

January/February 2011

SERMONS AND MEDITATIONS OF THE SWEDENBORGIAN CHURCH

OUR DAILY BREAD

IN GOD'S IMAGE

Prayer

Christ has no body now on earth but yours,
no hands but yours,
no feet but yours;
yours are the eyes through which to look
at Christ's compassion to the world,
yours are the feet with which he is to go about
doing good,
and yours are the hands with which he is to
bless us now.

Saint Teresa of Avila (1515-1582)

Cover Art Commentary:
A Note from Artist Anna Berezina

"It's easy to see God in nature's and life's miracles: a beautiful rainbow, the birth of a child. We are often too frantic, forgetting to see the beauty and wonder of the seasons. The truth is, though, that God's image is in everything. I challenge you to see the image of God in rainy weather, flight delays, and your car mirrors. Sometimes God's reflection is the strongest when you least expect it, if only you allow yourself to see."

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Dear Readers,

During the season of Epiphany, Christians celebrate God's appearance to the created world in his fullness and power, both in the person of Jesus Christ and in the action of the Holy Spirit, which gives us life, thought, feeling, and creativity. Amid the post-Christmas peace and quiet, we have the chance to open our eyes to the Lord's visible presence in our lives. The birth, ministry, death, and resurrection of Christ tell us that the idea of a far-removed Creator, a divine clockmaker, just doesn't make sense: it leaves a gap between our lives and the Divine, who creates us in his image and likeness because of the overflowing of his pure love and wisdom. Not only Epiphany but every holiday of the Christian year reminds us that God is intimately aware of, and feels every pang of, our human struggles.

The start of the year brings resolutions, commitments to changing and renewing our lives. As you strive to tread new paths, we pray that you will find strength and comfort in the One who knit you together in your mother's womb and seeks always to unveil the glorious divine image within you.

Many blessings,

Leah Goodwin & Kevin Baxter

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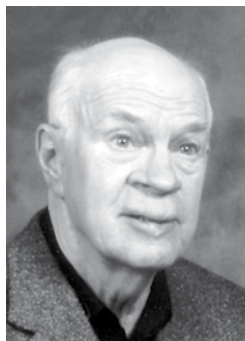
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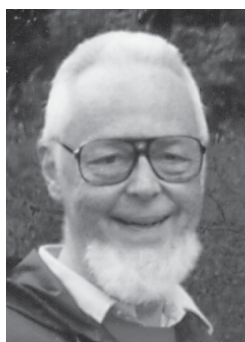
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Matthew 2:1-12

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.

Sermon

As much as the Christmas story is focused on the birth of Christ on earth, and knowing that the miracle of the birth of Jesus is the central message of the story, I have always been interested by the peripheral characters and what they have to teach us about our response to the birth of Christ in our own hearts and minds. Mary and Joseph, the shepherds, the Magi, even Herod all have something to teach us about what it means to be human in the presence of the divine.

We all begin our conscious relationship with the Lord by seeing God as something "out there." We learn the Bible stories and think about how the people behaved as they interacted with God "back then." We hear the Christmas story and wonder what it must have been like "for them." But sooner or later, if we continue

to progress on our lifelong journey of spiritual growth, if we in fact seek to know God, if we seek to bring the Lord into our lives, sooner or later we reach the point in our lives where we begin to experience our conscious relationship with God as something "in here"; we begin to think about how we interact with God "in this moment"; we begin to think about the birth of Christ and ask the question "How does this miracle affect me?" For you see, if we don't begin asking these questions and spending some serious time thinking about the answers, then Christmas is truly nothing more than a nice story for the kids. We just buy some presents, get a couple of days off work, and then forget about it and go on as if nothing had ever happened.

But when we talk about Christmas we are talking about God, the creator of all that is, the source of life in all living things, the marriage of love and wisdom from whom everything and anything that is good and true has its origin. We are talking about the divine presence and power, which is beyond comprehension, being born in the form of a human baby—the most wonderful and the most vulnerable of all things.

This birth happened for many reasons. One of those reasons has ramifications on a universal level and is one of the things that differentiate the Swedenborgian Church from many other Christian traditions.

I have been asked many times lately what makes this church different from all the other Christian traditions out there. Mostly I shy away from this question because we have far more in common than we have differences, and generally I find that the people who ask that question are usually looking to find some reason to prove to themselves that they are right and you are wrong so they can feel self-righteous in either their pity or their condemnation.

