



OUR DAILY BREAD

NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2013



Dayspring



SERMONS AND MEDITATIONS OF THE SWEDENBORGIAN CHURCH

Prayer

O come, O come, Emmanuel,
And ransom captive Israel,
That mourns in lonely exile here
Until the Son of God appear.

O come, Thou Wisdom from on high,
Who orderest all things mightily;
To us the path of knowledge show,
And teach us in her ways to go.

O come, Thou Rod of Jesse, free
Thine own from Satan's tyranny;
From depths of hell Thy people save,
And give them victory over the grave.

O come, Thou Dayspring, come and cheer
Our spirits by Thine advent here;
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night,
And death's dark shadows put to flight.

O come, Thou Key of David, come,
And open wide our heavenly home;
Make safe the way that leads on high,
And close the path to misery.

O come, Desire of nations, bind
In one the hearts of all mankind;
Bid Thou our sad divisions cease,
And be Thyself our King of Peace.

- "O Come, O Come Emmanuel,"
tr. John Mason Neale and Henry Sloane Coffin, c. 1850

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Dear Reader,

In the Northern Hemisphere, the days are shortening; we draw ever closer to the longest night of the year, which is quite near the day on which we celebrate our Lord's birth. This is no coincidence.

"The light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not," says the King James translation of John 1:5. Evil, sin, and fear can neither understand nor overcome the brilliance of the Lord's light, a light that lays bare the stark facts of this world's grief at the same time that it bathes them (somehow, beyond the reach of our own understanding) in the healing warmth of God's love.

The Lord Jesus Christ, our Dayspring, comes to kindle our souls with his light. By that lantern, we understand new ideas, just as the dawn lights the morning sky. We also, painfully but crucially, see into our dark corners; then we can rid them of the creepy-crawlies currently in residence. And they are there: our world is broken in innumerable ways and places and needs desperately to be remade, re-formed. That is God's will, but he needs our hands, feet, voices, and souls to do it.

Dawn. New light. Illumination. Understanding. Call it what you will: the Lord's presence with us, within history and within the heavens, draws us closer to God, our neighbor, and our created purpose. We sing "O come, O come, Emmanuel," but thanks be to God, he is already here, waiting for us to receive him.

Many blessings, Leah Goodwin & Kevin Baxter

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NOV **3** AS MANY DESCENDANTS
AS THE STARS
Rev. Kevin Baxter

Arcana Coelestia (Potts) n. 1843

Genesis 15:1-21

After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, "Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great."

But Abram said, "O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" And Abram said, "You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir." But the word of the Lord came to him, "This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir." He brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your descendants be." And he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.

Then he said to him, "I am the Lord who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess." But he said, "O Lord God, how am I to know that I shall possess it?" He said to him, "Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon." He brought him all these and cut them in two, laying each half over against the other; but he did not cut the birds in two. And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.

As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him. Then the Lord said to Abram, "Know this for certain, that your offspring shall be aliens in a land that is not theirs, and shall be slaves there, and they shall be oppressed for four hundred years; but I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions. As for yourself, you shall go to your ancestors in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age. And they shall come back here in the fourth generation; for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete."

When the sun had gone down and it was dark, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates, the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites."

1843. *Thy seed shall be a stranger.* That this signifies that charity and faith shall be rare, is evident from the signification of "a stranger," and of "seed." A "stranger" or "sojourner" signifies one that is not born in the land, so that he is not acknowledged as a native, and thus is looked upon as an alien. But "seed" signifies charity and its faith (as before shown, n. 255, 1025; and just above at verse 3). Because that is called "strange" which is looked upon as alien, and alien is that which is not in the land or of the land, it follows that it is that which is rare; and consequently it here means that charity and the faith of charity, which are the "seed," will be rare. It is the time before the consummation that is here treated of, when there shall be "great darkness," that is, falsities; the seed shall then be a stranger, that is, charity and faith will then be rare. [2] That faith would be rare in the last times was foretold by the Lord when He spoke of the consummation of the age (Matt. 24:4-51; Mark 13:3-37; Luke 21:7-38), where everything that is said implies that charity and faith will be rare at those times, and that at last there will be none. The like is said by John in Revelation, and also in many passages of the Prophets, besides what is said in the historical parts of the Word. [3] But by the faith that will perish in the last times there is meant nothing but charity, for there cannot possibly be any faith but the faith of charity. He who has not charity cannot have any faith at all, for charity is the very soil in which faith is implanted; it is its heart, from which it exists and lives. The ancients therefore compared love and charity to the heart, and faith to the lungs, both of which are in the breast. This comparison involves a real likeness, seeing that if a man should pretend to a life of faith without charity, it would be like having life from the lungs alone without the heart, which is manifestly impossible; and therefore the ancients called all things that pertain to charity things of the heart, and all things that pertain to faith without charity they said were of the mouth only, or of the lungs by the influx of the breathing into the speech. Thence came the ancient forms of speech concerning good and truth; that they must go forth from the heart.

Sermon

As often happens to me, while I was reading our Bible story in preparation for this week, a certain sentence popped out at me. "[God brought Abram] outside and said, 'Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.' Then he said to him, 'So shall your descendants be.'" I started to read and research the passage and came across some incredible statements from our tradition about stars: they represent goods and truths in the eyes of

spiritual people, and those same people look at the dawn and do not see the start of a new day but the rising of the Lord in the world and in our lives. I sat there for a moment, awestruck at the profundity of seeing all creation as one giant chorus looking to God.

Truth be told, this passage caught my eye because I had recently been watching an episode of the PBS animated show *Curious George*, “Curious George and the Stars” (I have two kids, so I watch George a lot!). Because darkness comes earlier these winter days, my son Ephraim sees the evening sky a bit more and frequently references that episode. In this particular episode, the (apparently independently wealthy) Man with the Yellow Hat leaves their posh apartment in the city and travels with George the monkey to their country cottage. George discovers the stars and decides he is going to stay up and count them. His stamina failing, he falls asleep.

The two return to the city a couple of days later. The first night back, George takes his pencil and paper out onto the balcony to count the stars—except that there are no stars. George mopes inside, and, because it is a stifling hot summer night, tries to turn on the window-unit air conditioner, but the Man with the Yellow Hat informs him that they are not allowed to use the air conditioner because it will cause a blackout.

Well, as monkeys will do, George awakes and sees neighboring apartment dwellers using their air conditioners, so he turns his on—and the power goes out. George returns to the balcony, horrified to see the devastation he has apparently caused with his action: a darkened city, as far as the eye can see. But then he notices that the stars have suddenly returned. He smiles, sits down, and starts to count them—and once again falls asleep before he can finish.

I have left our urban church at night and, walking to the car or train, noticed the absence of stars in the sky. By the time I arrive home (we live in a place that is significantly more rural than Cambridge), I enjoy a sparkling sky (though not as sparkling as a farm-field sky). I remember when I learned about light pollution, and how all the lights on the ground hide the lights in the sky.

In our scripture reading today, Abram must go outside and count the stars, for he is to have that many descendants, and the fourth generation will enter the

land that the Lord gave to him, Canaan. Abram, like Curious George and those whose spiritual eyes are turned to the heavens, needs to find a place where he can count those stars. And, like George, Abram never truly finishes counting them: “counting the stars,” in this case, is a metaphor—it refers to the multiplication or continuation of something until the end of creation—eternity.

What is going on in this story? There are five principal elements at play here: God, Abram, sky, land, and descendants.

In scripture, when God is talking, we are never to think that the character we should identify with is God. In this case, we are intended to identify with Abram, who has not yet been given a child. The land we are to receive is a life of heaven—a life of peace, truth, and goodness—which is represented by the Holy Land. (Spoiler alert: even the fourth generation of Abram’s descendants has trouble grasping this concept, but it is part of the promise!)

The land we are to receive is a life of heaven—a life of peace, truth, and goodness—which is represented by the Holy Land.

So the stars are points of truths about goodness, and Abram is supposed to count them; he will receive as many descendants as he is able to count. These descendants we can symbolically understand to be uses, or spiritual gifts. We will receive as many of these stars as we can number. In other words, the more we are willing to seek out truth and goodness in our lives, the more our hearts will be filled with goodness and truth when we enter

into a heavenly state.

Abram liked this prospect so much that he sacrificed as God had directed:

“Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon.” He brought him all these and cut them in two, laying each half over against the other; but he did not cut the birds in two. And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.”

There is more material in this brief passage than we have time to explore in this sermon, but in brief, I will say that this action indicated Abram’s perception of the fullness of divine things (both internal and external) of God and the Church, as well as of things that are spiritual. But the darkness and mystery of this passage also indicates that Abram, for all he sensed a numinous power, did not have a perception

Daily Meditations

of completeness in what he did—it was more like an awareness of the immensity and beauty of God’s being and action. His sacrifice was akin to what we would call a “mystical experience,” if you want to think of it that way—a sense that you are connected to something far more vast than yourself, and that God is responsible for it all.

This is a key moment, because as we see from our Swedenborg reading today, charity is the fertile ground of faith, and the interplay between faith and charity is the spiritual analog of the interplay between the heart and the lungs. By charity, we must always remember, we do not mean actions that garner IRS deductions, but a love for the Lord and the Church.

From time to time, I struggle about the question of why all people don’t go to heaven. The earthly-judgment part of me wants to see retribution, but the side of me that really looks to the Lord’s love and mercy questions the notion that not all people are saved. And yet, at times like this, our church’s view really makes sense to me. We are given the freedom to love, and so we will only bring into our hearts what we love.

This is what it means for us to go out and count the stars. It means to take in the goodness and truths of God; in turn, our love for goodness and truth gives us an affection for God and the Church on all its levels. We see the need for the imperfect organization that we incorporate—the spiritual church that unites people and inspires us to love the goodness in our neighbors—and ultimately we are inspired to love the Lord.

I cannot help but return to Curious George’s disappointment when he rushed out to his balcony and discovered no stars. What do you think the correspondence of light pollution might be? What happens when we lose sight of the truth and good that the Lord gives us? Our task, the task of the faithful, is always to ask what might obscure our eyes from the stars, that we clear our sight, count them, and inherit the life the Lord has given to us. Amen.

Prayer

Grant us, O Lord, not to mind earthly things, but to love things heavenly; and even now, while we are placed among things that are passing away, to cleave to those that shall abide; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

- Leonine Sacramentary, c. 7th century,
tr. William Bright (1824-1901)

Monday, November 4

Bless the Lord, O my soul.

O Lord my God, you are very great.
You are clothed with honour and majesty,
wrapped in light as with a garment.
You stretch out the heavens like a tent,
you set the beams of your chambers on the waters,
you make the clouds your chariot,
you ride on the wings of the wind,
you make the winds your messengers,
fire and flame your ministers.
You set the earth on its foundations,
so that it shall never be shaken. *Psalm 104:1-5*

No one is reformed in a state of intellectual blindness, either. These individuals, too, are not aware of truths and do not know about life, because it is our discernment that must instruct us in these matters and our volition that must act them out. When our volition is doing what our discernment tells it to, then we have a life in accord with truths; but when our discernment is blind, our volition is blocked as well. All it can do freely in accord with its own reasoning is the evil that it has justified in its discernment, which is false.

Divine Providence #144

Tuesday, November 5

You cover it with the deep as with a garment;
the waters stood above the mountains.
At your rebuke they flee;
at the sound of your thunder they take to flight.
They rose up to the mountains, ran down to the
valleys
to the place that you appointed for them.
You set a boundary that they may not pass,
so that they might not again cover the earth.

Psalm 104:6-9

If religion teaches a blind faith, it blinds our discernment just the way ignorance does. It is then teaching a false theology; for just as truths open our discernment, falsities close it. They close it from above but open it downward; and discernment that is open only downward cannot see truths. All it can do is justify whatever it wants to, especially anything false.

Ibid.

Wednesday, November 6

You make springs gush forth in the valleys;
they flow between the hills,
giving drink to every wild animal;
the wild asses quench their thirst.
By the streams the birds of the air have their
habitation;
they sing among the branches.
From your lofty abode you water the mountains;
the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work.
You cause the grass to grow for the cattle,
and plants for people to use,
to bring forth food from the earth,
and wine to gladden the human heart,
oil to make the face shine,
and bread to strengthen the human heart.

Psalm 104:10-15 ble

Our discernment is also blinded by compulsions to evil. As long as our intentions are caught up in these compulsions, they prompt our discernment to justify them; and to the extent that we justify our compulsions to evil, our volition cannot enjoy good desires, see truths on that basis, and so be reformed. *Ibid.*

Thursday, November 7

You have made the moon to mark the seasons;
the sun knows its time for setting.
You make darkness, and it is night,
when all the animals of the forest come creeping
out.
The young lions roar for their prey,
seeking their food from God.
When the sun rises, they withdraw
and lie down in their dens.
People go out to their work
and to their labour until the evening.

Psalm 104:19-23

For example, if people are compulsive adulterers, their intentions, being caught up in the pleasures of that love, prompt their discernment to justify it. It becomes so stupid because of its debauchery with volition that it cannot see that marriage love is the essence of spiritual heavenly love, the image of the love between the Lord and the church from which it flows; that it is inherently holy, the essence of chastity and purity and innocence; that it makes us forms expressive of love itself, because married partners can love each other from the center of their being and so make themselves loves; that adultery destroys this form together with the image of the Lord;

and that it is horrendous for an adulterer to mingle his life with the life of the husband in his wife, since there is human life in semen. *Ibid.*

Friday, November 8

O Lord, how manifold are your works!
In wisdom you have made them all;
the earth is full of your creatures . . .
These all look to you
to give them their food in due season;
when you give to them, they gather it up;
when you open your hand, they are filled with
good things.
When you hide your face, they are dismayed;
when you take away their breath, they die
and return to their dust.
When you send forth your spirit, they are created;
and you renew the face of the ground.

Psalm 104:24-30

Because this is a profanation, hell is called “adultery” and heaven is called “marriage.” A love for adultery is in direct touch with the deepest hell, and a true love for marriage with the highest heaven. The reproductive organs of both sexes correspond to communities of the highest heaven. *Ibid.*

Saturday, November 9

May the glory of the Lord endure for ever;
may the Lord rejoice in his works—
who looks on the earth and it trembles,
who touches the mountains and they smoke.
I will sing to the Lord as long as I live;
I will sing praise to my God while I have being.
May my meditation be pleasing to him,
for I rejoice in the Lord.
Let sinners be consumed from the earth,
and let the wicked be no more.
Bless the Lord, O my soul.
Praise the Lord! *Psalm 104:31-35*

I mention all this to show how blind our discernment is when our volition is caught up in compulsions to evil, and to show that no one can be reformed in this state of intellectual blindness. *Ibid.*

NOV 10 HOW THE LIGHT GETS IN

Rev. Emily Jane A. Lemole

Psalm 51:7-10

Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.

Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities.

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.

John 3:1-8

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

Divine Love and Wisdom 354

Anyone who looks at larvae can decide in favor of Divinity on the basis of observation of nature. Larvae are moved by the pleasure of some impulse to exchange their earthly state for one that is a parable of heaven. So they crawl off to particular places where they put themselves into a kind of womb in order to be reborn. There they become chrysalises, mature pupas, caterpillars, nymphs, and eventually butterflies. At the close of this transformation they are equipped with beautiful wings according to their species, fly in the air as though it were their heaven, play in it cheerfully, form marriages, lay eggs, and provide themselves with descendants. All the while they are nourishing themselves on sweet, soft food from flowers.

Sermon

I'd like to share an old Chinese tale about a woman who had two large pots. Each hung on the ends of a pole, which she carried across her neck. One of the pots had a crack in it, while the other pot was perfect and always delivered a full portion of water.

At the end of the long walks from the stream to the house, the cracked pot arrived only half full. For two years this went on daily, with the woman bringing home only one and a half pots of water.

Of course, the perfect pot was proud of its accomplishments. But the poor cracked pot was ashamed of its own imperfection, and miserable that it could only do half of what it had been made to do.

After two years of what it perceived to be bitter failure, it spoke to the woman one day by the stream. "I am ashamed of myself because this crack in my side causes water to leak out all the way back to your house."

The woman smiled. "Did you notice that there are flowers on your side of the path, but not on the other pot's side? That's because I have always known about your crack, so I planted flower seeds on your side of the path, and every day while we walk back, you water them. For two years I have been able to pick these beautiful flowers to decorate the table. Without you being the way you are, there would not be this beauty to grace the house."

We are like the cracked pot. Usually something must crack our surface for us to wake up to the deeper spiritual dimensions of our life, to be useful and create beauty.

We are much like eggs, too. We need to be cracked open to be used for a purpose—be it scrambling or bearing a chick. The crack in the shell of a "perfect life" lets the light in—"Godlight," C. S. Lewis called it.

Our journey of life on this beautiful planet is an adventure in change. As we grow and mature, it becomes a very specific journey—actually, a pilgrimage. We are all pilgrims, for we all have a purposeful, sacred destination, and everything that happens to us happens under the watchful eye and loving hand of God. He guides us along our pathways, and he provides for us the opportunities that enable us to change—if we choose to change.

"Spiritual formation," wrote Henri Nouwen, "is not about steps or stages on the way to perfection. It's about the movements from the mind to the heart

through prayer in its many forms, that reunites us with God, each other, and our truest selves."

Change? Why change?

W. Edwards Deming said, "It is not necessary to change. Survival is not mandatory." In other words, we must change to survive physically. To survive spiritually, we must change, as well. The writings of Swedenborg teach us how the Lord regenerates us and gives us the second spiritual birth that Jesus describes in our New Testament reading.

"Everybody changes," taught the Buddha.

Growth is about change.

Maturing is about change.

Reformation is about change.

Regeneration is about change.

And change can be so hard! Good changes also can be challenging, even as they bring new possibilities.

"The only person who looks forward to change," said Mark Twain, "is a baby with a wet diaper."

The first half of our life is for learning, for acquiring foundations of knowledge about life, about love, about what is right, wrong, good, bad, acceptable, or unacceptable. Though this developmental framework is not life's great purpose, it creates the container for later spiritual content. It is a means toward a purpose that is spiritual and eternal.

Psychologist Carl Jung wrote a great deal about the process of maturing. He said, "The first half of life is devoted to forming a healthy ego, the second half is going inward and letting go of it."

Eventually (it may be when we are thirty, or it may be when we are seventy-five, but sometime during our adult years), we will perhaps move or be moved from the security and safety of that first-half-of-life-foundation into new ground. We will be nudged or called or inspired to begin a new journey, one that we will not even realize we've begun at first. One day it occurs to us that there's been a shift. This is the awakening that all the great spiritual teachers speak of. After all, what does "Buddha" mean? It means "the awakened one." "There comes a time when the risk to remain tight in the bud is more painful than the risk it takes to blossom," said Anais Nin.

We do not like change. We resist changing. Who wouldn't? It is the unknown, it is scary. And yet we cannot advance on our spiritual journey unless we do change.

And so, lovingly, the Lord allows events to cross our path—events that will help us to change. Events that will allow some Godlight to shine, if we let it, into the darkness of our hereditary selves.

How we react to what happens to us on this pilgrimage is of course our responsibility, and in that lies our freedom of choice—freedom to choose our attitude, if nothing else. Carl Jung said,

"Wholly unprepared, we embark upon the second half of life . . . we take the step into the afternoon of life; worse still, we take this step with the false assumption that our truths and ideals will serve as before. But we cannot live the afternoon of life according to the program of life's morning—for what was great in the morning will be little at evening, and what in the morning was true will at evening have become a lie."

The question is, how do we deal with all of this? It's one thing to have some understanding of the spiritual

How we react to what happens to us on this pilgrimage is of course our responsibility, and in that lies our freedom of choice—freedom to choose our attitude, if nothing else.

processes involved. It's another thing to get through the day, care for your family, your spouse, your job, your profession, your own health and worldly concerns. The second half of life is rich and full and alive with wonderful potential and possibilities, but it is also a time of tremendous challenge. It is good to know life's journey has purpose and a Divine plan. Hope is essential—the kind of hope Vaclav Havel describes: "Hope is not the conviction that something will turn

out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out." This making sense often *doesn't*, when seen from the outside or "at the time," but the deep, abiding faith that God's plan makes sense *does*, even if we don't understand it.

There is a rightness in the wrongness of it all. When Saint Julian of Norwich says, "All is well," she is not saying life will be comfortable, perfect, and safe. She is describing the deep-down design, a rightness in the wrongness, like the still floor of the ocean while a storm rages on the surface.

Can we see the rightness in the wrongness of it all—an underlying meaning, a plan—at least an allowing it to happen for our highest good, our spiritual

future? Because in order for God's kingdom to come, our kingdom must go!

Martha Washington said this: "I am still determined to be cheerful and happy in whatever situation I may be, for I have also learned from experience that the greater part of our happiness or misery depends on our dispositions and not on our circumstances."

Father Richard Rohr, a Franciscan priest, wrote, "Your religion is as good as it helps you with your pain." Do we find that to be true? Or we could say our pain is named, understood, and transformed by religion lived? Religion can give meaning as well as purpose, conviction, conversion, boundaries, comfort, community, and support.

When we speak of pain and suffering, we need to understand that some people have a much harder time than we do. Yet no one escapes aging or loss or death. These common experiences run throughout all of our lives, and they should give us pause to reflect on the shortness of this life, our common lot, and the little time we have to love one another.

Spiritual teacher Paula D'arcy wrote, "God comes to us disguised as our life." If we see each event as a stepping stone, we can use it to deepen, to grow—as long as we can accept (at least part of the time) the wisdom behind it.

Misfortunes or trials can be perceived as stumbling blocks, or as stepping stones. We naturally avoid and usually resent anything that disturbs or disrupts our life, situations that make us unsettled or uncomfortable. They appear as stumbling blocks. We tend to perceive these unwanted events as random happenings, even as a Divine lapse or neglect in caring for us. Haven't we all said, "I don't need this!" We don't see God in it, but as Jung said, "Bidden or not bidden, God is present." There is a Divine design.

It is often said that when hard things happen to us we ask, "Why me?" And the universe answers, "Why not you?" I'd like to replace that response. Instead, we might ask, "Why me?" And God responds, "Because I love you and this is the way home to me. Trust me."

Our theology teaches that God has designed a plan for our transformation from natural into spiritual beings. That plan involves struggle and loss.

With loss comes an off-balancing of life that can feel like an earthquake's violent turbulence or a slight

tremor, depending on how strongly it registers on our personal Richter scale. It comes to us in different ways. Simply the process of aging "plunders" our life—as do accidents, disease, disasters, collapsed relationships, and their accompanying loss of meaning, loss of purpose, loss of trust, faith, and confidence. Especially after someone we love dies, there is a hole in our life and heart, mind and soul. Does the grief get better? Maybe with time. But it does come back in flashes that almost knock us down. We get through, not over, our deepest losses. In the case of serious disease, fear stalks us night and day, between scans and blood tests. There is no making light of loss!

And after the darkness, the Lord and our friends can bring light, but it doesn't seem so at the time. Actually, Swedenborg teaches that the Lord is never closer to us than when we are in pain, suffering, sadness, or temptation. Our theology explains that Divine providence or God's plan for us provides for our every spiritual need, in the smallest detail of our lives as well as the greatest.

There are steps or stages in our spiritual development. Swedenborg describes the second stage:

"At present the second stage rarely comes into play without trouble, misfortune, and grief, which enable bodily and worldly concerns—things that are our own—to fade away and in effect die out. The things that belong to the

outer self, then, are separated from those that belong to the inner self, the inner self containing the remains that the Lord has put aside to await this time and this purpose." (*Secrets of Heaven* 8)

Trials are wakeup calls to look at who we are and where we are headed on our spiritual journey. The Bible says we are to repent. Repentance is the third stage of spiritual growth. The Greek word for repent is *metanoia*, "to turn around," "to change one's mind." It sounds pretty easy to think about, and to write about. But oh, it is so hard to live it! We must catch onto the positive thread—the thread of what is good and what is true in our souls and in our life.

There is a connection from one spiritual state to another, and the thread of Divine providence runs throughout our life. The thread is the meaning—the purpose of our life.

*When hard things
happen to us, we might
ask, "Why me?" so
that God can respond,
"Because I love you and
this is the way home to
me. Trust me."*

William Stafford describes it beautifully in his poem:

The Way It Is

There's a thread you follow. It goes among things that change. But it doesn't change.
People wonder about what you are pursuing.
You have to explain about the thread.
But it is hard for others to see.
While you hold it you can't get lost.
Tragedies happen; people get hurt
Or die; and you suffer and get old.
Nothing you do can stop time's unfolding.
You don't ever let go of the thread.

So let us hold on to that thread. We know we will go through changes and challenges, but the thread is guiding us: "While you hold it you can't get lost."

This is not a tidy world. It is a messy one—one in which we are all becoming (or supposed to be becoming) spiritual humans. And it seems that this takes wakeup calls in the form of troubles.

I believe we are creatures made by a loving God for a journey in this beautiful world, and endowed with a return ticket home to God. Although we did not come with instructions, we are given them, as best we can receive them.

What are those instructions? First, to "love God by whatever name we have for God." Our theology teaches that God is the Lord Jesus Christ. Others have a different concepts and names for God, and that is fine, as planned. Second, we are to "love each other." All faiths teach this, although many religions have badly distorted what it really means. It means to wish one another well, to want the best for one another, to bless one another.

Our pilgrimage is not a solitary journey. We have fellow travelers on this adventure. It is a journey with others to God. And the way to get there is to learn to really love each other—and not because someone looks like us, holds our opinions, or has the same religious beliefs.

How are we to love them? By following the New Commandment: "Love one another as I have loved you," Jesus said. We need to spend time in the New Testament, and to understand the real importance of being kind, generous, forgiving and inclusive—just for starters!

There is a deeper level and meaning to all that happens to us. Maybe we can't make sense of it at

first—some things maybe never—but wonderfully enough, in hindsight, we may glimpse the thread.

Here we all are, in a life that by design will have losses, challenges, setbacks, and suffering—and at some point will be over, at least here. All this occurs, I believe, so we can wake up and experience happiness, joy, and heaven both now and later. Then we can say, instead of "I don't need this!" "I guess I *do* need this! I just can't figure out why yet!" These difficulties are allowed from God with love, even though it doesn't feel like that. Let us use what happens in our lives for the good that can be born from it, to wake up and see life differently through a spiritual lens—one that gives meaning and purpose, so that we can catch that thread which leads us to God, and see everything as a blessing.

Leonard Cohen wrote in "Anthem":

Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering,
There is a crack in everything.
That's how the light gets in.

Amen.

Prayer

O how shall I receive Thee, How greet Thee, Lord, aright? All nations long to see Thee, my hope, my heart's delight! O kindle, Lord most holy, Thy lamp within my breast, to do in spirit lowly all that may please Thee best.

Thy Zion palms is strewing, and branches fresh and fair; my heart, its powers renewing, an anthem shall prepare. My soul puts off her sadness, Thy glories to proclaim; with all her strength and gladness, she fain would serve Thy Name.

Love caused Thy incarnation, love brought Thee down to me; Thy thirst for my salvation procured my liberty. O love beyond all telling, that led Thee to embrace, in love all love excelling, our lost and fallen race!

O this blest truth remember, all ye who sit in gloom: Within your heart's best chamber for this dear guest make room; He who alone can cheer you is standing at the door; He brings His pity near you, and bids you weep no more.

- P. Gerhardt, tr. A. T. Russell
(Book of Worship Hymn #83 (1950))

Daily Meditations

Monday, November 11

I love you, O Lord, my strength.
The Lord is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer,
my God, my rock in whom I take refuge, my shield,
and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.
I call upon the Lord, who is worthy to be praised, so I
shall be saved from my enemies. *Psalm 18:1-3*

Our outer self has to be reformed by means of our inner self, and not the reverse. "The inner and outer self" means the same thing as "our inner and outer thought processes." *Divine Providence #150*

Tuesday, November 12

The cords of death encompassed me; the torrents of
perdition assailed me;
the cords of Sheol entangled me; the snares of death
confronted me.
In my distress I called upon the Lord; to my God I
cried for help. From his temple he heard my voice,
and my cry to him reached his ears. *Psalm 18:4-6*

The reason the outer has to be reformed by means of the inner is that the inner flows into the outer, and not the reverse. The scholarly world recognizes that there is a flow of spirit into matter, and not the reverse; and the church recognizes that the inner self needs to be cleansed and renewed first, and then the outer. *Ibid.*

Wednesday, November 13

Then the earth reeled and rocked; the foundations
also of the mountains trembled and quaked,
because he was angry.
Smoke went up from his nostrils, and devouring fire
from his mouth; glowing coals flamed forth from
him. *Psalm 18:7-8*

Whatever the Lord teaches, he enables us to perceive rationally. This happens in two ways. One is by our seeing its truth within ourselves as soon as we hear it; the second is understanding it through rational analysis. *Ibid.*

Thursday, November 14

He bowed the heavens, and came down; thick
darkness was under his feet.
He rode on a cherub, and flew; he came swiftly upon
the wings of the wind.
He made darkness his covering around him, his
canopy thick clouds dark with water.
Out of the brightness before him there broke through
his clouds hailstones and coals of fire. *Psalm 18:9-11*

Seeing it in ourselves happens in our inner self, and seeing it rationally happens in our outer self. Can anyone fail to see within, on first hearing, that the inner self needs to be cleansed first and the outer self cleansed by means of it? *Ibid.*

Friday, November 15

The Lord also thundered in the heavens, and the Most
High uttered his voice.
And he sent out his arrows, and scattered them; he
flashed forth lightnings, and routed them.
Then the channels of the sea were seen, and the
foundations of the world were laid bare at your
rebuke, O Lord, at the blast of the breath of your
nostrils. *Psalm 18:13-15*

However, if we have not accepted some general image of this from the inflow from heaven, we can go wildly astray when we rely on our outer thought processes. They show us simply that outward actions, deeds of charity and piety, bring us salvation apart from deeper values. *Ibid.*

Saturday, November 16

He reached down from on high, he took me; he drew
me out of mighty waters.
He delivered me from my strong enemy, and from
those who hated me; for they were too mighty for
me.
They confronted me in the day of my calamity; but
the Lord was my support.
He brought me out into a broad place; he delivered
me, because he delighted in me. *Psalm 18:16-19*

In the same vein, they tell us that sight and hearing flow into our thought, that smell and taste flow into our perception--that is, that the outside flows into the inside--when the opposite is true. *Ibid.*

WINDOW CLEANING

Rev. Julian Duckworth

same sparkle in his bright eyes from all that window cleaning.

