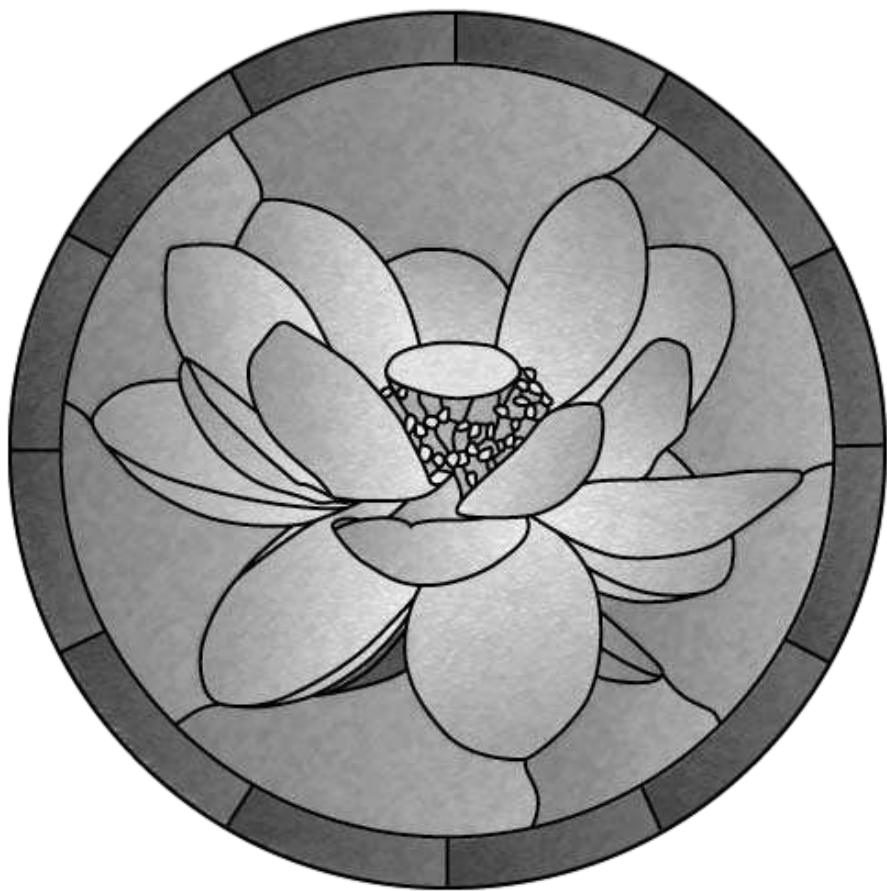


JANUARY 2010

SERMONS AND MEDITATIONS OF THE SWEDENBORGLIAN CHURCH

Our *Daily* Bread



Beginnings

Invitation

You are invited to use *Our Daily Bread* as a source of inspiration and as a guide for personal meditation and reflection. It is also a resource for home, small group, and church worship. Each issue has a theme, with weekly sermons focusing on various aspects of that theme. Daily meditations provide food for thought throughout the week.

Our Daily Bread has been published by the Swedenborgian Church since December 1949. May you be fed with spiritual nourishment as the Lord gives us this day our daily bread.

Prayer

God be in my head, and in my understanding;

God be in mine eyes, and in my looking;

God be in my mouth, and in my speaking;

God be in my heart, and in my thinking;

God be at mine end, and at my departing.

- *Old Sarum Primer*, 1538

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From the Editors

*See, amid the winter's snow,
Born for us on earth below,
See, the gentle Lamb appears,
Promised from eternal years.
Hail, thou ever-blessed Lord!
Hail, redemption's happy morn!
- Edward Caswall, 1851*

Dear Readers,

Depending on where you live, a blanket of snow may cover the ground, or the rain and bleak skies may seem never-ending. But life waits beneath the surface. In a poetic twist that only God could devise, the glories to come take nourishment from the biting conditions and bide their time, waiting to spring forth. So it is with our souls, as well.

This month we focus on beginnings, which, as nature's example suggests, have a way of showing up in unexpected and difficult places. Rev. Ron Brugler exhorts us to listen for the Lord's voice, no matter how soft. Rev. Dr. George F. Dole reflects on the year's turn as a sign that good is greater than evil. Robert McCluskey explains how we can each make a place for the Lord's spiritual birth into the world. Rev. Dr. Jim Lawrence challenges us to find in failure the opportunity for fresh growth. Rev. John Maine reflects on the power, for good or ill, of church institutions, and reminds us that God's wise goodness is always waiting to express itself in the intricacies of the human mind and heart.

Blessings,

Leah and Kevin

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JAN 3

Hearing Aids

Rev. Ron Brugler

Psalm 29

Ascribe to the Lord, O heavenly beings, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.

Ascribe to the Lord the glory of his name; worship the Lord in holy splendor.

The voice of the Lord is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the Lord, over mighty waters.

The voice of the Lord is powerful; the voice of the Lord is full of majesty.

The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars; the Lord breaks the cedars of Lebanon.

He makes Lebanon skip like a calf, and Sirion like a young wild ox.

The voice of the Lord flashes forth flames of fire.

The voice of the Lord shakes the wilderness; the Lord shakes the wilderness of Kadesh.

The voice of the Lord causes the oaks to whirl, and strips the forest bare; and in his temple all say, "Glory!"

The Lord sits enthroned over the flood; the Lord sits enthroned as king forever.

May the Lord give strength to his people! May the Lord bless his people with peace!

Matthew 3:13-17

Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented.

And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Good morning, everyone! Although I may be a bit late in saying it, I wish each and every one of you much happiness and fulfillment in the coming year.

But I find it difficult to believe that Christmas is over and this morning we are gathering for our first worship service of the year. Christmas this year seemed to rush by, which perhaps explains my reluctance to take down our tree at home. I just need to spend a bit more time with Christmas—I want to hold on to the joy and wonder it brings our way. Why? Because these are precious feelings, and I don't want them to end. Yes, we shared a wonderful Christmas together.

But this morning, I want us to remember something. The great moments of life, the times that touch us and cling to our memories, as if we are hearing the voice of God in a special way, are not just the moments when we have incredible experiences. No, great moments come to us in other, more subtle ways.

Today I want us to remember that we have made real spiritual progress when we realize that the greatest moments of life happen whenever the voice that proclaims the Good News is real to us. We have grown when we appreciate the fact that the voice speaks continuously. For children of the Spirit, all of life, each and every moment, becomes great because we are listening.

Some three thousand years ago the Roman thinker Epictetus observed, "Nature has given to man one tongue, but two ears, that we may hear from others twice as much as we speak." Over the years this saying has been restated in a variety of ways, but its truth remains unchanged. One of the keys to a successful spiritual life is being able to really hear what is around us. But how much of God's voice do we really hear? And how loudly must it speak to us?