But let's put that one aside to answer the question of difference that is directly related to the birth of Christ: the question of why Christ came to the earth as a human. The standard answer in most—not all, but most—Christian churches is that Adam and Eve sinned, and therefore all human beings are inherently sinful. God, being a God of justice, needed to exact punishment, and feeling pity for his children sent his own child to be crucified so God wouldn't have to punish us for our sins. It's called the doctrine of vicarious atonement. In this church, by contrast, we teach that, while people are born with an inherent tendency toward evil, they are also born with an inherent capacity for good, and that each individual is responsible for his or her own actions. The Lord was born to teach, through his life and death and resurrection, that there is a God; that the spirit is the person, not the body; and that there is life after death and what you believe and how you behave

matters very much. The crucifixion was an act of self-sacrifice on God's part to save us from our sin, not by suffering so we don't have to, but to show us the lengths to which love will go for another and to show us that when the body dies the spirit lives on forever with the same values and characteristics and habits developed in life. In this church we do not believe that Jesus paid for our sins. We believe that we "pay" for our own sins; we do not believe that God demands justice, but that, as Jesus taught and repeatedly demonstrated, God is a loving God of redemption and forgiveness, and that if we want it, and ask for it, and change our evil ways in favor of ways that are truly loving and good, we are forgiven. Everyone is intended for heaven; heaven is open to all, and all are welcomed. God sends no one to hell; instead, those who reject God, who hate what is good and kind and loving and can't stand heaven, choose, of their own free will, to enter into hell. God neither rewards nor punishes: the rewards of heaven and the punishments of hell are the direct results of the values we embrace and the way we treat ourselves and each other.

You may not agree with all that I have said. You may have questions, you may have doubts, you may flat-out disagree! In this church, it is OK to have a different perspective, but you are welcome to be here and worship as a part of our community without judgment and without pressure to believe something that you don't. You are left in freedom by the people of this community, because you have been given that freedom by God, and it is not for me or this congregation or anyone to take that freedom away.

That is one small part of what was born in Bethlehem, in a simple stable that smelled of animals; born to simple people, whose only warmth and comfort was provided by the beasts that we so often see as inconsequential and yet are so essential to life on earth. It was a humble birth, just one among hundreds of millions of other births, and yet it has proved to be the most profound source of love, compassion, and not only hope, but true faith in the reality of goodness and truth and the spirit as life, that the world has ever known. That the God of the universe, the God of all that is, would become as small and powerless as a helpless little baby; and through one human life, through the willing acceptance of one of the most horrible deaths man could devise, and through the resurrection, would change the nature of existence forever, is in my mind truly a miracle—a miracle that not only calls for but also demands a response from me.

To think the word "Christmas" is to think of all of life! It is to look up into a winter sky that is so dark and black it would suck out your soul if it were not for the

fact that it is filled with stars. To think of Christmas is to think of the birth of God as a human, to think of all those who witnessed it, to think of all those who have been changed by it, to think of God the infinite and unknowable, and at the same time think of Jesus the shepherd who is there for us all. To think of Christmas is to think of all these things and ask, "How does this affect me? How must I respond? What can I give back to show my gratitude and begin, in some small way, to repay a debt that can never be paid back?" To think of Christmas and all that it encompasses and all that it means and not be moved to think of one's own part in the unfolding miracle of life is to have one's heart closed to God and be already halfway to hell.

The presence of God and everything that is wonderful about life is all around you. Look into the night sky; you can see emptiness and void, but if you look at the stars you see the presence of God. Look at something as simple as a Christmas card; you can see the presence of God in the signature of the one who sent it to you. Christmas is about giving, because it is a celebration of the greatest gift of all, the gift of life itself: the gift of the life of Jesus that was given to all people on earth, and the gift of our own life, which each one of us has received directly from the hand of God. To celebrate Christmas is to celebrate this gift of life. Who among us can celebrate such a miracle, a miracle of birth that continues after two thousand years to live with vibrancy and joy? Who among us can celebrate Christmas and not, at some point, begin to experience a relationship with God as something "in here," or ask ourselves the question "How does this miracle affect me?"