17

 NOV

Genesis 9:18-23

The sons of Noah who went out of the ark were Shem, Ham, and Japheth. Ham was the father of Canaan. These three were the sons of Noah; and from these the whole earth was peopled. Noah, a man of the soil, was the first to plant a vineyard. He drank some of the wine and became drunk, and he lay uncovered in his tent. And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father, and told his two brothers outside. Then Shem and Japheth took a garment, laid it on both their shoulders, and walked backward and covered the nakedness of their father; their faces were turned away, and they did not see their father's nakedness.

Mark 8:22-26

They came to Bethsaida. Some people brought a blind man to him and begged him to touch him. He took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village; and when he had put saliva on his eyes and laid his hands on him, he asked him, "Can you see anything?" And the man looked up and said, "I can see people, but they look like trees, walking." Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again; and he looked intently and his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly. Then he sent him away to his home, saying, "Do not even go into the village."

Arcana Coelestia 1079

Where there isn't kindness and charity, then prejudice exists instead. Prejudiced people see evil and wrong in others, and if they see any good in them they tend to put some bad interpretation on it. People who are in charity are not like this at all, and in fact, the presence or the absence of kindness or charity distinguishes everyone, especially in the next life. Those who are in charity hardly notice the evil in someone else; instead, they notice the good and true things that are in them, and if they see something wrong, then they try to put a good interpretation on it.

Sermon

Window cleaning must rank as one of the most worthwhile tasks we do! You can really see the difference: the sparkle, the shine, the brilliance, and of course the satisfaction. We knew a window cleaner once who used to do a set of high-street shop windows inside and outside, and when he'd finished at the far end, back he went and started all over again—and when you looked at him you could actually see the

We sometimes say that "the eye is the window of the soul." This means that our eyes sometimes show the inside part of us fairly well—eyes are open, expressive, bright; they can show a lot of love. They can also show someone's pain and suffering and yet still be beautiful, and eyes can show fear, anger, hatred and envy.

The concept of the eye as the window of the soul isn't from the Bible—I think it's an Arabic proverb—but the idea of it is very biblical. Jesus used eyes and looking to get across to us the way in which we look out at people and situations. The eye is the lamp of the body, so if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light, but if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness.

Of course, this statement doesn't have much to do with our physical eyes—it's a metaphor, a correspondence, in the same way as we say "I see what you mean"—but it brings home to us the way we judge, interpret, and view who and what we're involved with.

And then the question arises: Do we tend to look for and see the good that people try to do and be, or are we more likely to see their faults and their not-so-good side? If we're honest, we'd probably say it's a bit of both, but then there's another question: Do we try and get over seeing their faults and noticing their bad side, or do we generally just keep it there? That's when the way we see others can become dangerous. Of course we shouldn't gloss over wrong or make out that everything is "just fine," but we should try and move on from assessing others' ragged spots. Jesus went on to say, "If the light in you is darkness, then how great that darkness is!" You see, if we hang on to the negative things we see (or think we see) in others, and if we keep reminding ourselves about peoples' possible faults, we become the losers—it's affecting *us*. It's important to take good care of your own spiritual state.

I came across a new word yesterday when I was reading the newspaper. The article was about two MPs who lost their seats in the recent election—one Labour and one Liberal—and how each of them might be very glad the other isn't around in Parliament any more. And then it said, "This is real *schadenfreude*," and I thought, "What's that?" so I looked it up.

"Schadenfreude" is German, and it means feeling glad that someone else is being knocked down or is failing. (In English, the rough equivalent is called

“gloating.”) The writer noted that some people turn *schadenfreude* around to be “*freudenschade*”: sorrow at someone else’s success. That’s just as bad. That’s jealousy!

The article also described the Buddhist concept of *mudita*, which is “feeling happiness in someone else’s good fortune and success.” It completed this quartet of relationship terms with the idea of feeling unhappiness at someone else’s misfortune—which we could describe as “sympathy,” “pity,” or “compassion.” Both of these last two terms are virtuous and good responses, but *schadenfreude* (gloating) and *freudenschade* (jealousy) are corrupted views; in Jesus’ imagery, they’re eye-darkness, not eye-light.

Let’s come back to windows for a moment. Windows look their best, of course, when they are completely clean, clear of any dirt or smear. Linking this idea with our own views of people and situations leads me to think that the word “clean” is the key word—not what we’d call squeaky-clean (for who can claim that?), but just clean and clear of something. That idea’s very much like the true idea of innocence, which literally means being free of any wish to cause harm to someone else. To be free of the desire for harm is to have innocence.

In our scripture reading and in a few things I’ve been saying, the word “interpretation” has come up a lot, in reference to putting a bad interpretation on someone’s actions or words, or putting a good interpretation on them. That’s what this eye business is all about. We shouldn’t start interpreting when it comes to others—we really, really shouldn’t. Who are we to do that? The eyes may truly be the window of the soul, and we may see peace or pain in them, but we cannot look into someone else’s being and make accurate judgments and assessments about their reasons and motives. That is ultimately between them and God. I must leave it there, leave well alone between them and God, and concentrate instead on putting my own house in better order.

I want to highlight one of our church’s key teachings: that the Lord alone knows our state. The Lord alone knows what causes us to be the way we are, understands our intentions and motives and what our overall state is. Even we ourselves don’t know our own spiritual state—only God knows it.

I find that idea incredibly reassuring. We don’t need to go all psychological with ourselves and dig deeper and deeper. We leave it alone, and hand it over. In life, we will almost certainly come up with things about ourselves that we like or that seem right, and

others that we don’t like or that seem wrong. Then we wonder, “What am I really like, really?” That’s not good—that’s an awful lot of self-preoccupation! Show me the person who isn’t a mixture of good and bad!

So understanding that the Lord alone knows our state becomes a deterrent for us, keeping us from heading into a dangerous game. Of course, that teaching doesn’t mean that we shouldn’t try to change things about ourselves. I think it’s pointing out that a clear line exists between what we can know about ourselves and what we just can’t, and we are to concentrate on things like being useful, showing respect, watching our comments, and so on, and leave what we cannot know for sure with the Lord, who alone knows such things.

Early on in my ministry, I had a talk with a visitor to our church, a woman who was the mother of an exceptionally good-looking family. She looked like a model, she worked for Fabergé, she appeared to have it all. During this talk, she said at one point that she was unsure whether her husband was her real soulmate. I stopped her right there and said, “Only God knows that. But if you decide to believe that the two of you are intended soulmates, you are doing what you need to do, and you can then get on with that confidently.”

Let’s stay a bit more with the idea that God alone knows. That does not mean that while you think you’d prefer to be in heaven, God’s going to put you in hell! No! It doesn’t mean, either, that while you are married to someone, God is going to prise the two of you apart with a crowbar and say, “You, go over there with him, and you, over there with her.” No! What is God after? He’s after genuineness, genuine love and sincerity and personal commitment. If we give God that, he can work with it infinitely well, with infinite full knowledge, and set it in place.

So, you see, all this and so much more happens when we take great care about our viewpoints, our labels, our “interpretations,” and the eye through which we look out at the world. Our eyes are amazing things—it seems that they’re like torches as we look at far-off mountains or at the litter someone just dropped. That’s how they seem, but it’s incorrect. Everything, sightwise, comes *into* our eyes, rather than going out from them; we are taking in everything and making sense of it inside our minds and brains.

“The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light, but if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If the light that is in you is darkness, how great that darkness then is!” Amen.

Daily Meditations

Monday, November 18

The Lord rewarded me according to my righteousness; according to the cleanness of my hands he recompensed me.
For I have kept the ways of the Lord, and have not wickedly departed from my God.
For all his ordinances were before me, and his statutes I did not put away from me. *Psalms 18:20-22*

The inner self is not reformed simply by gaining knowledge, understanding, and wisdom, not, that is, simply by thinking. *Divine Providence #152*

Tuesday, November 19

I was blameless before him, and I kept myself from guilt.
Therefore the Lord has recompensed me according to my righteousness, according to the cleanness of my hands in his sight.
With the loyal you show yourself loyal; with the blameless you show yourself blameless; with the pure you show yourself pure; and with the crooked you show yourself perverse.
For you deliver a humble people, but the haughty eyes you bring down. *Psalms 18:23-27*

We are reformed inwardly by intending to do what our knowledge, intelligence, and wisdom tell us. When our knowledge, intelligence, and wisdom tell us that there is a heaven and a hell, that everything evil comes from hell, and that everything good comes from heaven, then if we do not intend evil, on the grounds that it is from hell, and instead intend good, on the grounds that it is from heaven, we are on the first step of reformation. *Ibid.*

Wednesday, November 20

It is you who light my lamp; the Lord, my God, lights up my darkness.
By you I can crush a troop, and by my God I can leap over a wall.
This God—his way is perfect; the promise of the Lord proves true; he is a shield for all who take refuge in him. *Psalms 18:28-30*

We are reformed inwardly by intending to do what our knowledge, intelligence, and wisdom tell us. *Ibid.*

Thursday, November 21

For who is God except the Lord? And who is a rock besides our God?—
the God who girded me with strength, and made my way safe.
He made my feet like the feet of a deer, and set me secure on the heights. *Psalms 18:31-33*

When our knowledge, intelligence, and wisdom tell us that there is a heaven and a hell, that everything evil comes from hell, and that everything good comes from heaven, then if we do not intend evil, on the grounds that it is from hell, and instead intend good, on the grounds that it is from heaven, we are on the first step of reformation. *Ibid.*

Friday, November 22

You have given me the shield of your salvation, and your right hand has supported me; your help has made me great.
You gave me a wide place for my steps under me, and my feet did not slip.
You delivered me from strife with the peoples; you made me head of the nations; people whom I had not known served me. *Psalms 18:35-36, 43*

We are on the threshold of hell, facing heaven. When we take the next step and intend to stop doing wrong, we are on the second step of reformation. We are outside of hell, but not yet in heaven. We see heaven as above us, and it has to be within us if we are to be completely reformed. Still, we are not reformed until both the outer and the inner self are reformed. *Ibid.*

Saturday, November 23

The Lord lives! Blessed be my rock, and exalted be the God of my salvation,
the God who gave me vengeance and subdued peoples under me;
who delivered me from my enemies; indeed, you exalted me above my adversaries; you delivered me from the violent. *Psalms 18:46-48*

The outer self is reformed by means of the inner self when the outer self refrains from the evils that the inner self intends not to do because they are from hell. We are more completely reformed when for that reason we abstain from them and fight against them. *Ibid.*

NOV **24** **HELEN KELLER—A
WOMAN OF FAITH
AND ACTION**
Ms. Anna Woofenden

“I am only one; but still I am one. I cannot do everything, but still I can do something; I will not refuse to do something I can do.” - Helen Keller

“Although the world is full of suffering, it is full also of the overcoming of it.” - Helen Keller

“Happiness does not come from without, it comes from within” - Helen Keller

“Death is no more than passing from one room into another. But there’s a difference for me, you know. Because in that other room I shall be able to see.”

- Helen Keller

“Character cannot be developed in ease and quiet. Only through experience of trial and suffering can the soul be strengthened, vision cleared, ambition inspired, and success achieved.” □ Helen Keller

“Love should not be viewed as a detached effect of the soul, or an organ, or a faculty, or a function. Love involves the whole body of conscious thought—intention, purpose, endeavor, motives, and impulses—often suppressed, but always latent, ready at any moment to embody itself in act. It takes on face, hands, and feet through the faculties and organs; it works and talks, and will not be checked by any external circumstance once it begins to move toward an objective. Love, the all-important doctrine, is not a vague, aimless emotion, but the desire for good united with wisdom and fulfilled in right action.”

- Helen Keller

“The best and most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen or even touched. They must be felt with the heart.” - Helen Keller

A young child.

A water pump.

A child who is blind and deaf.

A teacher who persistently spells W-A-T-E-R into the hand of the child, over and over, in an attempt

to communicate as the icy well water pours over the child’s hand.

These may be the familiar images that arise when you think of the woman whose life story we explore today: Helen Keller.

This iconic saga of overcoming the loss of physical sight and hearing has become a beloved tale of resilience and perseverance, because this frustrated child becomes able to communicate, attends school and college, and travels the world as an advocate for those with disabilities. Helen Keller is the poster child for the blind and deaf.

Images you might not be so familiar with: Helen Keller, a Swedenborgian theologian; and Helen Keller, a prophetic voice for social change. It is these two ideas I want to bring forward today.

But first...beginnings.

Helen Keller was born in 1880, an energetic, curious, and alert child. At age two, she suffered a serious illness that left her completely blind and deaf. Keller spent the next few years of her childhood struggling to communicate and connect with others, going into rages and tantrums of frustration because of her inability to interact with the world around her.

In looking back at this time of life, she writes, “Truly I have looked into the heart of darkness, and refused to yield to its paralyzing influence.” Helen’s life changed dramatically when she was gently and firmly taught by her teacher and guide, Annie Sullivan. It was Annie who opened up the world of language to Helen, and through language gave her the ability to connect to ideas, people, and life around her.

Helen was an inquisitive child, asking questions and wondering about everything. She writes: “As a little child I naturally wanted to know who made everything in the world, and I was told that nature had made earth and sky and water and all living creatures. This satisfied me for a time, and I was happy among the rose trees of my mother’s garden, or on the bank of a river or out in the daisy-covered fields.” Keller learned quickly and was a voracious student. Alexander Graham Bell had assisted Keller’s parents in finding her teacher Annie Sullivan and later recommended Perkins School of the Blind as a next step for her education and growth.