How much of God's voice do we really hear? And how loudly must it speak to us?

In our scripture lessons for today, the theme of hearing God's voice comes to us in two different forms. Our Old Testament lesson, the 29th Psalm, refers to times when the divine voice cannot go unnoticed. The Psalmist proclaims: "The voice of the Lord is heard on the seas as thunder. The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars, and makes the mountains jump! The voice of the Lord makes the lightning flash, and the desert shake. The voice of the Lord strips the leaves from the trees."

This psalm, by the way, was a song used during Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year festival. It was intended to remind people that God speaks through creation and works in many awesome, terrible ways. It prepared people to listen. In these words the Jewish people were instructed to stand amid the magnificence of God's creation and hear his voice speak anew, even though its fury might make them afraid.

We have all heard God's voice speaking in this fashion. We know of the voice's power as it is spoken in storms. We know of its strength as it roars in the waters flowing over Niagara Falls. We know of its might as we stand on the edge of a canyon and gaze into the depths below. It is a voice that makes us feel small and insignificant. As such, it is a voice that must be heard.

But if this were the only way we heard God's voice, would we want to listen?

Fortunately, our New Testament lesson affirms the existence of another voice through which God speaks. The message, interestingly enough, comes to us in the account of the Lord's baptism. We might assume that this is simply an historical account, but our teachings make clear that its meaning goes much deeper, for it is really a lesson about our ability to hear the voice of God without his having to shout.

First, let us remember that John the Baptist appeared from the desert proclaiming that "the Kingdom of God is near." Once these words had been spoken, Jesus arrived, as if to affirm the kingdom's

closeness, and John recognized him. He asked that Jesus baptize him—but Jesus refused, saying that through his baptism by John they would both be doing “what God requires.”

In its spiritual sense, this story confirms why our Lord was born among us, and it is a real validation of the Christmas message. God came to us so that we might be near to him, and he near to us. What did this accomplish? In a very real way, it meant that God did not need to shout any longer.

Do you realize the difference between the messages contained in the Psalm and the Gospel reading? Where once in order to be heard God’s voice needed to be loud, needed to shake the trees and mountains and roar across the waters, now the voice is gentle. It is so close that the words are spoken as if emanating like a ray of sunlight through a cloud, or as a dove’s soft cooing. That voice gently affirms, “This is my own dear Son, with whom I am pleased.” Yes, it was a voice that could easily have been overlooked. But it needn’t be. The story urges us to be still, and listen.

In Biblical scholars this story is an account of what is known as a “theophany”—that’s a good word for us to learn at the start of a new year. But what is a theophany? A theophany is a manifestation of God at a particular time that involves visible or audible elements. It means that someone sees or hears God. I might add that the Bible is filled with theophanies, most of which are auditory.

***God does not need
to shout.***

In Genesis, even when no one was around to hear him, God said, “Let there be light, and water and land, and plants and animals and people”—and there were. Later on God spoke to Abraham and said, “To your descendants I will give this land.” God spoke to Moses out of a burning bush, and again out of a cloud before giving him the Ten Commandments. God spoke to Isaiah and other prophets, and they went on to tell the people what God had said.

In the New Testament also the voice of God spoke and was heard. But it spoke not only at the baptism of Jesus; Mary and Joseph and the shepherds heard a voice that told them of the Savior’s birth. And even

Paul, then known as Saul and a persecutor of Christians, reported that he heard the voice of God on the Damascus road. Yes, theophanies are a frequent Biblical experience.

But now I must ask you a question: Are theophanies real to you? Can you hear God's voice? Or do you, like so many of us, need a hearing aid?

The poet Swinburne described our situation well when he penned the following words: "sealed as the voice of a frost-bound stream." Think about that image for a moment. The voice of the stream is always there, but it can't always be heard because of the ice that coats the surface.

This image provides a useful hearing aid for us. Upon the streams of our lives, we allow so much ice to form that the voice of God is muffled and easily ignored. But just as spring comes to the earth and melts that ice, so too can we allow warmth to thaw the coldness of our spirits. In doing so, we can release that stream and free the voice so that it may be heard.

But from where does the warmth come? This question was answered in a wonderful way a number of years ago when George Burns played the role of a lifetime—God—in the movie *Oh, God!* You may recall that when he first appeared to protagonist John Denver, Denver inquired as to why he, a lowly grocery store clerk, had been selected to bring God's word to the world when so many other more worthy people could have been chosen. Burns replied, "Let's just say that it's because of your warm personality."

Are theophanies real to you? Can you hear God's voice?

"What do you mean by that? No one will listen to me!" Denver protested.

And Burns responded, "Yes, they will. They'll listen because you've taken the time to care."

May each of us take the time to care about God's voice in the year to come. May we do this by using the greatest hearing aid of all—our ability to be silent, to listen, and to care about what the voice of the

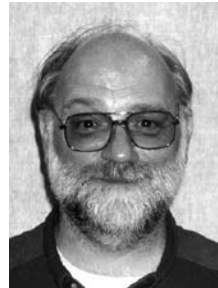
divine has to say to us. In doing so, may we discover that the voice is, in fact, real. Amen.

Prayer

Spirit of God, come as the wind to move us forward;
come as the dove to launch us heavenward;
come as the water to purify our spirits;
come as the cloud to abate our temptations;
come as the dew to refresh our languor;
come as the fire to purge our dross.

Christina Rossetti (1830-94)

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Daily Meditations

Monday, January 4

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

The universe as a whole and in every detail was created out of
divine love, by means of divine wisdom. *Divine Providence 2*

Tuesday, January 5

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

Divine love and wisdom radiate from the Lord as a single
whole. *Divine Providence 2*

Wednesday, January 6

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

There is some image of this whole in everything that has been
created. *Divine Providence 2*

Thursday, January 7

It shall not fear when heat comes,
and its leaves shall stay green;
in the year of drought it is not anxious,
and it does not cease to bear fruit. *Deuteronomy 34:7-8*

It is the intent of divine providence that everything created,
collectively and in every detail, should be this kind of whole,
and that if it is not, it should become one. *Divine Providence 2*

Friday, January 8

The heart is devious above all else;
it is perverse—who can understand it?
I the Lord test the mind and search the heart,
to give to all according to their ways, according to the fruit of
their doings. *Jeremiah 17:9-10*

The good that love does is actually good only to the extent
that it is united to the truth that wisdom perceives, and the truth
that wisdom perceives is actually true only to the extent that it is
united to the good that love does. *Divine Providence 2*

Saturday, January 9

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

If the good that love does is not united to the truth that
wisdom perceives, it is not really good, but it may seem to be;
and if the truth that wisdom perceives is not united to the good
that love does, it is not really true, but it may seem to be.