Christmas is truly a time for angels and stars. It is truly a time for peace and joy and giving. It is truly a time for miracles. It is truly a time to look deep into the icy blackness of the night sky of our lives and find ourselves thrilled and humbled by the number of stars, each one a point of light and love that has its origin in the heart of God and reaches out to be seen and so touch the heart within our own breast.

Christmas is a gift of God, freely and openly offered to each one of us. Open your heart, open your mind, and receive Christmas freely in the spirit in which it has been given. Merry Christmas!

Daily Meditations

Monday, January 3

Hear my cry, O God; listen to my prayer. *Psalm 61:1*

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*

Tuesday, January 4

From the end of the earth I call to you, when my heart is faint. Lead me to the rock that is higher than I; for you are my refuge, a strong tower against the enemy. *Psalm 61:2&3*

The means that serve to make us human and grow in perfection in discernment are summed up in the word "truths." They become concepts in our thinking, and we refer to them as facts in our memory. Essentially, they are the thoughts that give rise to what we know. *Divine Providence #335*

Wednesday, January 5

Let me abide in your tent forever, find refuge under the shelter of your wings. *Psalm 61:4*

As for the ways divine providence works with its means, and uses them to form us and bring us toward perfection, they are infinite in number and infinite in variety as well. There are as many of them as there are actions of divine wisdom, prompted by divine love, for our salvation. *Divine Providence #336*

Thursday, January 6

For you, O God, have heard my vows; you have given me the heritage of those who fear your name. *Psalm 61:5*

The pure love is pure mercy (a) because it is at work with everyone in the whole world, and by our nature we are all incapable of doing anything on our own; (b) it is at work with the evil and the unjust and with the good and the just alike; (c) it is leading people who are in hell and rescuing them from it. *Divine Providence #337*

Friday, January 7

Prolong the life of the king; may his years endure to all generations!

May he be enthroned forever before God; appoint steadfast love and faithfulness to watch over him! *Psalm 61:6&7*

Essentially, we cannot be anywhere but where our dominant love is. That is where the delight of our life is, and we all want to be where the delight of our life is. Our spirit cannot be anywhere else because it constitutes our life, our very breathing, and the beating of our hearts. *Divine Providence #338.5*

Saturday, January 8

So I will always sing praises to your name, as I pay my vows day after day. *Psalm 61:8*

Our life is not breathed into us in an instant but is formed gradually, and is reformed as we abstain from evils as sins—specifically, as we see what is a sin, recognize it, admit it, and then do not intend it, and therefore refrain from it, and also as we know the means that relate to knowing God. *Divine Providence #338.9*

Meditation on the Constancy of God

Rev. David Sonmor

Genesis 2:7-23

Then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.

And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. A river flows out of Eden to water the garden, and from there it divides and becomes four branches. The name of the first is Pishon; it is the one that flows around the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold; and the gold of that land is good; bdellium and onyx stone are there. The name of the second river is Gihon; it is the one that flows around the whole land of Cush. The name of the third river is Tigris, which flows east of Assyria. And the fourth river is the Euphrates. The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.

And the Lord God commanded the man, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die."

Then the Lord God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner." So out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner.

So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken."

Psalms 103:1-5

Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me,
bless his holy name.

Bless the Lord, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits—
who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases,
who redeems your life from the Pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,
who satisfies you with good as long as you live so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.

9 JAN

Sermon

There are times in life when we wish we could think more seriously about things. Now, I don't mean that we wish we could be more serious, but that we wish we could think more seriously—that is, that we could concentrate on a particular issue or subject until we fully understand it.

Sometimes our need for deeper understanding is connected with intellectual pursuits, such as in studying and attending classes, or writing essays or papers for a class. Sometimes it is in the realm of technical things—perhaps in our work or if we are trying to fix something that is broken and we need to remember where all the pieces go. Most often, though, we feel the need for concentration, focus, and clarity when something is bothering us emotionally, and that seems to be the hardest time to really concentrate. We may be feeling angry or anxious or fearful or guilty, and we want to understand why we have these feelings so that we can deal with them.