As she soaked up her studies, she began to ask more questions, questions about God and Jesus and religion and justice. "I inquired about God, and again I was baffled. Friends tried to tell me that God was the creator, and that he was everywhere, that he knew all the needs, joys, and sorrows of every human life...I was drawn irresistibly to such a glorious, lovable being and I longed to really understand something about him. I persisted in asking questions about God and Jesus 'Why did they kill him? Why does God make some people good and others bad? Why must we all die?'"

During this time of questioning, while at Perkins School for the Blind, Helen was introduced to the writings of eighteenth-century mystic and theologian Emanuel Swedenborg by John Hitz, a colleague of Alexander Graham Bell's, whom she later would call "the foster-father of my soul." Hitz gave her a Braille copy of Swedenborg's *Heaven and Hell* when she was fourteen years old. Hitz warned Keller that it might not make sense to her at first, but that it would in time "satisfy [her] with a likeness of God as loveable as the one in [her] heart."

When Helen began reading *Heaven and Hell*, a new opening in her spiritual life began. "I was as little aware of the new joy coming into my life as I had been years before when I stood on the piazza steps awaiting my teacher. Impelled only by the curiosity of a young girl who loves to read, I opened the that big book...My heart gave a joyous bound. Here was a faith that emphasized what I felt so keenly... The words 'Love' and 'Wisdom' seemed to caress my fingers from paragraph to paragraph and these two words released in me new forces to stimulate my somewhat indolent nature and urge me forward evermore."

Helen's engagement with Swedenborg's teachings was lifelong; she avidly read and wrote about her spiritual journey and how God shaped her after this first encounter with the writer. "It has given color and reality and unity to my thought of the life to come; it has exalted my ideas of love, truth and usefulness; it has been my strongest incitement to overcome limitations."

It is clear from Helen's writing that her faith was core to who she was and that from it her life arose. When we look at her legacy and her phenomenal lifelong mission to help those who were blind, deaf, or disabled, her work for the emancipation of women, and her devotion to equal rights and care for all

people, we can see the threads back to her theological grounding.

Helen's ability to live fully despite her disability has been greatly admired by many. Her physical disabilities gave her much she could have complained about or fallen victim to, but instead she chose to approach her life's limitations as teachers and opportunities for internal change.

She credits her approach to challenges to her spiritual path. She states, "Long ago, I determined not to complain. The mortally wounded must strive to live out their days for the sake of others. That is what religion is for—to keep the heart brave to fight it out to the end with a smiling face." She saw her challenges as opportunities for growth and internal transformation as she took to heart Swedenborg's teaching that "limitations of all kinds are forms of chastening to encourage self-development and true freedom."

Helen knew that God had called her to do important work in the world, and that she needed to continue to do her own internal work in order to follow this call to bring reformation to others. She writes about feeling like Joan of Arc at times, willing to follow the voice that says "Come" through any hardship or struggle. As her life progressed, she moved through the obvious struggle of functioning without hearing or eyesight with incredible strength, tenacity, and dedication to internal and external reform. Keller scholar Dr. Ray Silverman remarks that Keller "saw herself as a social reformer devoted to relieving human suffering."

The reform that Helen fought for was often expressed as a need for an external outcome, such as women's right to vote and economic equality. Her spiritual writings, however, called for a reform of the spirit as well. She spoke up for educational systems that were not exclusively focused on the intellect, encouraging compassion, consideration, and empathy as worthy educational goals.

Seeing the need for systems to be transformed strengthened her commitment to be a voice for internal transformation; she believed that transforming individuals would contribute to changing society as a whole. She drew heavily on Swedenborg's teaching that humanity without love and pity is "worse than a beast," and spoke to the recklessness of the power of thought when it is used for harming others. She called for reformation of the human spirit, and a

spiritual vision where love, wisdom, and useful service prevail.

Throughout Helen Keller's writings and speeches, she shares that the overarching message she drew from the teachings of Swedenborg was one of God's love for all people—regardless of their religious beliefs and allegiances. Having read the many volumes of Swedenborg's writings, she sums up her reading of his central theology with three ideas: "God as Divine Love, God as Divine Wisdom, and God as Divine Power for use." She shares her vision for God's love for all people as she reflects on who God is by saying, "Such teachings lift one up to a mountain summit where the atmosphere is clear of hatred, and one can perceive that the nature of the Divine Being is love and wisdom and use, and God never changes in God's attitude toward anyone at any time."

Helen's life, teaching, and writing were a continual outpouring of this love from God to all people as she became a sought-after voice for social reform. Silverman touts Keller's widespread engagement with these movements: "Helen did indeed carry the banner of social reform to all, and fought valiantly to raise consciousness about the plight of the handicapped. But Helen's social reform did not stop at combating preventable blindness." Silverman goes on to outline Keller's work with the suffrage movement, speaking up for social injustice and against racial prejudice and corrupt politics, denouncing business greed, and openly speaking against the horrors of war.

Keller shares her desire to see God in all religious paths when she writes: "Instinctively, I found my greatest satisfaction in working with men and women everywhere who ask not, 'Shall I labor among Christians or Jews or Buddhists?' but rather say 'God, in thy wisdom help me to decrease the sorrows of thy children and increase their advantages and joys.'"

She writes about being told by "narrow people" that those who are not Christians would be punished. She describes her soul's revulsion as she considered the possibility of the wonderful people she knew, people who had lived and died for truth as they saw it, ending up in hell. Helen was able to reconcile her universalism with her Christianity through Swedenborg's teachings on the symbolism of Jesus Christ. "I found that 'Jesus' stands for divine good, good wrought into deeds, and 'Christ' symbolizes Divine Truth, sending forth new thought, new life, and joy in the minds of all people; therefore, no one who believes in God and lives right is ever condemned." She went on to write often about this

view of salvation and how it informed her life, action, and teaching. Helen's theological understanding of God as one who created and loves all people came to life in her work, as she advocated for those who were unseen by society at large.

Through Helen's beliefs and her own disabilities, she became passionate about issues of equality and the care of all people. According to Dennis Wepman, author of one of the many biographies of Keller, she had "been long distressed about poverty and its effects on American children. She had also become a staunch suffragist—an advocate of women's right to vote." Joan Dash, another Keller biographer, connects Keller's actions for justice to her own experience of feeling on the margins. "When she visited the foul-smelling slums of New York, she was reminded of her hopeless and powerless existence as a child," which spurred on her work to bring hope to those who suffered.

As we hear stories of lives such as this one, it is easy to write ourselves out of the story. We may feel that the person we look to is in some other realm of possibility. We tell ourselves we can't expect to be one of "those people" who leaves an impact on the world. We draw a line between ourselves and those whom we look to for inspiration. Helen Keller's story calls us each to action and contemplation, work and theological reflection, in our own lives and ways.

Her words echo with us...

"I am only one; but still I am one. I cannot do everything, but still I can do something; I will not refuse to do something I can do."

"We are only one. But we are one. I am one. You are one. You cannot do everything, but you can still do something."

Helen calls us to live a life of action, beauty, and contemplation.

Helen Keller's life calls us to *do*, arising from our faith in a loving God—to do something in the world.

She calls us to give bread to those who are hungry, to stand for those who are oppressed, to serve a God of love, and bring the beauty of the fragrant roses to the world.

Prayer

Lord, let me not live to be useless.

- John Wesley (1703-1791)

Monday, November 25

In the second year of Nebuchadnezzar's reign, Nebuchadnezzar dreamed such dreams that his spirit was troubled and his sleep left him. So the king commanded that the magicians, the enchanters, the sorcerers, and the Chaldeans be summoned to tell the king his dreams. *Daniel 2:1-2*

However, the difference between the lights is obvious to people who look from one light into another. *Divine Providence #167*

Tuesday, November 26

When they came in and stood before the king, he said to them, "I have had such a dream that my spirit is troubled by the desire to understand it." The Chaldeans said to the king (in Aramaic), "O king, live forever! Tell your servants the dream, and we will reveal the interpretation." The king answered the Chaldeans, "This is a public decree: if you do not tell me both the dream and its interpretation, you shall be torn limb from limb, and your houses shall be laid in ruins. But if you do tell me the dream and its interpretation, you shall receive from me gifts and rewards and great honor. Therefore tell me the dream and its interpretation." *Daniel 2:3-6*

For example, when angels of heaven look into hell, they see nothing but pure darkness there, and when spirits of hell look into heaven, they see nothing but darkness there. *Ibid.*

Wednesday, November 27

They answered a second time, "Let the king first tell his servants the dream, then we can give its interpretation." The king answered, "I know with certainty that you are trying to gain time, because you see I have firmly decreed: if you do not tell me the dream, there is but one verdict for you. You have agreed to speak lying and misleading words to me until things take a turn. Therefore, tell me the dream, and I shall know that you can give me its interpretation." The Chaldeans answered the king, "There is no one on earth who can reveal what the king demands! In fact no king, however great and powerful, has ever asked such a thing of any magician or enchanter or Chaldean. The thing that the king is asking is too difficult, and no one can reveal it to the king except the gods, whose dwelling is not with mortals." *Daniel 2:7-11*

This is because heavenly wisdom is like darkness to people in hell; and conversely, hellish insanity is like darkness to people in heaven. *Ibid.*

Thursday, November 28

Because of this the king flew into a violent rage and commanded that all the wise men of Babylon be destroyed. The decree was issued...; he asked Arioch, the royal official, "Why is the decree of the king so urgent?" Arioch then explained the matter to Daniel. So Daniel went in and requested that the king give him time and he would tell the king the interpretation. Then Daniel went to his home and informed his companions, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, and told them to seek mercy from the God of heaven concerning this mystery, so that Daniel and his companions with the rest of the wise men of Babylon might not perish.

Daniel 2:12-18

This shows that the nature of our understanding determines the nature of our light, and that each one of us will come into his or her own light after death. We have no sight in any other. *Ibid.*

Friday, November 29

Then the mystery was revealed to Daniel in a vision of the night, and Daniel blessed the God of heaven. Daniel said: "Blessed be the name of God from age to age, for wisdom and power are his. He changes times and seasons, deposes kings and sets up kings; he gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who have understanding. He reveals deep and hidden things; he knows what is in the darkness, and light dwells with him. To you, O God of my ancestors, I give thanks and praise, for you have given me wisdom and power, and have now revealed to me what we asked of you, for you have revealed to us what the king ordered."

Daniel 2:19-23

In the spiritual world, where we are all spiritual even in respect to our bodies, our eyes are adapted to see in their own light. *Ibid.*

Saturday, November 30

Therefore Daniel went to Arioch, whom the king had appointed to destroy the wise men of Babylon, and said to him, "Do not destroy the wise men of Babylon; bring me in before the king, and I will give the king the interpretation." Then Arioch quickly brought Daniel before the king and said to him: "I have found among the exiles from Judah a man who can tell the king the interpretation." The king said to Daniel, whose name was Belteshazzar, "Are you able to tell me the dream that I have seen and its interpretation?" *Daniel 2:24-26*

The love of our life makes an intelligence for itself and therefore a light as well. Love is actually like the fire of life that gives off the light of life. *Ibid.*

DEC 1 LOVE UNFETTERED, LIGHT UNLEASHED

Rev. Sarah Buteux

Exodus 34:29-35

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

Luke 9:28-43

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

On the next day, when they had come down from the mountain, a great crowd met him. Just then a man from the crowd shouted, "Teacher, I beg you to look at my son; he is my only child. Suddenly a spirit seizes him, and all at once he shrieks. It convulses him until he foams at the mouth; it mauls him and will scarcely

leave him. I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not." Jesus answered, "You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and bear with you? Bring your son here." While he was coming, the demon dashed him to the ground in convulsions. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, healed the boy, and gave him back to his father.

And all were astounded at the greatness of God.

Sermon

We got rid of our television five years ago, and I swear it wasn't just so we could tell people we got rid of our television five years ago. We got rid of it because I'd developed a bit of a habit (one might even go so far as to call it an addiction) to all those shows on TV that take an unassuming house or room or person and transform them into something else entirely.

I couldn't get enough of *Trading Spaces* there for a while. I became the sort of person who would swear to myself (because you know I only ever watched these things alone) that I was going to watch just one more—just one more!—episode of *What Not to Wear* or *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* or *Extreme Home Makeover International*—and then I'd get back to writing my sermon, making dinner, folding the laundry or, you know, living my life. It got pretty bad there for awhile. It was so bad, in fact, that it took something as life-changing as getting pregnant with my first child, George, to make me question whether this was really how I wanted to live out my days.

Well, the answer was no, so we pitched the TV and set me free.

But I've got to tell you, even after all these years, I can still remember—still remember the thrill of the reveal, the adrenaline rush, the catharsis—the *tears*, for goodness' sake!—that those last seven minutes of the program inevitably provoked. I loved watching the homeowners and the host all trying to cram into the doorway of their newly renovated half bath, or the sassy smile of the overworked and underappreciated mom as she sashayed out in her brand-new dress and cute new haircut.

It was such sweet relief to see a person finally liberated from feathered hair or bad linoleum. And I am not ashamed to admit that watching a team of professionals bring out the absolute best in a person or a place really inspired me, especially since most of the people on these shows end up on them because someone else saw that potential first. They saw it and wrote in and said, "You know who deserves a makeover? My coworker Maude, who is so much prettier than she realizes," or "Bernadette, my wife of

thirty years, who really deserves something special,” or “Our neighbors down the street, Tim and Diane, who always did so much for everyone else that they never got around to renovating their kitchen.”

That’s the part I loved most, and it kind of makes me wonder what all these networks would have done with Jesus if they’d been around back then. Might someone have seen the potential in him and thought to herself, “You know, with the right haircut and some new sandals, that guy could go far”? Maybe.

And if they had, I can just imagine how the show would play out. We’d spend the first ten minutes getting to know Jesus. There would be a montage of Jesus walking by the sea of Galilee, multiplying loaves and fishes on a hillside, maybe healing a few folks or playing ball with little kids in the dusty streets of some village. Then we’d get the close up on his face and, as the camera panned back, listen in as the experts talked about the sad state of his hair, the dirt caked on his feet, and how that robe he was wearing was made of decent material, but really, for a man of his build, the cut was all wrong.

I know it’s hard to imagine that Jesus would ever agree to anything this ridiculous, but if he had, I can tell right where, in his story, they would have wanted to end their program. They would have loved, loved, loved, the part of his story we read today. The Transfiguration would have been, for any producer worth his salt, the reveal to end all reveals.