Divine Providence 2

JAN **10**

The Beginning of the Year

— Rev. Dr. George F. Dole

Exodus 12:1-11

The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt: This month shall mark for you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year for you. Tell the whole congregation of Israel that on the tenth of this month they are to take a lamb for each family, a lamb for each household. If a household is too small for a whole lamb, it shall join its closest neighbor in obtaining one; the lamb shall be divided in proportion to the number of people who eat of it. Your lamb shall be without blemish, a year-old male; you may take it from the sheep or from the goats. You shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month; then the whole assembled congregation of Israel shall slaughter it at twilight. They shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it. They shall eat the lamb that same night; they shall eat it roasted over the fire with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. Do not eat any of it raw or boiled in water, but roasted over the fire, with its head, legs, and inner organs. You shall let none of it remain until the morning; anything that remains until the morning you shall burn. This is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it hurriedly. It is the passover of the Lord.

Matthew 13:31-52

He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches." He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened." Jesus told the crowds all these things in parables; without a parable he told them nothing. This was to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet: "I will open my mouth to speak in parables; I will proclaim what has been hidden

from the foundation of the world.” Then he left the crowds and went into the house.

And his disciples approached him, saying, “Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field.” He answered, “The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!

“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it. “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Have you understood all this?”

They answered, “Yes.” And he said to them, “Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.”

This month shall be to you the beginning of months: it shall be the first month of the year for you. Exodus 12:2

There are three basic kinds of “special days”: those in memory of outstanding individuals, those that memorialize historical events, and those that mark seasonal changes. The first two tend to overlap,

since a great event may focus on an outstanding individual, or we may choose an individual's birthday for celebration.

***Passover
changed the
calendar.***

Apparently most Israelite holy days were of the seasonal variety. They celebrated first fruits, harvest, and ingathering. The one great exception was Passover, the celebration of the Exodus. Its purpose was to remind Israel of the divine acts by which she had been delivered from slavery. The Passover Seder centers in a retelling of the story of that deliverance. The closest parallel in our calendar is Independence Day, the Fourth of July, but it seems that we celebrate it with much less of a sense of the event or events that it is supposed to call to mind.

Certainly, Independence Day does not loom as large for us as Passover did and does for Israel and Judaism. Passover was not just fitted into the existing calendar, it changed the calendar. "This month shall be to you the beginning of months: it shall be the first month of the year for you." This can be understood as a recognition that the story of the nation really starts here. The tales of the patriarchs were prologue. The nation proper began to come into existence only when the people began to act together under a single leader.

The basis of our own New Year is seasonal rather than historical. The choice of January first probably stems from a compromise between the solar and lunar calendars, representing the new moon closest to the winter solstice. The solar calendar would have the new year start on December twenty-second, when things turn around and the days start getting longer instead of shorter. January first was the official beginning of the year in Rome from the middle of the second century B.C. In medieval times, European Christianity opted for March twenty-fifth, and while William the Conqueror in the eleventh century chose the first of January, England seems to have reverted to the general European practice until the adoption of the Gregorian calendar in 1582. Sweden, incidentally, did not adopt the Gregorian calendar until 1753, and for a while Swedenborg had to specify which system he was using when he dated his manuscripts.

The closeness of New Year's Day and Christmas is no mere coincidence. The date chosen in 274 for Christmas was that of a

Roman festival of the winter solstice, celebrating “the birthday of the unconquered sun (*natalis solis invicti*).” We cannot help but think of the Gospel of John: “The light is shining in darkness, and the darkness has not mastered it.”

In a way, then, the whole focus of our New Year is very different from that of Passover. The Passover looked back in gratitude. But if we look back at the winter solstice, what we see is the gathering darkness. New Year’s Day looks ahead. It is a statement of confident hope, a recognition that the light is gathering strength. It is designed to awaken optimism.

A century ago, the mood in this country was strikingly optimistic. Material resources seemed inexhaustible, and technological progress promised a standard of living undreamed of. Thoughtful people looked ahead and saw a century of peace and plenty coming—and as far as plenty is concerned, they were not far wrong. The majority of people in our country, the whole middle class, live with comforts and conveniences that were beyond the reach of even the wealthiest a century ago.

If the prophets of that era were right about plenty, though, they were obviously not right about peace, either international or domestic. They were not right about the elimination of poverty. Even more to the point, they were not right about the elimination of discontent. With our twenty-twenty hindsight, we can only label their optimism as naive. They did not realize how deep are the roots of our inhumanity to each other.

Two world wars, the Holocaust, domestic violence, economic greed, and ecological callousness have made that kind of optimism unthinkable. Among philosophers and historians, the very concept of “progress” is suspect. So it was startling at the Parliament of the World’s Religions in 1993 to hear the Dalai Lama state his conviction that we were about ready to turn the corner, that the next millennium would be far better than the last.

***How deep are
the roots of our
inhumanity to each
other!***

The Dalai Lama is not naive. He has seen his country brutally conquered by an utterly atheistic Chinese regime. He and many of his people live in exile.

***Goodness is
greater than
evil.***

No, when we look at what the Dalai Lama has been through, and what he is affirming, perhaps we should ask whether there may not be such a thing as “naive pessimism.” Just as people a century ago got so caught up in all the wonderful things that were happening that they did not realize the extent and the strength of human evil, perhaps we are so caught up in all the terrible things that are happening that we do not realize the extent and the strength of human goodness. The help that came from the community of Bridgewater in this church’s time of need was very real. The affection for this church that surfaced among its members was very real. In the same vein, there are loving and thoughtful spouses and parents as well as abusive ones. There is a factory owner who chooses to pay his employees and continue their medical benefits even though his mill has been devastated by fire.

In fact, we have no real way of adding up the total score to determine which outweighs which. In that sense, we have no definitive way of measuring “progress.” Pessimism says this proves that progress is an illusion, but that is an unwarranted conclusion. Just because I don’t have a scale does not mean that I am not gaining weight. It doesn’t mean that I am not losing weight or holding my own, either. It means no more than it says—that I cannot measure myself in this regard.

We can and do measure the times of sunrise and sunset, the lengths of day and night. We are quite sure that for more than a week now, the days have been getting longer. This does not mean that the difficulties of winter are over—we know from experience that they are probably just beginning. It does mean that winter will not have the last word, that spring will come.

Realistic optimism, similarly, does not sweep difficulties under the rug. Rather, it insists that the power of goodness is ultimately greater than the power of evil, and if God is perfect love and wisdom, we can hardly believe otherwise. We know from experience that,

in individual cases, wrong can have the last word. New Year's Day reminds us that ultimately, universally, good is omnipotent. Perhaps our little planet could be one of the individual cases in which wrong has the last word, but after all, it is a very little planet.