Religious people often turn to God to ask his help in overcoming their feelings of anxiety or guilt. Often when we ask for forgiveness or understanding we don't feel that we have received an answer. We don't hear a loud, clear voice that says to us, "I heard what you confessed and I forgive you, so now you are clean—just don't go out and do it again." More often we don't feel anything more than a small sense of relief, which we credit to simply having admitted that we have done something we shouldn't have. Also, we often do not really get rid of the guilt or anxiety because even if we believe that the Lord has forgiven us, we have not yet forgiven ourselves. We are not yet ready to let go. Maybe we feel we should be punished a bit more, or should feel more repentant, so we won't let go. But what right do we have to overrule God's forgiveness? What right do we have not to forgive ourselves when God himself has already forgiven us our trespasses?

Letting go is difficult. Letting go of fear, letting go of anger, letting go of blame, letting go of guilt or sorrow or jealousy, and letting go of tension all seem

so hard to do. Religious people look to the Lord because God offers relief from tension, anxiety, and pain. He says, "I am the Lord your God who brought you forth out of the land of Egypt, that you should not be slaves; and I have broken the bars of your yoke and made you walk erect." Jesus said, "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

We look to God for comfort, but when we hear his voice speaking directly to us we sometimes doubt. We sometimes wish that we knew more about God and how he communicates with us. We would like to understand him better, and we have this strong desire to have a personal relationship with him, a little "one-on-one" time with the Savior. But we are so unsure! We are overawed with our own imagination and concept of God, so we feel that understanding him is not possible. The Hebrews regarded him as being unknowable and his name as being the unutterable YHWH. When we personify God we are attempting to put him into a form our finite minds can relate to, a shape and size that will fit the dimensions of our minds and hearts, or the scope of our imagination.

Why shouldn't we see God in the shape of a man? After all, were we not made in his image and likeness? Did he not appear as the Divine Human? As long as we are stuck with this physical notion of the nature of God we will have trouble in communicating with Him, for not only are we working with a misconception of the nature of God, but we are also working with a misconception of our own real nature. It is not our physical shape or body that makes us human. If you take this body and lengthen the arms and back, extend the spine so it has a tail, then shorten the legs, flatten the head, broaden the jaws, and cover it with a thick coat of hair, you no longer have a human, you have an ape. Then if you take the ape and tip him onto his arms and legs, and change his neck and features a bit, you have a dog. And if you take the dog and reduce it down to one twentieth of its size you would have a mouse, and that mouse still has most of the physical aspects of the human we started with. No, the human form that is in the image and likeness of God is not our physical shape; rather, it is our spiritual form. It is thought and affection that make us what we are, and it is the spirit within us that thinks and loves that is the real human form.

***It is not our
physical
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Meditation

(You may wish to have someone read this portion to you):

I am going to ask you to use your imagination for a while. I would like you to visualize a mirror in front of you. It is a full-size mirror. Now see your self reflected in that mirror, see the whole body, all of you, top to bottom, and hold that image for a moment.

Now wipe the mirror clean and see your image of God in the mirror—your own personal idea of what God looks like or how he appears in your mind. (Pause)

How did you visualize God? Perhaps as a bright light. Or maybe you envisioned an old person with long white hair and a flowing gown, or perhaps you saw an image such as the ones Daniel and John saw, with eyes like flames and legs of bronze, or maybe a picture of Jesus. Perhaps you did not see a person, but rather a book or some printed words. Each of you has your own vision that springs from your mind, imagination, and understanding. But such images do not have much substance to them, and if you try to hold them for any length of time, you may find that they start to change and other images come into view.

Now relax a moment and then once again visualize yourself back in the mirror, but this time let's look much more closely. First, look at your feet. What is distinctive about them? Next, see your legs and hips, and then your waist. What color is the skin? Now see your chest and arms and shoulders. See your neck: is it tense, or is it relaxed? Let the muscles relax. This is not a painful exercise. Now see your hair—its color and texture, the way it fits your head. Last of all, see your face. That is the face you see every morning in the mirror. Why is it so hard to make out the details—the line of the lips, your smile, the bump of the nose, the lines on your forehead, your frown? Look closely. You see that face several times a day, and yet it doesn't seem to come into focus very well. Is that you? Look into the eyes. See how they fit into your face. See the color. See the expression in them. Let your eyes become larger and clearer until you can see within them.

(End of meditation).