Seeing Jesus up there with bigwigs like Moses and Elijah, bright and shining in a new white robe, with even his Father on hand to praise him—I’m telling you, if the gospel had been written for TLC, it would end right here in chapter 9, with Jesus striking a pose in all his heavenly splendor. We’d cut to commercial thinking, “Wow, that guy looks *amazing*.”

But the gospel doesn’t end here, because strangely enough, at least in Luke’s telling of this odd and wondrous event, the point of the transfiguration is not in the reveal of Jesus in all his power and glory. No. The seminal moment in his transfiguration comes in the conversation he has with Moses and Elijah, a conversation that reveals what he intends to do with all his power and glory.

They have come from beyond to discuss his departure—in Hebrew, his “exodus,” an exodus he will accomplish not here on this mountain but down in Jerusalem, and not by rising to the heights of power but by being lifted up on a cross.

Like Moses before him, Jesus has come to set his people free—free from sin, death, oppression, and

violence—but unlike Moses and every other leader before him, Jesus has come to do this in a new way. He has not come to get, but to give, not to hurt but to heal. He is not planning to win by conquering but by being conquered.

Rather than use his time on earth to acquire all the wealth and power and control he can muster, the better to rise up and bring his adversaries down, Jesus has come to use all the power at his disposal on behalf of everyone else. He has come to lift up, restore, heal, and empower everyone he meets—*everyone*—be they friend or enemy, clean or unclean, worthy or undeserving. He has not come to free his people from their enemies by force but to liberate them from the idea that they need have any enemies at all, first and foremost by refusing to have any enemies himself.

Here on this mountain, even as we see him in all his power and glory, we come to learn how he intends to subvert his power and pour out his glory. His plan is to use all the means at his disposal not to achieve peace through violence, but to somehow absorb all the violence people can throw at him and forgive them anyway because they know not what they do.¹

You see, for Jesus, the only way to free us from the cycle of violence, sin, and death that has held all humanity in its thrall since the beginning, is to embrace a new way, his way: the way of the cross, the way that refuses to hit back, the way that takes all the power and glory and blessing we possess and, rather than hold on to it all for our own sakes, pours it back out into the world for the sake of others, no matter what the cost.

Jesus’ exodus on the cross in defiance of the ways of the world opens the door for our exodus from the ways of the world as well. His way of self-giving, self-emptying, and self-sacrifice shows us the way, a new way, the only way to heal the world.

I know that’s a lot to take in, but that’s the blueprint for our salvation that was laid out on top of that mountain, and that is the peculiar glory Jesus wanted his disciples to see. That was what he hoped to reveal to them: not that he was all-glorious and all-powerful, but that heaven’s true purpose is beyond power and glory.

And it’s a hard truth to take in. It was back then, and it is today. Amassing power and glory, influence and prestige, making it to the top and then figuring out how to stay there—that’s what most of us seek after, whether we realize it or not. That’s why makeover

1. Rob Bell and Dan Golden, *Jesus Wants to Save Christians*, p. 88.

shows are so compelling: because they make us believe that if we just had the right people on our side, better abs, or nicer floors, we'd be living on top of the world too.

It's really easy, even for those of us who claim to follow Jesus, to get sucked into the idea that life is all about us, about what we can get and what we can achieve. The disciples didn't get Jesus' alternative offer right away—and, truth be told, even two thousand years later, we're still struggling to come to terms with it.

Think about it. Peter, James, and John saw all this with their own eyes. They heard all this with their own ears. Jesus has told them repeatedly that he has come to serve rather than be served, to love rather than be loved, to give rather than take, release rather than control, to heal rather than harm.

They have seen him now, in all his glory, a glory that should be enough to convince them that as counterintuitive as Jesus' plan might be, it still comes to them straight from heaven. And yet they still don't get it. They still, somehow, think it's all about them.

If you continue along in the chapter, you find that they go down the mountain and fail to heal the very first person they encounter. Then they get into an argument about who is the greatest. Then they get upset because they catch some random guy who isn't one of them healing other people in Jesus' name—as if Jesus wouldn't like that.

The disciples have seen and heard and been given so much, and yet, at least at first, it's like all the blessing of being close to Jesus, and learning from Jesus, and being loved by Jesus, is all stopped up inside of them. It takes time for them to figure out that they have been blessed in order to be a blessing. Like us, they get confused and distracted. Along the way, they do a whole lot of selfish, stupid, sinful things. It takes practice and an awful lot of bumbling before they are able to translate their experience of Jesus into a life lived like Jesus, before they are ready to follow his way rather than their own.

But you know what? Jesus sticks with them anyhow, even unto and after death. He resurrects and comes back to them and gradually, eventually, they do start to get it. And then they start to live it. And by the end of their stories they are freeing others from the ways of the world as well, freeing them from their selfish desires, freeing them from their fears and their anger, freeing them to live like Jesus. It's all in here, in the Acts of the Apostles, and it is beautiful to behold.

Not to be too grandiose or anything, but that's my hope for us here. I'm not saying we've been to the mountain top, but like the disciples, we have been witness to the power and glory of God in this place, in our time together, in our shared testimony and all the many ways we see the Holy Spirit at work in this community. Last weekend was amazing. There is no other word for it. This week has been amazing as well.

Through emails and phone calls and visits, I am hearing your stories: stories of healing and hope, the stories of God at work in your lives, stories of all the many ways God is opening you up to new ideas, new possibilities, new hopes and dreams for this church and the world.

I hear talk of a putting the church float back together so we can march in the Pride parade, plans for turning the front of the church into an edible landscape and moving coffee hour out there once the weather gets warmer. Jane has made a sign to put out on Route 9 inviting people in for coffee and worship, a knitting group in this church is welcoming people into its fellowship who don't even worship here, and plans are afoot to take a team down to Kentucky this summer to work with the Red Bird mission.

Seriously, you'd have to be blind not to see what God is doing here in our community. Our challenge and our calling is to keep coming up with ways to take all this blessing out into the world. Remember the words Paul Nickerson spoke to us from Eugene Peterson's *The Message*? From Matthew chapter 5: "You're here to be light, bringing out the God-colors in the world. God is not a secret to be kept. We're going public with this, as public as a city on a hill..."

Friends, if there is a vision for this church to embrace, let it be this one. Let us go public with all we have received here.

It may take us a while to figure out how to do it, but that is why the Spirit has come to us the way that it has. God, in all his power and glory, has not given up on the world, and we are part of the team he has assembled to reveal the potential hidden out there beneath all the grime of fear and doubt, sin and selfishness, hurt and pain. We've been called to help people see themselves the way God sees them; called to set them free from all the lies that seize and maim, and throw them to the ground; called to reveal to the world, through our own self-emptying, self-giving, and self-sacrifice, nothing less than the kingdom of God.

May it be so. Amen.

Monday, December 2

Daniel answered the king, "No wise men, enchanters, magicians, or diviners can show to the king the mystery that the king is asking, but there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries, and he has disclosed to King Nebuchadnezzar what will happen at the end of days. Your dream and the visions of your head as you lay in bed were these: To you, O king, as you lay in bed, came thoughts of what would be hereafter, and the revealer of mysteries disclosed to you what is to be. But as for me, this mystery has not been revealed to me because of any wisdom that I have more than any other living being, but in order that the interpretation may be known to the king and that you may understand the thoughts of your mind. *Daniel 2:27-30*

The Lord cannot fully lead evil people away from their evils and guide them in what is good as long as they believe that their own intelligence is everything and that divine providence is nothing.

Divine Providence #297

Tuesday, December 3

"You were looking, O king, and lo! there was a great statue. This statue was huge, its brilliance extraordinary; it was standing before you, and its appearance was frightening. The head of that statue was of fine gold, its chest and arms of silver, its middle and thighs of bronze, its legs of iron, its feet partly of iron and partly of clay. As you looked on, a stone was cut out, not by human hands, and it struck the statue on its feet of iron and clay and broke them in pieces. Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver, and the gold, were all broken in pieces and became like the chaff of the summer threshing floors; and the wind carried them away, so that not a trace of them could be found. But the stone that struck the statue became a great mountain and filled the whole earth."

Daniel 2:31-35

It seems as though we can lead ourselves away from evil if we only think that it is against the common good, impractical, and against national and international law. *Ibid.*

Wednesday, December 4

"This was the dream; now we will tell the king its interpretation... After you shall arise another kingdom inferior to yours, and yet a third kingdom of bronze, which shall rule over the whole earth. *Daniel 2:36, 38-39*

Evil people can do this just as well as good people if by birth or by training they are the kind of people who can think to themselves with analytic and rational clarity. However, we still cannot lead ourselves away from evil. *Ibid.*

Thursday, December 5

And there shall be a fourth kingdom, strong as iron; just as iron crushes and smashes everything, it shall crush and shatter all these. As you saw the feet and toes partly of potter's clay and partly of iron, it shall be a divided kingdom; but some of the strength of iron shall be in it, as you saw the iron mixed with the clay. As you saw the iron mixed with clay, so will they mix with one another in marriage, but they will not hold together, just as iron does not mix with clay.

Daniel 2:40-41, 43

This is because while the Lord gives the ability to understand and appreciate things abstractly to everyone, evil and good alike (as already noted any number of times [€€86, 96, 99, 223, 285]), such understanding still does not enable us to lead ourselves away from evil. *Ibid.*

Friday, December 6

And in the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed, nor shall this kingdom be left to another people. It shall crush all these kingdoms and bring them to an end, and it shall stand forever; just as you saw that a stone was cut from the mountain not by hands, and that it crushed the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver, and the gold. The great God has informed the king what shall be hereafter. The dream is certain, and its interpretation trustworthy." *Daniel 2:44-45*

Evil is a matter of our volition, and our discernment does not flow into our volition except to give it light, to illuminate it, and to instruct it. If the warmth of our volition (that is, our life's love) is hot because of obsessions with evil, it is cold toward any desire for what is good. *Ibid.*

Saturday, December 7

Then King Nebuchadnezzar fell on his face, worshiped Daniel, and commanded that a grain offering and incense be offered to him. The king said to Daniel, "Truly, your God is God of gods and Lord of kings and a revealer of mysteries, for you have been able to reveal this mystery!" Daniel made a request of the king, and he appointed Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego over the affairs of the province of Babylon. But Daniel remained at the king's court.

Daniel 2:46-47, 49

This means that it does not accept the light, but reflects it back, or stifles it, or turns it into evil by inventing some distortion. Winter sunlight, which is just as bright as summer sunlight, does the same thing when it flows into frozen trees. *Ibid.*

Exodus 33:12-23

Moses said to the Lord, "See, you have said to me, 'Bring up this people'; but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, 'I know you by name, and you have also found favor in my sight.' Now if I have found favor in your sight, show me your ways, so that I may know you and find favor in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people." He said, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." And he said to him, "If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here. For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people, unless you go with us? In this way, we shall be distinct, I and your people, from every people on the face of the earth." The Lord said to Moses, "I will do the very thing that you have asked; for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name." Moses said, "Show me your glory, I pray." And he said, "I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, 'The Lord'; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. But," he said, "you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live." And the Lord continued, "See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock; and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen."

John 1:1-14

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. 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. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the

world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

Secrets of Heaven 10574:5

This enables us to determine the meaning of "the glory of the Jehovah" and his "light" in [this passage from] Isaiah:

Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of Jehovah has risen upon you. See, darkness has covered the earth, and gloom the peoples, but Jehovah will rise up over you and his glory will be seen over you. The nations will walk toward your light, and kings toward the radiance of your rising. Your sun will no longer set, and your moon will not be withdrawn, because Jehovah will become a light of eternity for you. (Isaiah 60:1-3, 20)

This is about the Lord's advent. The "light" here is what is divine and true radiating from the Lord, and "his glory" and "the radiance of his rising" are everything about the Lord and about faith in him and love for him appearing in that light. The "darkness and gloom that cover the earth and the peoples" are the dimness of faith and love.

Sermon

And the word was made flesh, and dwelt among us; and we beheld his glory, glory like that of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. John 1:14

Our Old Testament reading told of a time when Moses asked to see the glory of the Lord, and was told not only that *he* could not, but also that no one could. Our text might seem to contradict that, but if we read it carefully, we find that it is not a claim to have seen the glory of God, but to have seen the glory of "the word made flesh." Make no mistake, this "word" is still cosmic. The opening verse of John's gospel takes us all the way back to the opening verse of the Bible: "In the beginning." "In the beginning was the word . . . and the word was God." "All things were made by him" is an echo of the third verse of Genesis, "And

God said." This is a word of infinite creative power. God simply spoke, "and it was so."

But that word "became flesh, and dwelt among us." Mary provided it with a physical body—not an immense, powerful one, but a tiny, infantile one. The babe in the manger, the word made flesh, was just as helpless as any newborn. It would seem to bear little if any resemblance to the glory of Jehovah that passed by Moses. Think for a moment of how that scene on Sinai might be presented in a movie, taking advantage of all the special effects that technology can provide, and then turn your attention to the crèche. What do the two have in common?

There is a faint glimmer of glory in Matthew's account, in the prophecy that this child would save his people from their sins (Matthew 1:21). There are brighter glimmers in Luke, with the angel Gabriel visiting Mary, the Holy Spirit inspiring first Elizabeth, then Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, and then Simeon—"for my eyes have seen your salvation . . . a light to enlighten the gentiles and the glory of your people, Israel" (Luke 3:30, 32). In each case, though, the glory is not so much present as promised. This infant would grow up to become the adult in whom John saw "glory like that of a father's only son, full of grace and truth."

The adult was in the future, yes, but the promise was in the present, and that is a hallmark of life. Life, we are told, is love (*Divine Love and Wisdom* 4). Love, that is, is essentially purposeful, goal-seeking. We as living creatures do of course react to what happens to and around us, but not just passively, like inanimate objects. We choose to behave in particular ways. We evaluate our behavior, often finding ourselves wanting in some respects. We have an image of the kind of person we should be, and perceive a gap between that image and the person we believe we are.

Sticks and stones may inflict injuries, but not of their own intent. They have none. The thought that they might hold themselves responsible for damage done is obvious nonsense. The gap between the stone and the hand that hurls it is immense, greater by far than the gap between the scene on Sinai and the scene in the stable.

In other words, what we see in the manger is an embodiment of the most powerful force in the universe, namely, life. Put Genesis and John together

once again. "And God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light." That is power indeed. "In him was life, and the life was *the light of the world*."