All this comes to its sharpest focus in us as individuals. When we are pessimistic about the world around us, this reflects in part our evaluation of ourselves. We project. When we see violence or injustice outside ourselves, we sense within it the only feelings we know at first hand—our own. We may not be able to imagine them at that intensity, but we do have a sense of their essential quality. We wonder what may lie beneath the surface of our own consciousness, and are not in any hurry to find out.

Our theology indicates that if we could see beneath the surface, we would find evils that we have not yet dealt with. It assures us, though, that this is not the whole story, not at all. If we could see through the layer that Swedenborg calls “the natural,” we would find that inner person which still and always reflects the image of its creator. The worst life we can lead does not destroy that image, but “closes it off,” imprisons it. It is the life force of everything that emerges on the surface of our consciousness. Our most shameful impulses are not so much denials as distortions of it.

Make no mistake, the distortions can be terrible. Hitler saw Christ as “the greatest early fighter against the world enemy, the Jews,” and saw himself as carrying that battle to completion.

But this does not actually destroy the beauty of the Lord's love or cancel out its power. In fact, we do not appreciate the power of that love except as we acknowledge the power of its opposite, just as the hope awakened by the winter solstice has meaning only against the background of the gathering darkness. Perhaps we may simply hope that naive pessimism is ultimately as fragile as naive optimism.

***Nothing can destroy
the Lord's love.***

One closing thought. It is dangerous to see things in terms of simple, polar contrasts between light and darkness, good and evil. It can all too readily lead to a Holocaust or a Bosnia. Yet without a moral compass, we are truly lost. The problems come when, to use

doctrinal terms, we make our judgments on the basis of external appearances. This physical world is a very ambiguous place. It is only in the spiritual world, and there only in the light of heaven, that evil and good appear outwardly as they really are.

What we can know here and now is that good is always loving and perceptive, inherently trustful, and that it treasures both difference and harmony. What we can know about evil is that it is fearful and deceptive, desperate to be in control, and intolerant of contradiction. And what New Year's Day tells us is that, of these, good is ultimately, infinitely, the stronger. Amen.

Prayer

Holy Spirit, Lord and giver of life, moving force of all things,
root of all creation, purifier of all that lives;
remove from us all that stains our beauty,
wipe away all our sins and anoint all our wounds;
that, awakened by your Spirit,
our lives may shine forth your praise,
now and forever.

St. Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179)

The Rev. Dr. George F. Dole is a professor at the Swedenborgian House of Studies in Berkeley, CA, pastor of the New Church in Bath, ME, and a translator and author.



Daily Meditations

Monday, January 11

I will extol you, my God and King, and bless your name forever and ever.

Every day I will bless you, and praise your name forever and ever. *Psalms 145:1-2*

We finite beings cannot grasp what anything infinite and eternal is, and yet at the same time we can. We cannot grasp it because the finite cannot contain the infinite; and we can grasp it because there are abstract notions that enable us to see that certain things do exist even though we cannot see what their nature is. *Divine Providence 46.3*

Tuesday, January 12

Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised; his greatness is unsearchable.

One generation shall laud your works to another, and shall declare your mighty acts. *Psalms 145:3-4*

If God were not infinite, then, nothing finite would exist; if the Infinite were not the All, there would not be anything; and if God had not created everything from himself, there would be nothing real, nothing at all. In short, we are because God is.

Divine Providence 46.3

Wednesday, January 13

On the glorious splendor of your majesty, and on your wondrous works, I will meditate.

The might of your awesome deeds shall be proclaimed, and I will declare your greatness. *Psalms 145:5-6*

What is intrinsically infinite and intrinsically eternal is the same as Divinity. *Divine Providence 47*

Thursday, January 14

They shall celebrate the fame of your abundant goodness, and shall sing aloud of your righteousness.

The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. *Psalms 145:7-8*

It is hard for us to attain union or unity (of what is good and what is true or of what is evil and what is false) in this world, because as long as we are living here we are kept in a state of reformation or rebirth. *Divine Providence 47*

Friday, January 15

The Lord is good to all, and his compassion is over all that he has made.

All your works shall give thanks to you, O Lord, and all your faithful shall bless you. *Psalms 145:9-10*

In everything it does, divine providence focuses on what is infinite and eternal from itself, especially in the intent to save the human race.

There is an image of what is infinite and eternal in the angelic heaven made up of members of the human race who have been saved. *Divine Providence 47*

Saturday, January 16

They shall speak of the glory of your kingdom, and tell of your power,

to make known to all people your mighty deeds, and the glorious splendor of your kingdom. *Psalms 145:11-12*

The very core of divine providence is its focus on what is infinite and eternal in the forming of the angelic heaven so that it can be a single person in the Lord's sight, a person who is his image. *Divine Providence 47*

House of Bread

Mr. Robert McCluskey

17 JAN

Micah 5:2-4

But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days. Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has brought forth; then the rest of his kindred shall return to the people of Israel. And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth.

Matthew 2:1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'"

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

When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw

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

“Rise up, O men of God, have done with lesser things; give heart and mind and soul and strength to serve the King of kings!”

Our opening hymn sets a good tone for us as we begin a new year. It reminds us to equip ourselves anew for the journey ahead by focusing on the power and glory of the risen Christ, who is with us now. Today we do so with the sacrament of communion, a living symbol of that “daily bread” that sustains us through all that is to come.

The prophet Micah tells us that Bethlehem, although small, inconspicuous, and relatively insignificant in relation to the larger history of Israel, would nevertheless become the site of great things. When these words were written, the author was aware of two points we also should note. The first is that Bethlehem had already served

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as the location for most of the story of Ruth, a brief, relatively inconspicuous book, written at the time of the judges, that plays a key role in the overall narrative. It is to Ruth, in the town of Bethlehem, that a son is born. “They named him Obed; he was the father of Jesse, the father of David.” As we know, it is from the house of David that Jesus was born. Obed,

the son of Ruth, born in Bethlehem, was to become part of that grand genealogy linking Jesus to Adam, Abraham, and David.

Along with this Biblical precedent for Bethlehem’s important role in the history of Israel, there is another reason why Micah raises it up as a place of great things yet to come. That is its literal meaning: Bethlehem (*beth lechem*) means “house of bread.”

There are many images of goodness or love in the Bible: oil, fire, a variety of animals, mountains, and more. Bread is another one, and

represents a very specific type of goodness or love. It is simple, basic, and universal; it represents the universal love God has for all people, and which he extends to both the good and the evil. It is that basic, fundamental sense of the goodness of all life, universally, that sustains us daily, in and through all things. Bread is as necessary for natural life as God's love is for spiritual life. This was even more the case in Biblical times, when not only bread but anything else was even harder to come by.

