perceives by a kind of sight that belongs to his understanding.

Apocalypse Explained n. 654

When the Lord glorified His internal man, that is made it Divine, He was first imbued with the memory-knowledges of the church, and from and by them advanced to things more and more interior, and at last even to those which are Divine. *Arcana Coelestia n. 4964*

Wednesday, January 2

When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: “A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.” *Matthew 2:16-18*

Affection is of the love, and love is the life of man, therefore the life of everyone after death is such as his ruling love had been in the world; and the ruling love of truth and good is with those who have loved the truths of the Word, and have lived according to them.

Apocalypse Revealed n. 526

Thursday, January 3

When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead." *Matthew 2:19-20*

The Lord had the power of learning above every other man; but because, unlike other men, He was to be instructed in celestial things before He was instructed in spiritual things, this is here declared; and also for the further reason that there was hereditary evil from the mother in His external man, against which He was to fight, and which He was to overcome; and also for other reasons innumerable. *Arcana Coelestia n. 1464*

Friday, January 4

Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. *Matthew 2:21-22*

There are some who suppose that innocence is the same as infancy, for the reason that the Lord said of little children that of such is heaven; and that they who do not become as little children cannot enter into the kingdom of the heavens. But they who so imagine do not know the internal sense of the Word, nor therefore what is meant by "infancy." By "infancy" is meant the innocence of intelligence and wisdom, which is such that they acknowledge that they have life from the Lord alone, and that the Lord is their only Father; for that man is man is from the intelligence of truth and the wisdom of good, which he has solely from the Lord. *Arcana Coelestia n. 2305*

Saturday, January 5

There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, "He will be called a Nazorean."

Matthew 2:23

The Lord's life was love toward the whole human race, and was indeed so great, and of such a quality, as to be nothing but pure love. Against this His life, continual temptations were admitted, as before said, from His earliest childhood to His last hour in the world. *Arcana Coelestia n. 1690*

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SERMONS AND MEDITATIONS OF THE SWEDENBORGIAN CHURCH

OUR DAILY BREAD