In the history of the universe as science reconstructs it, the advent of life remains a mystery. The arch-skeptic Richard Dawkins writes, "The origin of life is a flourishing, if speculative, subject for research. The expertise required for it is chemistry and it is not mine. I watch from the sidelines with engaged curiosity," he says, and he then adds something quite bewildering: "and I shall not be surprised if within the next few years, chemists report that they have successfully midwived a new origin of life in the laboratory."¹

Where did that word "midwived" come from? Certainly not from the science of chemistry. It is more like a poetic image, and if it is an appropriate image, it recognizes that the chemists will not have originated life. Midwifery is assisting in the delivery of an infant who is already alive, who has been growing steadily since conception. If Dawkins' image is appropriate, then, life will have been latent for a long time before the chemists "midwife" it; and the chemists' task will then be to reduplicate not just its birth but its initial conception. As a matter of fact, it could be that the chemists themselves would figure out that life was latent in the universe from its very beginning.

A Convention minister who was a contemporary of my father, Samuel Weems, wrote a little pamphlet whose title, if I remember correctly, was simply *The Virgin Birth*. It was not so much a defense of the doctrine as an explanation of it, taking seriously a principle most clearly stated in *Soul-Body Interaction* (§14), "God alone acts—we only react, and if we look more deeply, even that comes from God." Ultimately, all life comes from God. What we do is to steer it in particular directions, and when we generate offspring, it is like channeling a little of the flowing water of an immense river into one particular stream—and our doing this is an effect of the stream that is flowing into us.

From that perspective, the virgin birth is not exceptional at all. It is quintessentially typical. It is God acting, plain and simple; and if we cannot explain it in material terms, that does not necessarily mean that it could not have happened. In fact, that

1. Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston, Houghton Mifflin: 2008), pp. 165f.

What we see in the manger is an embodiment of the most powerful force in the universe, namely, life.

logic leads straight toward the conclusion that God does not do anything that we cannot explain.

In his Foreword to *A Thoughtful Soul* (two and a half pages that were written with care are well worth reading with care), Huston Smith wrote,

To readers who may be meeting Swedenborg for the first time in these pages and find his almost garrulous talk about angels initially offsetting, let me confess that I too went through that phase. Fortunately, however, I checked my annoyance by asking why clear-minded, well-balanced people like D. T. Suzuki and literary giants like Jorge Luis Borges and Czeslaw Milosz refused to let the imperious demands of common sense derail them and kept on reading this author. It did not take me long to conclude that it was their alertness to the largeness of life itself—its largeness and mystery—that rescued them from the rules of intellectual respectability and allowed Swedenborg’s more generous world of discourse to have its rights.²

“Swedenborg’s more generous world of discourse” is a scope of thought that recognizes the reality of the spiritual world, or at least entertains the possibility of that reality. It is a world in which it is possible and in fact necessary to ask not only the scientific questions about *how* things happen but the deeper questions about *why* things happen. Is this vast universe absolutely pointless? Could there be a purpose behind it? Again, if there is, then we come up against the gap between the stone and the hand—purpose and life go hand in hand.

This is a huge issue. To quote Smith again (p. ix), “Swedenborg’s firsthand reports of higher world clearly upset [the eminent philosopher, Immanuel] Kant. ‘What astonishing consequences would follow,’ he wrote, ‘should the philosopher make room for even one [of Swedenborg’s] visions!’”

All this would be nothing but ivory-tower theorizing if it were not for the fact that “the astonishing consequences” include radical effects on the way we understand and therefore treat ourselves and each other. To put it bluntly, if there is no real spiritual world, then we are nothing but lumps of matter whose neural activity spins illusions of personal freedom and responsibility, of love and hatred, and of heaven and hell here and now, if not hereafter. We are bound to believe only what we have been conditioned to believe, so there is no defensible

meaning to the word “truth.” This, incidentally, applies just as rigorously to the physicist as to the spiritualist, to the genius as to the imbecile. Physicists believe what they believe not because it is true but because their experience compels them to believe it, just as my experience compels me to believe what I believe.

Contrast this with our text. “And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us; and we beheld his glory, glory like that of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.” This is the absolute inverse. It is not flesh that made the Word. In materialism, there is neither grace nor truth, and there is certainly no glory. Only the “more generous world of discourse” has room for the conviction that our own lives can have genuine meaning and beauty. Strict materialism would invert the maxim from *Soul-Body Interaction*. “Only matter really acts. We only react, and if you look more closely, this too is simply a necessary effect of material causes.”

Friedrich Schelling was a younger contemporary and reader of Swedenborg, one who was plunged into despair by the untimely death of his beloved wife. What rescued him was his acceptance of Swedenborg’s testimony concerning the reality of a spiritual world and life after death (this, incidentally, after an initial Smith-like feeling that angels were “the most boring creatures of all”), a conviction that he summed up in a memorable little sentence: “Es ist der Geist, der sich den Körper baut”—“It is the soul that builds a body for itself.”³ That sets the body and the soul, or the world and us, in their proper order.

The glory is there in the manger, the glory of a divine soul building itself a body, the glory of a promise not only of regeneration but also of glorification, of light triumphing over darkness, love over hatred, life over death. Amen.

Prayer

While all things were in quiet silence, and night was in the midst of her swift course, thine Almighty Word, O Lord, leaped down out of the royal throne. Alleluia!

- *Christmas Vespers, Western Rite*

2. George F. Dole, *A Thoughtful Soul: Reflections from Swedenborg* (West Chester, Pennsylvania: Swedenborg Foundation, 1995), pp. xf.

3. Friedemann Horn, *Schelling and Swedenborg: Mysticism and German Idealism* (West Chester, Pennsylvania: Swedenborg Foundation, 1997), p. vii.

Monday, December 9

In the first year of Darius son of Ahasuerus, by birth a Mede, who became king over the realm of the Chaldeans—in the first year of his reign, I, Daniel, perceived in the books the number of years that, according to the word of the Lord to the prophet Jeremiah, must be fulfilled for the devastation of Jerusalem, namely, seventy years. Then I turned to the Lord God, to seek an answer by prayer and supplication with fasting and sackcloth and ashes. *Daniel 9:1-3*

It is because the very essence of the Divine is love and wisdom that we have two abilities of life.

Divine Love and Wisdom #30

Tuesday, December 10

I prayed to the Lord my God and made confession, saying, “Ah, Lord, great and awesome God, keeping covenant and steadfast love with those who love you and keep your commandments, we have sinned and done wrong, acted wickedly and rebelled, turning aside from your commandments and ordinances. We have not listened to your servants the prophets, who spoke in your name to our kings, our princes, and our ancestors, and to all the people of the land. *Daniel 9:4-6*

From the one we get our discernment, and from the other volition. Our discernment is supplied entirely by an inflow of wisdom from God, while our volition is supplied entirely by an inflow of love from God. *Ibid.*

Wednesday, December 11

“Righteousness is on your side, O Lord, but open shame, as at this day, falls on us, the people of Judah, the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and all Israel, those who are near and those who are far away, in all the lands to which you have driven them, because of the treachery that they have committed against you. *Daniel 9:7*

Our failures to be appropriately wise and appropriately loving do not take these abilities away from us. *Ibid.*

Thursday, December 12

O Lord, in view of all your righteous acts, let your anger and wrath, we pray, turn away from your city Jerusalem, your holy mountain; because of our sins and the iniquities of our ancestors, Jerusalem and your people have become a disgrace among all our neighbors. Now therefore, O our God, listen to the prayer of your servant and to his supplication, and for your own sake, Lord, let your face shine upon your desolated sanctuary. Incline your ear, O my God, and hear. Open your eyes and look at our desolation and the city that bears your name. We do not present our supplication before you on the ground of our righteousness, but on the ground of your great mercies. O Lord, hear; O Lord, forgive; O Lord, listen and act and do not delay! For your own sake, O my God, because your city and your people bear your name!” *Daniel 9:16-19*

They only close them off; and as long as they do, while we may call our discernment “discernment” and our volition “volition,” essentially they are not. *Ibid.*

Friday, December 13

While I was speaking, and was praying and confessing my sin and the sin of my people Israel, and presenting my supplication before the Lord my God on behalf of the holy mountain of my God— while I was speaking in prayer, the man Gabriel, whom I had seen before in a vision, came to me in swift flight at the time of the evening sacrifice. *Daniel 9:20-21*

So if these abilities really were taken away from us, everything human about us would be destroyed--our thinking and the speech that results from thought, and our purposing and the actions that result from purpose. *Ibid.*

Saturday, December 14

He came and said to me, “Daniel, I have now come out to give you wisdom and understanding. At the beginning of your supplications a word went out, and I have come to declare it, for you are greatly beloved. So consider the word and understand the vision.”

Daniel 9:22-23

We can see from this that the divine nature within us dwells in these two abilities, in our ability to be wise and our ability to love. *Ibid.*

DEC 15 WHERE IS JOY?

Rev. Wilma Wake

Matthew 2:13-23

Now after they 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." 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."

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."

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." 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. 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."

Sermon

The phone rang one Saturday morning. I picked it up to hear the voice of Jimmy, an eight-year-old boy who is a client in my social work practice.

"Something really strange happened this morning," he said, "and Mom said I should call you."

"I'm glad you called, Jimmy. What happened?"

"Well, I got up this morning, like usual, and my Dad said "Good morning" to me. Then I started to cry. I cried and cried. But I didn't know what I felt sad about. I *never* cry."

I had a pretty good idea about why he had cried.

"Did you have a scary dream; or watch something on TV that made you sad?"

He was quiet for a moment, then said softly, "I was watching TV last night before I went to bed, and I heard about all those kids killed in their school. I think that's why I was sad."

We went on to talk about how scared he was to go back to school, and how powerless he felt. Then he had another concern. "They said that the shooter had autism. I have autism. Could I do this kind of thing?"

"Oh course not! Lots of people have autism, but they aren't any more violent than anyone else. Most of them are very kind, like you are."

He was relieved then, and went on with his day.

Jimmy's story isn't unique; his distress is similar to what both kids and adults are feeling all over North America—all over the world—about the horrible tragedy in Newtown, Connecticut, on December 15, 2012. It's another example of Swedenborg's holographic world: whatever happens to one of us happens to all of us. All of our hearts have been broken. As well, whatever one of us does to heal brings healing to all.

A minister interviewed on TV just after the shootings said, "*This is the week we're supposed to be feeling joy.*" This is the third week of Advent, and we light the candle of joy. How do we find joy in the season when twenty innocent children have been murdered?" In this congregation, our theme this month is angels. Where are angels in the lives and deaths of children?

Swedenborg tells us that angels are with children from the time of their birth. Sometimes angels perform amazing miracles that save children's lives. To find stories about angels helping infants, we can start with today's scripture reading about angels telling Joseph to take the baby Jesus to Egypt.

Glennyce Eckersley is an angel researcher in England. Here is a story that she was told about another infant being saved by angels:

Lesley, a young British woman, married a Nigerian man and moved to Africa. Her husband was gone a lot, and Lesley had no family near by. So she felt very alone when she went to the hospital to have a baby. Her labor was long and complicated, and an IV had to be inserted into her arm. She lost consciousness.

Meanwhile, one of the doctors on her team was exhausted after working forty-eight hours straight. She went to a room, locked it, and fell asleep. Then she was shaken awake and told to go room 6, where

a woman and her unborn baby were in danger. As the doctor woke up, she realized that no one was in the room, and the door was still locked from the inside. She figured it was a dream, and went back to sleep. Again, she was shaken awake with the same message. She woke up fully and saw a young woman, dressed in white.

Racing to room 6, she found that Lesley had been given the wrong IV. She and the baby were moments from death. But the doctor switched the IV in time, and a lovely baby girl was born. Lesley is now an artist, certain that an angel saved both her and her baby's life. So this is also a story about what inspired a young woman to become an artist!

Jean was a fifteen-year-old who loved to ride her bike. One day, through no fault of her own, she was a victim of a terrible accident: a bus slammed into the side of her bike on the road. Jean felt herself being lifted a fraction of a second before the impact; she was carried about twenty feet and gently placed on the ground. Her bike was a crumpled mass of metal. She was certain a guardian angel had saved her.

Some of the parents of children who survived the tragedy on December 15, 2012 felt that angels had been instrumental in saving the lives of their children. One boy described feeling a sudden impulse to run past the shooter and out the classroom door—and he somehow did so safely.

Our tradition teaches that angels greeted those children who were killed in heaven. Swedenborg wrote this in *Heaven & Hell*:

"330. When children die they are still children in the other life, having a like infantile mind, a like innocence in ignorance, and a like tenderness in all things. They are merely in the rudiments of a capacity to become angels, for children are not angels but become angels. For everyone passing out of this world enters the other in the same state of life, a little child in the state of a little child, a boy in the state of a boy, a youth, a man, an old man, in the state of a youth, a man, or an old man; but subsequently each one's state is changed."

Children are adopted by angels:

"332. As soon as little children are resuscitated, which takes place immediately after death, they are taken into heaven and confided to angel women who in the life of the body tenderly loved little children and at the same time loved God. Because these during their life in the world loved all children with a kind of motherly tenderness, they receive them as their own; while the children, from an implanted instinct, love them as their own mothers."

There are as many children in each one's care as she desires from a spiritual parental affection. This heaven appears in front before the forehead, directly in the line or radius in which the angels look to the Lord. It is so situated because all little children are under the immediate auspices of the Lord; and the heaven of innocence, which is the third heaven, flows into them."

Children are educated by angels, and grow into adulthood in heaven.

"335. Children are taught chiefly by representatives suited to their capacity. These are beautiful and full of wisdom from within, beyond all belief. In this way an intelligence that derives its soul from good is gradually instilled into them."

Knowing that children are nurtured by angels in heaven does not, of course, take away our grief when we lose them—or anyone, for that matter. It is not helpful to a grieving parent to say to them, "Don't be sad; your child is with the angels." It is true that the child is safe and happy, but still, such a profound loss must be grieved.

So what can we do in this time of Christmas joy? We can remember *why* we have joy during the Christmas season. Jesus was born into the world as a light to guide us through the darkness. The Light is reborn in all of our hearts this season. No matter how dark the darkness becomes, it can never shut out the light. The deeper the darkness, the brighter the light shines.

Someone from Newtown, Connecticut was interviewed—I think the mayor. He was asked if the Christmas lights in town should be shut off in remembrance of the killings. He said, "Oh, no! We must let them shine as brightly as we can, to show that nothing can destroy the spirit of Christmas."

True words. Trust the light in your heart, and in all the places we see it in the world. Be joyful for the light in our midst, in this time of darkness. Amen.

Prayer

Oh, night that guided me,
Oh, night more lovely than the dawn,
Oh, night that joined Beloved with lover,
Lover transformed in the Beloved!
All ceased, and I abandoned myself,
Leaving my cares forgotten among the lilies.

- St. John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul*

Daily Meditations

Monday, December 16

Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. *Isaiah 60:1-3*

Divine love and wisdom is substance and is form. The everyday concept of love and wisdom is that they are something floating around in, or breathed out by, thin air or ether. Hardly anyone considers that in reality and in function they are substance and form.