*The bread of life,
God's gift of love, is
given freely.*

This is why bread is so central in the Biblical narrative. Its lack drove Jacob's children to seek refuge in Egypt; its gracious descent from heaven in the form of manna preserved the Hebrews in the wilderness, and continues to stand at the center of the annual observance of Passover; it sustained David's men as they battled the Philistines. Bread was at the center of one of the three questions asked of Christ by the devil in the wilderness: "Why don't you turn that stone into bread?" It was a key ingredient, along with fish, in feeding the multitudes; Christ used it to reveal an important clue to the correspondence of nature and spirit (Matt. 16:5-12). In the powerful discourse on the bread of life in John 6, the image of bread is linked to the impending death of Christ, the breaking of his body. And, of course, it is the central element, along with wine, in the sacrament of communion, the most concrete symbol of God's gift of love and goodness to us, his children. This is the gift we need if we are to truly live as spiritual beings, reflecting the divine qualities of love and wisdom in our lives. For these are not things we can acquire or produce on our own; they must be received from above.

This is seen rather dramatically in the Roman Catholic understanding of communion. Here the bread is cast in the form of a small, inconspicuous wafer that nourishes our spiritual life. It is reminiscent of the manna given to the Hebrews in the wilderness. It is called the Eucharist, which refers to charity or grace, emphasizing that this bread, the bread of life, God's gift of love, is given freely. As Isaiah 55 tells us, God's love is not for sale; it is for the taking. In the sacrament of communion, in the sharing of the bread and the

wine, God's gifts of love and truth are made visible and accessible in a way that is ultimately simple and straightforward; the sacrament of communion is intended to speak to all who would hear its Word. Notice also that Isaiah links the bread and the wine with the renewal of God's covenant, his promise to forgive and save. In the same way, the Lord would use bread and wine to describe the renewal and expansion of this covenant to all people.

What happened to Bethlehem? Well, Bethlehem is the house of bread; Bethlehem is where love and goodness dwells in us. Like all things in scripture, it refers to a spiritual quality in each of us. Specifically, Bethlehem represents that place in us where the Lord can be born, that place from which we maintain our own link to our spiritual "genealogy" and heritage, rooted in God; that place from which goodness flows into our lives. Bethlehem is that small,

***Bethlehem represents
that place in us where
the Lord can be born.***

inconspicuous, quiet, unassuming, and humble spiritual center within us, of which we have spoken before at this season. Here is where the action is, here is where God descends to us, here is where we begin the journey of following and being led by the Lord: in the house of bread.

As small as it may be, Bethlehem contains the potential not only for great good, but also for great evil. In the story of the Lord's birth given in Matthew, we notice a blend of spiritual wonder and mystery with political intrigue and conspiracy. I am thinking here of the "costars" of this story, Herod and the wise men.

Herod represents the internal challenges and threats that we experience whenever we honor the Christ child within us, whenever we allow ourselves to be nourished by the bread of life. In a sense, God's love brings out the worst in us: our *proprium* [our sense of autonomous selfhood] at its best! We note that Herod is not in Bethlehem, but in Jerusalem, which is now occupied by the enemy. This is an image of the individual being ruled by truth alone, one whose doctrine or spiritual principles have been conformed to the world, to the *proprium*—one who is in need of salvation by a higher power. On his own, Herod is unable to find the Christ child; we are

no different: armed only with truth, ruled by our propriums, we too are unable to find the Lord in the midst of our lives.

We can compare Herod with the wise men, who represent another spiritual influence that operates whenever the Lord is born in us, whenever love descends to meet us. This is our recognition and acknowledgment of the Lord's power and sovereignty. The wise men represent a spirit of sincere gratitude, thanksgiving, and praise for God. This is precisely the "wisdom" that leads each of us to seek the Lord in Bethlehem, in the house of bread, where goodness dwells in us. It is this, God's love, that we can be truly thankful for, because it does indeed sustain and nourish us at all times, even in the wilderness; that is, even when we reject it. To accept the simple fact of our dependency on God and his steadfast love for us leads us eventually to discover his presence within us, resting quietly in the house of bread, where goodness dwells. To accept this simple fact, that we are "weak, but Thou art mighty," leads us eventually to respond to the gift of God's love with gifts of our own: gold, frankincense, and myrrh—love of God, faith in the Word, and service to the neighbor.

On the path to heaven, we are to be led and fed by God, no one else. "Guide us, O Thou great Jehovah... feed us till we want no more." That is to say, equip us, Lord, for the journey ahead, with the gifts we so desperately need, your love and truth. And let us each prepare ourselves to become a house of bread, a place where goodness dwells and the Lord reigns in innocence and peace, a Bethlehem in the midst of our lives.

Prayer

Lord, help us to receive your gifts of love and truth in a spirit of genuine need and thanksgiving, so that we might be truly inspired to live out your Word in our lives. Nourish us with the bread of heaven. Amen.

This sermon was preached at the New Church (Swedenborgian) in New York City, January 4, 1998.

Daily Meditations

Monday, January 18

Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and your dominion endures throughout all generations. *Psalms 145:13a*

To say that we are led and taught by the Lord alone is to say that the Lord is the only source of our life, since it is the intentions of our life that are led and the intelligence of our life that is taught. *Divine Providence 156*

Tuesday, January 19

The Lord is faithful in all his words, and gracious in all his deeds. *Psalms 145:13b*

Each of us is assigned a place in the Lord (that is, in heaven) according to the quality of that union or acceptance of him. *Divine Providence 164*

Wednesday, January 20

The Lord upholds all who are falling, and raises up all who are bowed down.

The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food in due season. *Psalms 145:14-15*

There is spiritual light and there is physical light. Outwardly, they seem to be alike, but inwardly they are different. Physical light comes from the sun of the physical world and is essentially dead, while spiritual light comes from the sun of the spiritual world and is essentially alive. *Divine Providence 166*

Thursday, January 21

You open your hand, satisfying the desire of every living thing.
The Lord is just in all his ways, and kind in all his doings.

Psalms 145:16-17

We are taught by the Lord through the Word, and teaching
and preaching from the Word, and therefore directly by the
Lord alone. *Divine Providence 171*

Friday, January 22

The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him
in truth.

He fulfills the desire of all who fear him; he also hears their cry,
and saves them. *Psalms 145:18-19*

Outwardly, we are led and taught by the Lord to all
appearances as though we were leading and teaching ourselves.
Divine Providence 174

Saturday, January 23

The Lord watches over all who love him, but all the wicked he
will destroy.