We have a physical body that we identify as being our self. But that is the self that is seen by others from a distance. As people get closer to you and get to know you, they become aware of your inner person. You too see yourself as far more than that reflection in the mirror. You can look within your mind, and

there you are no longer flesh and bone. You see joy and sadness, you see laughter and gladness, you see your affections, you see love. You see anger. See your feelings, all of your feelings. Are you angry, are you disappointed, are you elated, are you content? Yes, you are all these things and more, and they are not abstract ideas. They are really you, these feelings, and you express them every day. They are your affections, sometimes warm and sometimes cold, sometimes on the surface and sometimes very deep within your soul. These are your affections, these are your loves.

In addition to being fully aware of your affections, you can also look within and be aware of your thought. Look further back into your eyes and see your mind, your thought, your thinking processes. Here is a storehouse of knowledge and facts and data. It is filled with impressions that your environment has made on you: $2+2 = 4$, $10 \times 10 = 100$.

Truth is the knowledge that you believe. Truth is the information you are sure of. Truths are the ideas you can rely on to get you through each day. Truth, knowledge, and wisdom: we see them within, and we see ourselves. The form of our self is affection and thought; it is what we love and what we understand. If we are affection and thought, we therefore are reflections of the love and wisdom of God.

We are made in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 2:7-23). If we look at the Divine Trinity as explained by Emanuel Swedenborg, we see that God is Divine Love and Divine Wisdom and Divine Action. Love is the divine substance from which all things are created. Divine Wisdom planned the creation of the universe, and Divine Action is the spirit or activity involved in the whole process. See your love and affections; see your knowledge and truth. Expand your vision to include the love and truth of everyone in your life, and then expand it to include everyone in your community and everyone in the country and everyone in the world. How tremendous a vision that is: billions of people, all with affections and thoughts drawn from one source—God! One constant source of love and wisdom, ready to fill every human vessel as required.

The constancy of God is a comfort to us. He is always there, never changing, no matter what our circumstances might be or might become. We can depend on the Lord to be with us, ready to give us more love and more wisdom, ready to fill us, to sustain us, to bless us. He is ready to make us fully human, an image of himself.

Bless the Lord, O my soul;
And all that is within me, Bless His holy name!
Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget none of His
benefits,
Who forgives all your iniquity, Who heals all your
diseases,
Who redeems your life from the pit,
Who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,
Who satisfies you with good as long as you live
So that your youth is renewed like the eagle.

- Psalm 103

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, you are the sun that always rises, but never sets.

You are the source of all life, creating and sustaining every living thing.

You are the source of all food, material and spiritual, nourishing us in both body and soul.

You are the light that dispels the clouds of error and doubt, and goes before me every hour of the day, guiding my thoughts and actions.

May I walk in your light, be nourished by your food, be sustained by your mercy, and be warmed by your love.

- Desiderius Erasmus (c. 1466-1536)

May I, may you, may we not die unlived lives.

May none of us live in fear

of falling or catching fire.

May we choose to inhabit our days,

to allow our living to open us,

to make us less afraid, more accessible,

to loosen our hearts until they become wings,

torches, promises.

May each of us choose to risk our significance;

to live so that which comes to us as seed

goes to the next as blossom

and that which comes to us as blossom

goes on as fruit.

- Dawna Markova

Author and editor, Utah

Daily Meditations

Monday, January 10

When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. The more I called them, the more they went from me; they kept sacrificing to the Baals, and offering incense to idols. *Hosea 11:1-2*

The reason no one can enter heaven without being born again is that we are involved in all kinds of evil through what we inherit from our parents; we also inherit an ability to become spiritual by the removal of those evils. *Divine Providence #83*

Tuesday, January 11

Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms; but they did not know that I healed them. *Hosea 11:3*

Our first state, the state of damnation, is the one we get from our parents by heredity. Each of us is born with a predilection to love ourselves and the world, and subject to all kinds of evil that have these forms of love as their wellspring. It is the pleasures of these loves that guide us; and they render us unaware of our involvement in evils. *Divine Providence #83.2*

Wednesday, January 12

I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love. I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them. *Hosea 11:4*

Our second state, the state of reformation, starts when we begin to think about heaven in terms of its joy and therefore to think about God as the one who gives us heavenly joy. At first our thinking is prompted by the pleasure we find in self-love, and heavenly joy is that kind of pleasure for us. *Divine Providence #83.4*

Thursday, January 13

How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim? My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. *Hosea 11:8*