Divine Love and Wisdom #40

Tuesday, December 17

Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms. Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord. All the flocks of Kedar shall be gathered to you, the rams of Nebaioth shall minister to you; they shall be acceptable on my altar, and I will glorify my glorious house. *Isaiah 60:4-7*

Even people who do see that love and wisdom are substance and form sense them as something outside their subject, flowing from it; and they refer to what in their perceptions is outside the subject and flowing from it as substance and form even though they sense it as floating around. *Ibid.*

Wednesday, December 18

Who are these that fly like a cloud, and like doves to their windows? For the coastlands shall wait for me, the ships of Tarshish first, to bring your children from far away, their silver and gold with them, for the name of the Lord your God, and for the Holy One of Israel, because he has glorified you. Your gates shall always be open; day and night they shall not be shut, so that nations shall bring you their wealth, with their kings led in procession. *Isaiah 60:8-11*

They do not realize that love and wisdom are the actual subject, and that what they sense as floating out from the subject is only the appearance of the inherent state of the subject. *Ibid.*

Thursday, December 19

The glory of Lebanon shall come to you, the cypress, the plane, and the pine, to beautify the place of my sanctuary; and I will glorify where my feet rest. The descendants of those who oppressed you shall come bending low to you, and all who despised you shall bow down at your feet; they shall call you the City of the Lord, the Zion of the Holy One of Israel. Whereas you have been forsaken and hated, with no one passing through, I will make you majestic forever, a joy from age to age. *Isaiah 60:13-15*

There are many reasons why this has not come to light before. One of them is that appearances are the first things the human mind draws on in forming its understanding, and the only way to dispel these appearances is through careful probing into cause.

Ibid.

Friday, December 20

You shall suck the milk of nations, you shall suck the breasts of kings; and you shall know that I, the Lord, am your Savior and your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob. Instead of bronze I will bring gold, instead of iron I will bring silver; instead of wood, bronze, instead of stones, iron. I will appoint Peace as your overseer and Righteousness as your taskmaster. Violence shall no more be heard in your land, devastation or destruction within your borders; you shall call your walls Salvation, and your gates Praise. *Isaiah 60:16-18*

If a cause is deeply hidden, we cannot probe into it unless we keep our discernment in spiritual light for a protracted period of time; and we cannot hold it there for a long time because of the earthly light that keeps pulling us back. *Ibid.*

Saturday, December 21

The sun shall no longer be your light by day, nor for brightness shall the moon give light to you by night; but the Lord will be your everlasting light, and your God will be your glory. Your sun shall no more go down, or your moon withdraw itself; for the Lord will be your everlasting light, and your days of mourning shall be ended. Your people shall all be righteous; they shall possess the land forever. They are the shoot that I planted, the work of my hands, so that I might be glorified. The least of them shall become a clan, and the smallest one a mighty nation; I am the Lord; in its time I will accomplish it quickly. *Isaiah 60:19-22*

Still, the truth is that love and wisdom are the real and functional substance and form that make up the very subject. *Ibid.*

2 Samuel 7:1-11,16

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. 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.

Sermon

"The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned" (Isaiah 9:2). So the prophet Isaiah speaks of the time of Jesus. Jesus came in the night, in the darkness. He came in the darkest season of the year. And he came at a time in human history that was equally dark. So the apostle John says, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (John 1:5). That one birth, in the darkness of night, in the darkest season of the year, in a dark time in human history—that one birth shone so brightly that now, two thousand years later, his light still enlightens those who receive him.

Jesus is called "the Messiah." "Messiah" is a Hebrew word, the Greek translation for which is "Christ." So Jesus Christ isn't just a first and last name. It means that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ. We Christians immediately think of Jesus when we hear the name "Messiah." We may think of Handel's wonderful composition, "The Messiah," which contains many of Isaiah's prophecies about the coming of the Lord.

But to fully understand who the Messiah is, we need to go back into Jewish history. Then we will better understand the hopes of the Israelites for the Messiah to come, and we will understand how dark the world appeared to them at the time of the incarnation.

In Hebrew, the word "Messiah" means "anointed." Specifically, a messiah is a king in Israel, who is anointed by a prophet when he is chosen by God. Each time a new king was chosen by God, a prophet would anoint the new king with oil. Since all Israelite kings were anointed in this fashion, you could say that all the Israelite kings were messiahs. They were all anointed ones.

But there was one special Messiah, one special king, whom we mean when we talk about the "Messiah" in capital letters. That king is David. A whole mythology

developed around King David that no other king of Israel enjoyed. God made a special promise to King David that was not made to any other king; we hear this promise in our Bible reading from 2 Samuel. God promised King David that there would always be one of his descendants on the throne in Judah, forever. *Forever*. The prophet Nathan tells King David,

The LORD declares to you that the LORD himself will establish a house for you: When your days are over and you rest with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, who will come from your own body, and I will establish his kingdom. . . . My love will never be taken away from him, as I took it away from Saul . . . Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever. (2 Samuel 11, 12, 15, 16).

When God says that David's house and kingdom will endure forever, and that David's throne will be established forever, God is saying that a descendant of David will always be ruling on the throne in Judah. This is called the "Messianic promise." We see the Messianic promise in Psalm 89, which reads:

I have made a covenant with my chosen one,
I have sworn to David my servant,
"I will establish your line forever
and make your throne firm through all generations."
. . .
I will maintain my love to him forever,
and my covenant with him will never fail.
I will establish his line forever,
his throne as long as the heavens endure. (Psalm
89:3-4, 28-29)

But history didn't cooperate with the Messianic promise.

First, Babylon conquered Judah in the sixth century BCE. Jerusalem was pillaged, and the Israelites were deported to Babylon. There was no longer an Israelite king on the throne in Judah, let alone a descendant of King David.

But this wasn't all. Alexander the Great conquered Israel in the third century BCE. In his wake, all the territories he conquered adopted Greek ways. At a particularly bad time during the Greek rule, things got so awful for Israel that the ruler of that province actually sacrificed a pig to Zeus on the altar in Jerusalem.

Then came the Romans, who overthrew the Greeks in the second and first centuries BCE. For hundreds of years, no Israelite king sat on the throne in Jerusalem,

no descendant of David. It appeared that God had broken his promise. We see this also in Psalm 89:

You have renounced the covenant with your servant
and have defiled his crown in the dust.
You have broken through all his walls
and reduced his strongholds to ruins.
You have put an end to his splendor
and cast his throne to the ground.
Lord, where is your former great love,
which in your faithfulness you swore to David?
(Psalm 89:39-40, 42, 44, 49)

In this darkness, in this time when it appeared that God had broken his promise to the Israelites, hope persisted. Throughout the prophets is expressed the hope that one day, a descendant of King David will return and assume the throne in Jerusalem. The hope persisted that one day the Israelites would be redeemed, and the glory of King David's kingdom would be restored. The hope persisted that the Messiah would come.

Over the centuries, the mythology of the Messiah grew. In time, the Messiah was conceived of in terms so grand that no human could fulfil these expectations. Consider once again Psalm 89. In it, we see that the Messiah is, in fact, the Son of God:

He will call out to me, "You are my Father,
my God, the Rock my Savior."
And I will appoint him to be my firstborn,
the most exalted of the kings of the earth. (Psalm
89:26, 27)

Not only is the Messiah the son of God, he will be the most exalted king in the whole world. It is hard to imagine a mere mortal who could fulfill these expectations. In the darkness of God's broken promise, with the land promised to Abraham now under foreign rule, the Israelites waited for the coming of a divine king who would redeem Israel.

From our Swedenborgian perspective, we too see the time of Jesus as a time of great darkness. Indeed, we see it as the darkest time the world had ever known. It was a time desperately in need of Jesus' redeeming light. It was a time in need of God's Incarnation.

Our theology teaches that the forces of darkness threatened to overwhelm heaven and earth before the Incarnation. We believe that without God's Incarnation, humanity would have been lost, but that with the advent of Jesus, God's power came to humans—and through the divine humanity of Jesus Christ, God could come to humanity in a new way. Swedenborg writes,

In order that hell might be cleared away, and this impending damnation be thereby removed, the Lord came into the world, and dislodged hell, subjugated it, and thus opened heaven; so that he could henceforth be present with men on earth, and save those who live according to his commandments. (*True Christian Religion* 579)

Jesus is that divine Messiah of Psalm 89, who calls God his father. This is clear from His very birth, when the angel Gabriel tells Mary,

The holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end. . . . (Luke 1:35, 32-33)

Both Matthew and Luke are careful to trace Jesus' genealogy through King David. But Jesus was just as much a human—fully God and fully man.

Let us think back to those days. Let us imagine what it must have been like in that special part of the world, when Jesus walked among us. Let us think about the disciples on the road to Emmaus, walking next to Jesus, walking next to a God so human that they saw him as an ordinary man. But in retrospect, they said, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?" (Luke 24:32).

With the incarnation, God became present to humanity in a way that had not been possible before. Throughout his life on earth, Jesus grew progressively closer to God, and God grew progressively closer to Jesus, until ultimately God and man became one. So Jesus says in John 10:30, "I and the Father are one." Jesus explains this to Philip:

If you really know me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him. . . . Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, "Show us the Father"? Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you I do not speak on my own authority. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work. Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me. (John 14:7, 9-10)

This intimate union of God and man is expressed in the Nicene Creed, as well. It says that Jesus is "of the essence of the Father, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father." God comes to us through his humanity as Jesus Christ. It is through

Jesus' divine humanity that he can say, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). And because Jesus is of the essence of the Father, because Jesus is God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, of one substance with the Father, he can say, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Matthew 28:18).

With wonder, I think back on those days when Jesus walked—O happy day!

With awe, I think back on those who felt their hearts burn within them in Jesus' presence.

With amazement, I think of those holy feet, dusty with the sand of Palestine.

But Jesus is with us still. Jesus is with us in his divine humanity.

So the question is, "Do you walk with Jesus?"

Does your heart burn with a holy fire? Is the Messiah present in your life?

I think it was with these questions in mind that the poet William Blake wrote of his own country and his own place,

And did those feet, in ancient times,
Walk upon England's mountains green:
And was the holy Lamb of God,
On England's pleasant pastures seen!

It isn't only a matter of ancient times. If we are but open, we can see those feet in Edmonton's pleasant river valley or city streets—and everywhere.

Prayers

Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness and put on the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life, in which your Son Jesus Christ came to us in great humility.

O Lord our God, make us watchful and keep us faithful as we await the coming of your Son our Lord; that when he comes, we may be found active in his service and joyful in his praise, in and through his holy name. Amen.

- Gelasian Sacramentary, 7th century, adapted

O Christ my Savior, the enlightenment of those who lie in darkness, the salvation of all in despair, I seek thee early in the morning; enlighten me with thy brightness, O King of Peace, for I know no other God save thee.

- from the Feast of the Forerunner, Orthodox Church

Daily Meditations

Monday, December 23

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence—as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil—to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence! When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence. From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him. You meet those who gladly do right, those who remember you in your ways. But you were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself we transgressed. *Isaiah 64:1-5*

In the spiritual world, divine love and wisdom look like a sun. *Divine Love and Wisdom #83*

Tuesday, December 24

We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us, and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity. Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand. *Isaiah 64:6-8*

There are two worlds, one spiritual and one physical; and the spiritual world does not derive anything from the physical one, nor does the physical one derive anything from the spiritual one. *Ibid.*

Wednesday, December 25

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. 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. *Isaiah 61:1-3, 10*

They are completely distinct from each other, communicating only by means of correspondence, whose nature has been amply explained elsewhere.

Ibid.

Thursday, December 26

For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest, until her vindication shines out like the dawn, and her salvation like a burning torch. The nations shall see your vindication, and all the kings your glory; and you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord will give. You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God. *Isaiah 62:1-3*

The following example may be enlightening. Warmth in the physical world is the equivalent of the good that thoughtfulness does in the spiritual world, and light in the physical world is the equivalent of the truth that faith perceives in the spiritual world. *Ibid.*

Friday, December 27

You shall no more be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate; but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her, and your land Married; for the Lord delights in you, and your land shall be married. For as a young man marries a young woman, so shall your builder marry you, and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you. *Isaiah 62:4-5*

No one can fail to see that warmth and the goodness of being thoughtful, and light and the truth of faith, are completely distinct from each other. *Ibid.*

Saturday, December 28

You shall no more be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate; but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her, and your land Married; for the Lord delights in you, and your land shall be married. For as a young man marries a young woman, so shall your builder marry you, and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you. *Isaiah 62:4-5*

At first glance, they seem as distinct as two quite different things. That is what comes to the fore when we start thinking about what the goodness of being thoughtful has in common with warmth and what the truth of faith has in common with light. Yet spiritual warmth is that very "goodness," and spiritual light is that very "truth." *Ibid.*

Christmas Eve Meditation

Rev. Kevin Baxter

Have you ever received a Christmas gift that you did not want, or that was just not quite what you had asked for, and then noticed that that gift turned out to be more useful and better than the other things you were given that year? For me, in recent history, it was a little pen knife that folded into a key. I got that present and thought to myself, "Great, a key knife," but I used that knife for years and was always thankful I had it when I needed it!

These moments are not limited to Christmas. A book can look unassuming, but it can change the way you view the world.

Even college, which certainly offers information, can seem ho-hum, but the lessons learned go beyond the classroom and can shift the way you approach things that are unrelated to the subjects you studied.

As we examine our readings today, we find that this shift occurred in many different ways around the birth of Christ.

Mary is given a child at a time that was not expected. I am sure that she and Joseph would have had children soon enough, but certainly not in the order that the events occurred. And yet, she comes to terms with her gift fairly quickly.

The people of that day, however, were looking for and expecting a savior. They looked to the prophets and saw a military and political leader who would unseat the current government. In scripture, this is what the Wise Men were looking for; why else should the Roman government and the local authorities have responded as they did, with the Slaughter of the Innocents? They were looking for the child who would grow up to overthrow the government.

What if the Wise Men had said, "A person is going to come along who, after thirty-three years, will

be easily dealt with"? Would Herod have been as worried?

But the Lord, though not fulfilling the promises that people foresaw, transformed the world.



This is true in each of our lives as well, from simple gifts to events that transform us, especially when we are not aware of what is coming.

The gift we have been given by the Lord's life is not the gift we might think we want. It is not a gift of certainty or of the comforts of life. The gift we have been given is transcendence. The gift we are given is an awareness that the physical limitations of the flesh are not the sum total of reality.

Helen Keller said of Emanuel Swedenborg's writings, "They gave light to my darkness." A mere book opened her mind up to a new reality.