My mouth will speak the praise of the Lord, and all flesh will
bless his holy name forever and ever. *Psalms 145:20-21*

This means that without this appearance we would have no
acknowledgment of God, no charity and faith, no consequent
reformation and regeneration, and therefore no salvation. *Ibid.*

JAN 24

To Have Successful Failures

(Among Other New Year's Resolutions)

Rev. Dr. James F. Lawrence

Habakkuk 3:17-19

Though the fig tree does not blossom, and no fruit is on the vines; though the produce of the olive fails and the fields yield no food; though the flock is cut off from the fold and there is no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will exult in the God of my salvation. God, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, and makes me tread upon the heights.

In last Sunday's *Calvin and Hobbes* the two are tromping through snow, with Hobbes offering the opening query: "Are you making any resolutions for the New Year?"

"Nope!" Calvin quips. "I want everything to stay the same as it was this year."

"Everything?" asks a bewildered Hobbes.

"Right," says Calvin. "This year was lousy, but at least it's familiar. I hate change! It's too disruptive! When things are different, you have to think about the change and deal with it! I like things to stay the same, so I can take everything for granted. Besides, things keep changing for the worse! The longer I live, the more complicated everything gets. I say, let's stop here before life gets any harder! From now on," Calvin concludes, "no more change!"

The case argued and closed, the two stand around in the snow for a few panels. Then, finally, Calvin bursts into a run, saying, "I'm bored. Let's go do something different!"

"Some things," Hobbes observes with wise countenance, "don't change."

Marking the close of the old year and the beginning of yet another new one brings home in its own dramatic fashion the unyielding flow of change, the march of days, and it often seems good and meet to take this opportunity and reflect upon the big picture. It does indeed sometimes seem that everything keeps changing. One of our persistent challenges is to make sense of this flow of experience and phenomena and our own roles in it.

Swedenborg informs us that in the sea of change, there is one and only one absolutely constant factor in our lives. This is the Lord's presence. Everything else changes—our world, our circumstances, our bodies, our relationships, our values, our knowledge—but the Lord is always with us, and always the same. It is not easy for us to comprehend this, partly because our awareness of his presence is one of the things that changes. The Lord's thoughts and ways are infinitely higher and wiser than our own, so we live with a tremendous discrepancy that comes into play with our goals and our constant endeavors to succeed in our lives. Even if we are diligently spiritual, it can be immensely challenging to immerse ourselves in our life's hopes and dreams and responsibilities, and then to evaluate our performance critically as we try to sense the Lord's guiding hand. Listening for the Lord's voice in the buzz of our lives can be like trying to make out the melody on a radio frequency that is virtually all static.

So much of the time in our living throughout the year, we feel off the pace and have trouble getting all our ducks lined up just right. We set out, let's say, to have dinner on the table by six o'clock sharp. But the phone rings at five fifteen and everything gets set back by ten minutes. We set an absolute deadline of Wednesday morning as the time by which we will finish a certain project. But one thing after another comes up, and when Wednesday morning rolls around we are not finished. We're responsible for supervising a certain individual whose performance continues to fall shy of what we really need. We keep thinking of things to say to the person, but when push comes to shove, we aren't really honest with them.

These and a myriad of similar life situations throughout a year of living can feel like little nagging failures in our ability to pull our life together in the way that we want, to keep our life rolling along

as smoothly and tranquilly as a Rolls Royce on a Sunday afternoon drive. Most of us, however, get stuck with what is a promising little vehicle, to be sure, but which for some reason keeps having lots of irritating problems. We get frustrated by a battery of little system failures throughout the year.

Sometimes these frustrations impel us to try harder or to do something differently. Sometimes we let them assault our self-esteem, and we feel that we've failed. Sometimes we may actually decide that our standards are set unrealistically high. Usually, however, such failures to live up to the personal standards and goals that we have set, either consciously or unconsciously, eat at us to a greater or lesser extent, depending on how deeply we believed in the rightness of our aims.

Here is where this familiar process can become the lifeblood of our spiritual growth in our next year of living. Right at this point, our theology has something vitally important to tell us: that the sense of failure normally prompts some of our deepest, hardest, and most soul-searching thinking. When everything is going well, we are not likely to lie awake at night trying to figure out why. We are usually content to believe that we're doing things right, and we scarcely know how to go about discovering exactly what is so right about it. When something goes wrong, though, we never stop going over it, even in our sleep. We turn over and over the circumstances and our past words and deeds, we dissect possibilities, and we keep wrestling with it.

***Failure can become
the lifeblood of our
spiritual growth in
the next year.***

In competitive sports there is the familiar demon of being too far ahead, of succeeding too much. A team or player in such a situation is all too likely to become complacent; frequently the pendulum swings and the other team comes roaring back—and often wins. Such complacency is known as “snatching defeat from the jaws of victory”! If you look at what is happening on the respective benches when one team has gone way out in front, the scenes are usually quite dramatically different. The losing team, the one experiencing a sense of failure, is in turmoil. The coaches are scribbling, speaking with

great energy to each other and to the players, and the entire team looks deeply concerned. Over on the winning side, however, it is all smiles and high-fives. They are starting to lean back on the bench and banter at another with happy grins on their faces. Only when things start to fall apart for them again do they begin asking any serious questions about what they are doing.

This all suggests, as we stand at the portal of another year of precious life, that we should take a good look at our common assumptions about success and failure. We cannot avoid pursuing goals, setting standards for ourselves, and experiencing to a certain extent satisfaction or frustration, depending upon how well we feel we are living up to our own standards.

*The Lord wants us
to become angels.*

Having goals and standards is absolutely necessary. But perhaps a theological and spiritual life skill that we can blend more deeply and profoundly into our weekly efforts throughout the year is the ability to shift focus frequently and, instead of fretting over whether we are succeeding or failing in this, that, or the other, ask of ourselves: "Have I learned anything from this? Am I changing as a result of struggling with this challenge?" As we become authentic with such an inner and spiritual perspective on our personal performance, we are in truth opening our inner mind more and more to the light of heaven.

The Lord has provided some explicit criteria for evaluating our endeavors in this way. In his Word and in revelation the Lord has given us a kind of general outline of his thoughts on the matter—adapted, of course, to our worldly level of comprehension. Quite simply, he wants us to become angels. He doesn't much care whether we become rich or famous or influential, except as this may help us to become wise and perceptive, affectionate and compassionate, and consistently helpful in our growing competencies. To paraphrase a couple of statements from Swedenborg's *Divine Providence*, the Lord focuses on eternal issues and sees temporal issues only in terms of their relationship to eternal ones. So getting that promotion, or making that relationship happen, or embarking on that new career path or volunteer project, or becoming a whiz in the kitchen, may

end up being either a blessing or a detour depending upon eternal considerations, which only the Lord sees with utter clarity.