As long as the pleasure from that love and the pleasure we find in the evils that arise from it are in control, though, we can only think that we get to heaven by pouring out prayers, listening to sermons, taking communion, giving to the poor and helping the needy, contributing to churches, supporting hospices, and the like. In this state, all we know is that salvation comes by thinking about what our religion teaches us, whether that is what we call faith or whether it is what we call faith and charity. *Divine Providence #83.5a*

Friday, January 14

I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath. *Hosea 11:9*

As long as our nature leads us to think about heaven and God as matters of religion and not to think at all about evils as sins, we are still in the first state. We reach the second state, the state of reformation, when we begin to think that there is such a thing as a sin, and especially when we identify some particular thing as a sin, and when we look into it in ourselves, even briefly, and do not want to do it. *Divine Providence #83.5b*

Saturday, January 15

They shall go after the Lord, who roars like a lion; when he roars, his children shall come trembling from the west. *Hosea 11:10*

When we are regenerated, the whole pattern of our life is inverted. We become spiritual instead of earthly, since what is earthly is contrary to the divine design when it is separated from what is spiritual, and what is spiritual is in keeping with the divine design. The result is that when we have been regenerated, we act out of thoughtfulness and make the elements of that thoughtfulness part of our faith. *Divine Providence #83.6*

To God through the Roof

Rev. Julian Duckworth

Mark 2:4

When they could not come to Him because of the crowd, they uncovered the roof where He was. And when they had broken through, they let down the bed on which the paralysed man was lying.

Arcana Coelestia 1311

The idea that God “comes down” is very often used in the Word about God where there are phrases like “the Most High” or “God in the highest.” This though is language based on appearances or on the way it seems to us to be, for God doesn’t dwell in the highest but in the innermost things of life, and therefore in the Word “most high” and “innermost” are identical in meaning and interchangeable.

Sermon

If you know anything about AA (Alcoholics Anonymous), you’ll know that it’s a program of recovery based on twelve steps. The second of the twelve steps is about coming to believe that a higher power greater than ourselves can restore us to sanity. But the first step is admitting that we are powerless over our own addiction. The whole program has to do with recovery, and it follows a clear spiritual sequence that also openly keeps mentioning God. But AA people realise that some Jews are alcoholics—so are some Anglicans and Buddhists, of course, and atheists—so they use this powerful phrase “higher power” to deal with the idea of God.

It’s a great phrase, because it comes naturally to us to think about God being higher than we are ourselves, especially, of course, if you yourself have some kind of weakness or addiction or blind spot. We’re here, and God is up there. Or, perhaps even better, I know what I am like at times, and I also know there is a much better way of being, to do with love and goodness—an ideal, *the* ideal. I’m not anywhere near it myself, but I know it’s there, and because of the gap (mind the gap!) it feels like it’s up there on high. It feels like God or this ideal is literally higher than me.

Well, I wouldn’t quarrel with that, because it’s a very helpful model, especially if you are dealing with something like addiction. You look to something higher or to an ideal. We all do—you don’t have to have alcoholism for that. We *all* generally want to be a better kind of person, a better husband or wife, father or mother, friend, human being. We try hard, we do

our best, and we set our sights. But the trouble with that is that we often fall short and see the discrepancy only too clearly. We all went to school and did exams in our first part of life, and we knew we could get an A+ but we got a B- or something like that, and we’ve been carrying that kind of idea ever since. So what I’m saying is that this idea lacks something. It’s not enough. It’s not “wrong,” but it’s only partly right.

Life is about being. Let’s just put it like that. If you say life is about being the right kind of person, it keeps this discrepancy going. You could say life is about being you, but that’s a bit of a worry too, because it sounds like just being what you’re like and how you feel, and that’s not right either. It’s partly right, though. Who you are is so important. So let me have a go at completing that sentence “Life is about being ...” Life is about being who you are when you are reflecting, displaying, mirroring, manifesting, and being something which we call God. Notice I’m not now using this phrase “higher power,” just the word “God.” And while we certainly aren’t like that all the time or much of the time, we can be like that some of the time when we let ourselves be. It might be just ten seconds on a Friday afternoon or a moment of loveliness on a Tuesday. God comes through us in some way, and we are completely right. Now that is a good way of putting it—God comes through us. And just for a moment we are actually glorifying God, an idea we would normally run away from or deny we could ever do. “It’s too much like Jesus,” we say.