Each of us has the opportunity to see our lives and hearts opened to a new reality, a reality where the simplest, most unexpected thing can transform us. But we must be willing to engage. I could have simply thrown that knife away, but I didn't. I said, "Why not?" We can shelve a book, but why not read it? If we are open to the gifts we receive, we are actually open to the hearts of the people who give them. That is an example of the true reality that lies behind a gift.

We are given the gift of a reality that lies behind the physical things of the world, a reality in which love rules the day. But we have to be willing to listen, and be open.

As we approach the gifts we are given at this time of year and throughout the seasons, let us see them as opportunities to glimpse the love and goodness behind them, that they might transform our hearts and our lives. Amen.

DEC 29 LOOKING FOR JESUS

Rev. Leah Grace Goodwin

Luke 2:41-52

Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. Assuming that he was in the group of travelers, they went a day's journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, "Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety." He said to them, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" But they did not understand what he said to them.

Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart. And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.

Sermon

He said to them, "Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" But they did not understand what he said to them.

It happens the instant a child is born, adopted, or otherwise enters a family: whoever is taking care of that little person develops radar. Whatever you're doing, if you're parenting a little one, two questions always operate in the background: (1) "Where is my baby?" and (2) "Is my baby OK?"

Once these questions take hold of you, I don't think they ever really fall silent, however old your children become. But when you actually have a say about where your munchkin is, those two questions always echo loud and clear.

Still, no matter how vigilant we are during those early years, sometimes the radar fails. Sometimes you lose track of a kid. Sometimes you turn around after two seconds...and they're just not there. Sometimes

you (I) fall prey to the "I thought *you* had him" syndrome. Sometimes they're not really lost—they're hovering just beyond your peripheral vision. (I hate that!)

However it happens, if you've ever lost your child, you know how it feels. It's terrifying. Every dire thing you can think of pops into your head. A future without your baby becomes suddenly very real.

So I can totally relate to Mary and Joseph, and how they must have felt when, after *twenty-four hours* of traveling—on foot, with a donkey in tow—they realized that their son was missing from their travel party.

It gives me the horrors just to think about it. I mean, you go to Jerusalem for Passover, just like you do every year, packing your kids and your food and your supplies and your clothes and everything else onto the donkey, and you get there, and you make your offerings and you worship, and you spend time with your family, and you pack up and you head out, and everything's great. Phew! Another good holiday, in the bag.

And then, BAM. "Where's the kid? Where's my firstborn? Where. Is. Jesus?"

"I thought you had him."

Back to Jerusalem—another day's journey. Much panic. Much aggravation. Very stressful. Where could Jesus be?

And then you find him. In the temple, among the teachers—people you trust—safe and sound, listening and asking questions and engaging and doing all the amazing things that a precocious, well-mannered, thoughtful, almost-adult teenage boy should be doing.

Except that you've been searching for him for *three days*.

And here's the best part of the story (which, by the way, is the only one like it in all four gospels—it's the only childhood story we have of Jesus)—the best part is, Jesus pretty much responds with an aggrieved "*What?*"

Luke tells us, "When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, 'Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.' He said to them, 'Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?'"

Which, in the language of the gospel, is pretty much equivalent to the teenage Jesus snarling at his parents for butting into his business.

I want to know how Mary and Joseph *really* asked the question. Because I know I would have been relieved to find my child, safe and sound, after those horrible nights of worry—and I would have been not only astonished, but also mightily peeved, at his response. “Why was I *looking* for you? Because I’m your parent, and you were *gone!*”

But Jesus, adolescent attitude aside, raises a good point here. Luke is telling us this odd teenage-Jesus story for a reason. Why *did* Mary and Joseph look for Jesus in all the wrong places? Why *did* it take them three days to figure out that Jesus had to be in the temple—his Father’s house—and going about his Father’s business?

Had Mary and Joseph forgotten? It seems strange that they would have, the way Luke writes his gospel—this story’s only in the second chapter. But still, it’s been twelve years since the hard trip to Bethlehem, thirteen years since the angel came to Mary and asked her if she would mother the Savior. It’s been thirteen years since Joseph has been made to understand that God meant for this to happen, that Joseph had a part to play too. It’s pretty clear from other gospel accounts that Jesus has brothers and sisters by now. He’s the firstborn, but still, he’s the eldest of a gaggle of kids.

So were things just so ordinary for so long—no more adoring shepherds, no more angels, no more ancient prophecies—that the mystery of Jesus’ birth had started to fade, just like a dream? Or maybe Mary and Joseph knew who their son would become, maybe they imagined what he might do—but they figured that was years away, that he would surely be an adult by then. Maybe Jesus didn’t seem that interested in religious observance or in studying the scriptures, so it didn’t occur to his parents that he would be hanging out in the temple—after all, Jerusalem was, even then, a large city, with lots to see and do. Maybe Mary and Joseph just didn’t see that their baby was growing up. Where did their baby go?

And it’s not just where they find him—suddenly Jesus is talking about his “Father,” with a capital F, and he’s not referring to Joseph. “I must be in my Father’s house,” he says—the temple in Jerusalem, not the carpenter’s shop in Nazareth. Even this early in Luke, Jesus has set his sights on Jerusalem, the city where he will teach, and heal, and die, and rise again after three days’ time.

Two worlds collide in this moment. In one world, life goes on as it always has. Mary and Joseph find their child, take him back to Nazareth, and finish raising him to adulthood. He is, as Luke tells us, “obedient to them.” He loves his parents, and he honors them. For the time being, he disappears from history, merges once again with the daily rhythms of his hometown. For about eighteen more years, Jesus hangs out not with teachers and politicians and Roman officials, but with ordinary people. In this world, Jesus seems to be just like us—he is, as one hymn puts it, “our childhood’s pattern; day by day, like us, he grew.”¹

In the other world this story hints at, Jesus the Messiah is preparing himself for the work that his divine Father has sent him to do. He knows where he must be and the business he is supposed to be about: saving the broken world.

But still Mary and Joseph face the question: *where did their baby go?* The Jesus they find in the temple, among the teachers, is not the Jesus they thought they’d brought with them upon leaving Jerusalem. Mary and Joseph leave the city once again, this time with Jesus in tow, but somehow, maybe, still looking for the son they’d lost three days before. A new, different Jesus, one they can’t quite fashion in their own image, goes with them.

We have trouble keeping up with Jesus too. Here we are, the first Sunday after the 25th, four days after Christmas, and the baby Jesus we last saw lying in a manger has grown to near-puberty, twelve years old, standing on the threshold of manhood. Time flies.

According to our Christian year, God has entered the world. Jesus the Christ—God with Us, our Savior—has been born into our midst. We’ve put a lot of effort—lots of time and money and energy—into celebrating the fact that God is among us, a sweet little baby, all innocence, in the manger. The world has changed. Christ is born!

But after all the Advent buildup (which really starts at Halloween now, at least as far as the shopping season goes), maybe we feel that as soon as we start to look for Jesus, he slips through our fingers. Suddenly it’s almost New Year’s Eve, and the signs are everywhere that for a lot of people, Christmas is a done deal. Most of the sales are even over in the stores. We’ve been anticipating Christ’s coming for four weeks, we celebrated his arrival, and now we just want to see him and hold him—or have him hold us—but he’s not in our traveling party.² Where did our baby Jesus go? Just like Mary and Joseph, we ask

1. “Once in Royal David’s City”

2. Thanks to Russell Rathbun for the germ of this thought.

God, "Where are you? Why have you treated us like this? We've been looking for you!"

Like Mary and Joseph, we can't see—or choose not to notice—that our Jesus is growing up even as we, spiritually speaking, grow up. Our Jesus is transforming, changing into someone we didn't expect.

"But Jesus," says Craig Satterlee, "didn't come to fulfill our expectations." He doesn't come to us, not really, in sentiment for the way things used to be or the way we wish things could be. Jesus is about the future. Jesus was born and lived and died and rose to be about God's business of putting an end to our searching by making plain the way to God, even if that means shattering our expectations.

Here's the good news for us in this week after Christmas: just like Mary and Joseph, our search for Jesus is done. We've been looking for him, and here he is, in his Father's house, doing his Father's holy work, showing us the path to God.

And here's the scary news (it's still good news, though): our search doesn't end where we thought it would. Mary and Joseph searched three wretched days for Jesus, and on the third day found him happy and healthy. But they didn't find him where they thought he'd be; instead, they found him ensconced in the Temple at Jerusalem among the teachers, "the very place" where, as Satterlee points out, "it all will end as Jesus is tried, convicted, and handed over" for death. Mary and Joseph go looking for Jesus and find him, after three days, in a place they would never have expected.

This should sound to you suspiciously like Easter. Remember? The dead and buried Jesus rises. Then there is a new temple, destroyed as Jesus promised and also, as he promised, rebuilt in three days: Christ's resurrected body. Luke is offering us a hint here: when we look for Jesus, really look, we will find him. But the catch, the glorious catch, is that what we find is not what we expected. Our searching ends in new life, in startling beauty, in the life God intends, but it's definitely not the life we would have aimed for, left to our own devices.

One of my favorite gospel passages is John chapter 21. In that chapter, Mary Magdalene encounters the risen Christ face to face in the garden outside his tomb. Like his parents, Mary Magdalene went looking for Jesus, though all she thought she wanted to do was anoint his dead and broken body. She found him—but like his parents, like us, she also discovered what she could never have expected: the risen Lord. Then—

called by name, having stared the divine in the face, knowing even as she herself was fully known—she found herself running from that garden, her skirts flapping around her ankles, to tell the good news of the resurrection to the apostles.

I close this morning with a poem by George Appleton about that moment:

O Christ, my Lord, again and again
I have said with Mary Magdalene,
"They have taken away my Lord, and I know not
where they have laid him."
I have been desolate and alone.
And *you* have found *me*, again and again, and I know
That what has died is not you, my Lord,
But only my idea of you.
The image which I have made to preserve
What I have found, and to be my security.
I shall make another image, O Lord,
Better than the last.
That too must go, and all successive images,
Until I come to the blessed vision of yourself,
O Christ, my Lord.
Amen.

Meditations

God is nearer to us than our own soul. For He is the Ground in whom our soul stands; and He is the Mean which keeps the substance and sense-nature together, so that they shall never part. For our soul sits in God in very rest; and our soul stands in God in sure strength; and our soul is kindly rooted in God in endless love. And therefore, if we want to have knowing of our soul, and communion and loving with it, we need to seek into our God, in whom it is enclosed.

- *Julian of Norwich*, Revelations of Divine Love

When we transcend ourselves and become in our ascent toward God so simple that the bare supreme Love can lay hold of us, then we cease, and we and all our selfhood die in God. And in this death we become the hidden children of God, and find a new life within us.

- *Jan van Ruysbroeck*, The Sparkling Stone

The image of the Beloved suddenly lifted its head
from the heart,

Like the moon from the horizon, like a flower from
a branch.

- *Rumi*

Monday, December 30

I was ready to be sought out by those who did not ask, to be found by those who did not seek me. I said, "Here I am, here I am," to a nation that did not call on my name. I held out my hands all day long to a rebellious people, who walk in a way that is not good, following their own devices; a people who provoke me to my face continually, sacrificing in gardens and offering incense on bricks; who sit inside tombs, and spend the night in secret places; who eat swine's flesh, with broth of abominable things in their vessels; who say, "Keep to yourself, do not come near me, for I am too holy for you." These are a smoke in my nostrils, a fire that burns all day long. *Isaiah 65:1-5*

Warmth and light emanates from the sun that arises from divine love and wisdom.

Divine Love and Wisdom #89

Tuesday, December 31

Thus says the Lord: As the wine is found in the cluster, and they say, "Do not destroy it, for there is a blessing in it," so I will do for my servants' sake, and not destroy them all. I will bring forth descendants from Jacob, and from Judah inheritors of my mountains; my chosen shall inherit it, and my servants shall settle there. Sharon shall become a pasture for flocks, and the Valley of Achor a place for herds to lie down, for my people who have sought me. *Isaiah 65:8-10*

In the spiritual world where angels and spirits live, there is just as much warmth and light as there is in the physical world where we live. The warmth feels just like warmth and the light looks just like light, as well.

Ibid.

Wednesday, January 1

For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight. *Isaiah 65:17-18*

Still, the warmth and light of the spiritual world and the warmth and light of the physical world are so different that they have nothing in common. They are as different as life and death. *Ibid.*

Thursday, January 2

I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people; no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress. No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime; for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth, and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed. *Isaiah 65:19-20*

The warmth of the spiritual world is essentially alive, and so is the light; while the warmth of the physical world is essentially dead, and so is the light. The warmth and the light of the spiritual world come from a sun that is nothing but love, while the warmth and light of the physical world come from a sun that is nothing but fire. Love is alive, and divine love is life itself. *Ibid.*

Friday, January 3

They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat; for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands. They shall not labor in vain, or bear children for calamity; for they shall be offspring blessed by the Lord— and their descendants as well. Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear.

Isaiah 65:21-24

Since angels are spiritual beings, they cannot live in any warmth or any light that is not spiritual. We, on the other hand, cannot live in any warmth or any light that is not physical. This is because what is spiritual suits what is spiritual, and what is physical suits what is physical. *Divine Love and Wisdom #90*

Saturday, January 4

The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; but the serpent—its food shall be dust! They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the Lord. *Isaiah 65:25*

If you observe carefully the thoughts of your own mind, you can recognize that there is a spiritual light completely distinct from physical light. When a mind is thinking, it sees its objects in light, and people who think spiritually see truths as readily at midnight as in daytime. *Divine Love and Wisdom #96*

Our Daily Bread is a ministry of the General Convention of the Church of the New Jerusalem

Our Beliefs in Brief:

- God is pure love, pure wisdom, and pure creative power.
- God became human in Jesus Christ and dwells with us.
- The Bible is God's Word, and has many levels of meaning.
- God loves and saves people of all religions.

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The Swedenborgian Church bases its teachings on the Bible as illuminated by the works of Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772), a Swedish scientist and theologian. Swedenborg envisioned a new Christianity coming into being that was revitalized by the Spirit of the Lord.

We believe that there is one God, known by many names. We worship Jesus Christ as our Lord and our God, who made himself known to us through his life as the divine human Jesus of Nazareth, and whom we continue to know through his Holy Spirit, which operates through and around us.

We believe the Bible is the inspired Word of God, and that in its pages we find two parallel stories: the account of people, places, and events; and within that account a spiritual reflection of our individual and corporate journeys. The Bible, with its infinite depth of meaning, is truly a living Word, guiding us as we strive to make ourselves temples for the Lord by loving and serving others. We believe that, above all, "all religion relates to life, and the life of religion is to do good." The Swedenborgian Church exists to help people be open to the Lord's presence and leading, and to facilitate their spiritual well-being. We invite you to participate with others who are seeking to deepen their inner life and pursue their spiritual journey.

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