An imaginative response often produces a personal breakthrough.

Every once in a while, you'll hear someone say, "The best thing that ever happened to me was my heart attack," or "losing that job," or "flunking that class" or some such occurrence that seemed a setback or failure at the time. Behind every such statement is a growth experience. Losing a job does not automatically change a person's life for the better. Letting a high-cholesterol diet bring us perilously close to death does not *ipso facto* produce wisdom. Rather, such apparent setbacks provide opportunities for creative engagement with the circumstances we face. An imaginative response often produces a personal breakthrough.

The Lord's divine providence over all of life means that the challenges we face are not exactly haphazard and random, but instead emerge from issues and situations that are central to our spiritual situation. So our frustrations and seeming failures are the result of living at our personal edge—a thin line on which the Lord is also walking with us, every step of the way. That includes every late project, every burnt casserole, every relationship stress, every overlooked detail.

If we could learn without living at our edge, I have no doubt that our loving Lord would lead us to heaven by one victory after another, from delight to delight. This doesn't seem to be the case, though. So it behooves us to look beyond our own meaning toward the Lord's meaning in all the circumstances of our life, and to remember this: with our spiritual perspective fully engaged, we can have no failures; we can only keep growing and growing. May the Lord's blessing be with us all.

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Daily Meditations

Monday, January 25

Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock!
You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth before
Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh.
Stir up your might, and come to save us! *Psalms 80:1-2*

The Lord cannot act contrary to the laws of divine providence,
because to do so would be to act contrary to his own divine love
and his own divine wisdom, and therefore contrary to himself.
Divine Providence 331

Tuesday, January 26

You brought a vine out of Egypt;
you drove out the nations and planted it.
You cleared the ground for it;
it took deep root and filled the land. *Psalms 80:8-9*

I explained in *Angelic Wisdom about Divine Love and Wisdom* that the Lord is divine love and divine wisdom and that these two are reality itself and life itself, the source of the reality and life of everything. *Divine Providence 331*

Wednesday, January 27

Why then have you broken down its walls,
so that all who pass along the way pluck its fruit?
The boar from the forest ravages it,
and all that move in the field feed on it. *Psalms 80:12-13*

So divine providence is constantly at work for our salvation;
but it cannot save more of us than want to be saved.
Divine Providence 333

Thursday, January 28

Turn again, O God of hosts;
look down from heaven, and see;
have regard for this vine,
the stock that your right hand planted. *Psalm 80:14-15*

I have also said that the working of divine providence continues forever, because all angels grow more perfect in wisdom forever. *Divine Providence 334*

Friday, January 29

They have burned it with fire, they have cut it down;
may they perish at the rebuke of your countenance.
But let your hand be upon the one at your right hand,
the one whom you made strong for yourself. *Psalm 80:16-17*

The working of divine providence is constantly done through means, out of pure mercy. Divine providence has both means and ways. The means are what serve to make us human and grow in perfection in discernment and volition. The ways are the manners in which these processes happen. *Divine Providence 335*

Saturday, January 30

Then we will never turn back from you;
give us life, and we will call on your name.
Restore us, O Lord God of hosts;
let your face shine, that we may be saved. *Psalm 80:18-19*

Instant salvation by direct mercy is impossible. I have just explained that the work of divine providence for our salvation begins at our birth and continues until the end of our life and then goes on to eternity, and that this work is constantly being done out of pure mercy and through means. *Divine Providence 338*

Swedenborg's Birthday

Rev. John Maine

31 JAN

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.

A lot of people have been hurt by organized religion. Even the words "organized religion" leave many with a bad taste in the mouth. They've become synonymous with things like hypocrisy, narrow-mindedness, and arbitrary rules, not to mention forms of worship that frequently seem boring and incomprehensible.

This is especially evident when you're a kid in church. Many people have shared with me their memories of being made to say stuff they didn't understand and believe stuff that didn't seem to make sense.

And maybe that's the worst of it, that it didn't make any sense. That's very serious, because it's a violation of our integrity to have to mouth things that don't touch our hearts, to say something we're told is true when it isn't true for us, when we don't even really know what it means. All that stuff about how we're evil and sinners and how Jesus' sacrificial death has saved everybody and that if you just believe in that, everything will be okay again—what's all that about, anyway?

And then there are all those other stories in the Bible, which is this big book that's really hard to read and it seems like hardly anyone does nowadays. You're supposed to believe it's literally and absolutely true in every detail because it's God's Word. But it has stuff in it like the world being made in seven days that nobody thinks is true anymore. And it's about these people who lived thousands of years ago and wore strange clothes that look like bed sheets and who mostly spent their time herding camels and goats. None of it's like anything we know today, but it's all supposed to really matter for some reason.

Only it doesn't—not for most people, anyway, which is why current polls indicate that close to 80 percent of Canadians say “No thanks!” when it comes to going to church.

Now, on the one hand, I think that's perfectly understandable, given what so many have experienced. Their Christian faith has literally become a closed book to them, a Bible that sits on the shelf and never gets opened. The attitude is “Been there, done that, and don't want to do it again!” Why? Because nothing beautiful came from it, nothing that was true to their souls, nothing that lifted them up into a whole other way to be, a way that was real and good.

But turning away from the church and from faith is very sad, too, simply because we need it so much and because it really is all there, in that closed book. But to be opened again, that book's meaning needs to be unlocked. We need a key that can let the Spirit come forth in a new way. It just won't do to repeat slogans like “Jesus is your personal savior!” over and over. We need something more.

We need to understand, so we can respond as a whole person—because we can't shut off our brains while our hearts ache for what

is beautiful and true. And how they do ache! That same 80 percent of Canadians who don't attend church almost all claim to have a personal belief in God. They just can't seem to find him in what "organized religion" has to offer. They're looking everywhere else, each pretty much on his or her own, looking for a wisdom that can stand the test of time and a love that will last forever. The result, I think, is a pervasive sense of restlessness these days, of searching, of human hearts yearning for something "more."

But as the apostle John tells us, the Lord knows our hearts better than we do. He knows how we long to understand, to come to him with both heart and mind. After all, before his earthly ministry even began, where do we find Jesus? In the temple, asking questions. Not just worshiping, not just accepting whatever was told to him, but asking questions of the teachers of "the Law"—that is to say, the Torah, the Old Testament scriptures. He was trying to find out what those ancient teachings really meant, what secrets they held.

Jesus, we're told, astonished the teachers with his answers and his understanding. Maybe those wise old men of the temple began to see the scriptures in a new way for the first time. Maybe they began to glimpse a whole other possibility and purpose they hadn't even guessed at before, thanks to this unusual young boy. But that was what Jesus was about, wasn't it? His whole ministry was designed to open people's eyes to the truth they hadn't seen before but that lay right before them, in the scriptures and in his own life.

But not to open their eyes all of the truth, because Jesus knew, as no one else could, that for much of it we simply weren't ready yet. Thus we read in the Gospel of John that near the end of his earthly life, Jesus says to the disciples, "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, the Spirit will guide you into all the truth; for the Spirit will not speak on his own but will speak whatever he hears" in heaven (John 16:12-13). And Jesus later added that a time "is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figures [of speech] but will tell you plainly of the Father" (John 16:25).

*The Lord knows our
hearts better than
we do.*

A time is coming, Jesus tells us, when he will tell us plainly all the secrets of heaven and hell, of this world and the next—of everything! “You’re not ready for it yet,” says Jesus. “You wouldn’t be able to handle it. But there’ll come a time when you are ready—indeed when you’ll really need to know. Then I will send my Spirit to tell you everything, to explain everything.”

Well, in fact, that time came. It came a couple of hundred years ago at the dawning of what we now call the modern age, the era of sudden and utterly unprecedented human advances in science and technology. After living pretty much the same way for so many thousands of years, humanity has taken a sudden fork in the road, and we’re still changing incredibly fast. Who knows where it will lead—to cloning, artificial intelligence, new life forms, the eventual colonization of other planets?

But two centuries ago, when it all started, the leading thinkers and scientists of the day were quite dazzled by the possibilities. Religion became old hat almost overnight. The Bible was just a lot of myths and old wives’ tales that science had proved couldn’t be true. Instead, this material world that science analyzed so well was all there really was. There was, alas, no afterlife, but the good news, the new gospel, was that men would be the masters of the material realm. Indeed, we’d become like gods with our new technologies, “masters of the universe”!

Humanity has taken a sudden fork in the road, and we’re still changing fast.

Well, we know today how far off the rails we’ve gone with that kind of thinking: world wars, nuclear weapons, genocides, massive global pollution, extinctions, and so on. It’s literally a miracle we haven’t destroyed ourselves despite our best efforts to do so. But that’s the Lord stepping in, as always. He saw that, in our knowledge of the world, we had grown tremendously, but in our wisdom, not at all.

So it was indeed time, the appointed hour that the Lord had predicted so many centuries before. Just as we were getting ready to launch on our present course, he called to one of the greatest scientists of the day. He was a Swedish gentleman in his fifty-sixth year, and his

name was Emanuel Swedenborg. It was to Swedenborg that the Lord sent his promised Spirit of truth, so that this great scientific mind could be witness to heaven and hell and everything of the spiritual world and then describe it in detail, exactly as it is. The Lord also led Swedenborg by the Spirit to read and understand the scriptures in a wholly new way, a way that revealed deeper truths no one else had even guessed at before.

God is known by many names, but he is Love above all and in all.

Let us be clear: Swedenborg's writings are neither a replacement of the Bible nor an addition to it. Only the Bible contains the Word of God. But Swedenborg's books do contain a new understanding of the Word. As the Lord came in the flesh two thousand years ago to astonish us, so he came in the Spirit two centuries ago, to this one man, to do so again. In this way the Lord has proclaimed nothing less than the dawning of a new age, not of cars and computers, but of the Spirit. For he has deemed us ready to know, in plain speech, as he promised, all the exact workings of the spiritual world and our part in it as spiritual beings, both in this life and eternally.

And the great news is that this new age is for everyone, all God's children, not just Christians, or just this or that religion. The coming of the Lord's Spirit is happening everywhere. It's expressing itself in a new consciousness that's beginning to open up all over the world as more and more people realize that God is known by many names. But he is Love above all and in all, and his way of love is the only way for us to live. This is what Swedenborg called the New Church Universal—not an organization, but a new awareness that's slowly bringing people together as they realize how interconnected we all are, one family of God. It's the new way for the new global village that we are today.

But if there's a New Church Universal coming, there's also a New Church Specific—a church in the more conventional sense, a specific community where people can gather to celebrate this new understanding of the gospel. This, at least in part, is us. We are the New Church, with a new message and a new hope.

Today, as we celebrate the birthday of Emanuel Swedenborg, may the Lord bless our efforts to honor his life by bringing this new message and hope to the world. May we do our part to build the New Church. Amen.

Prayer

Lord, on your last days on earth you promised to leave us the Holy Spirit as our present comforter. We also know that your Holy Spirit blows over this earth. But we do not understand him. Many think he is only a wind or a feeling. Let your Holy Spirit break into our lives. Let him come like blood into our veins, so that we will be driven entirely by your will. Let your Spirit blow over the wealthy parts of the world, so that people there will be humble. Let your Spirit blow over the poor and war-torn parts of the world, so that people there need suffer no more.

There are a thousand voices and spirits in this world, but we want to hear only your voice, and be open only to your Spirit. Amen.

Prayer of a young Ghanaian Christian, quoted in The Oxford Book of Prayer (Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 153.

The Rev. John Maine is the pastor of the Church of the Good Shepherd in Kitchener, Ontario.



Daily Meditations

Monday, February 1

When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dream. *Psalms 126:1*

All our thoughts arise from impulses of our life's love; there
are no thoughts whatever that arise from any other source.
Divine Providence 192

Tuesday, February 1

Then our mouth was filled with laughter,
and our tongue with shouts of joy;
then it was said among the nations,
"The Lord has done great things for them." *Psalms 126:3*

Only the Lord knows the impulses of our life's love.
Divine Providence 192

Wednesday, February 2

The Lord has done great things for us,
and we rejoiced. *Psalms 126:3*

The Lord guides the impulses of our life's love by his divine
providence, and with them guides the thoughts that give rise to
our prudence. *Divine Providence 192*

Thursday, February 3

Restore our fortunes, O Lord,
like the watercourses in the Negeb. *Psalms 126:4*

By his divine providence the Lord gathers these impulses
of the whole human race into a single form, which is a human
form. *Divine Providence 192*

Friday, February 4

May those who sow in tears
reap with shouts of joy. *Psalms 126:5*

People who acknowledge only the physical world and human
prudence constitute hell, while people who acknowledge God
and his divine providence constitute heaven.

Divine Providence 192

Saturday, February 5

Those who go out weeping,
bearing the seed for sowing,
shall come home with shouts of joy,
carrying their sheaves. *Psalms 126:6*

None of this could happen if it did not seem to us that we
think autonomously and manage our lives autonomously.

Divine Providence 192

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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.

***Our Daily Bread* is a ministry of the Swedenborgian Church**

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.

*All Returns to:
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