There’s a wonderful story of some ladies who were doing a Bible study on the book of Malachi (at the end of the Old Testament) and they read about God being like a refiner of silver. This puzzled them, so one of them said she’d find out what it meant. She went to a silversmith and asked if she could watch him. He took a wadge of silver and held it in a gas jet flame and watched it constantly. It got white-hot, and suddenly he took it out. She said, “Why do you watch it non-stop?” He said, “Because there’s a critical moment. Too early and it’s not ready; too late, and the silver’s spoiled.” She said, “How do you know when that moment is, then?” He said, “It’s easy. It’s when I can see my own image in it.”

Now I want to go back to that miracle of the paralysed man whose friends brought him to be healed by Jesus, but they couldn’t get in because of the crowd. So, they took him up on to the roof and made a hole and lowered him down to where Jesus was. And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the man, “Son, your sins are forgiven.” Wonderful. Ingenious. Where there’s a

will, there's a way. Now, what we usually do with that miracle is link it with a kind of lateral thinking: "If you can't get in one way, there's another way. It's to do with your mind. You must raise your mind and think higher up. If you do, you will see things differently, and then you will get in and be healed."

Well, yes. That's fine, and I have no problem with that. But it's still in that area of the difference between where I feel I am and where I want to get to, that I mentioned earlier. To me, it's still not quite enough. That explanation is saying that the roof is like our mind because the roof is higher and our mind can think higher, so we should change the way we think. We should stop thinking about all the problems there are (that's the crowd at the door) and think about God leading and managing and guiding events providentially and bringing good out of every evil. If you do that, you will certainly have a better understanding, an accurate picture of life with a keen and true appraisal of things from a spiritual and rational consideration. And it's good to have that, to see the unseen realities of life. But it's a bit cold, intellectual, and thoughtful. The worry is that seeing it as you now do leaves you feeling you've got it. My relationship with the Lord is to come to understand Him.

Over the years I've come across books in which wise people—often ministers—have ruminated on the meaning of life. I'm afraid I call them "pipe-smoking whimsies." It's philosophy. We don't do philosophy. We do living spiritual growth and change. We are based on the Lord who is present with us and in us. It's called love and goodness—not our version of those, but the Lord's power to give us His own love and goodness so that we have it—and even more, so that we actually feel it. How can we sing a hymn like "Be Still, for the Glory of the Lord is Moving in This Place" and only think about God as a set of theological statements?

So this miracle of the paralysed man and gaining access through the roof shouldn't simply leave us thinking, "Aha, they raised their minds and got in from higher up, so we should too." Perhaps the image is so strong that it's all we sometimes take away from the story, but if we do, we've stopped halfway through the story and ignored several vital things. We've not really fully appreciated the point that Jesus is already there inside the house but can't be got to. We've not really fully appreciated that the paralysed man eventually picks up his bed and, amazingly, walks to his own house free from paralysis. The roof bit took over. But these other things are perhaps even more important than the roof! The roof is simply the means to the end.

Of course you can't find God if you're going round in circles saying, "Why me, why this, why now?" or wringing your hands over life's unfairness, et cetera, et cetera. It'll crowd the doorway. You need to find another way in. That new way is a means to the end—which, of course, is to be healed. And to be healed is to feel right because you're feeling that God and you are now together. Not cosily, not intellectually, but completely. Jesus was always there inside the house. God is always there inside you, and when you discover that and feel it, you too can pick your bed up and walk to your own house. You are no longer paralysed.

But we even have to be careful about that—this feeling of being free from paralysis. I've been emphasising the limitations of ideas and thinking and philosophy, but I also need to point out the limitations of feeling that because your paralysis has gone, it's going to stay like that for ever. That's where some versions of the Christian message get out of balance. It's the "evangelical crusades" approach: you have this deep conversion experience, and from then on it's guaranteed and taken out of your hands. Sorry, but no. You are going to feel paralysed at some point again, maybe paralysed with some new fear or feeling, and you'll need to go up on to the roof again and down into the house to re-find God, and you, and you and God. And you'll do that regularly. It's a process. And maybe as you repeat the process, it will get a bit easier because you know the need. But you'll always be doing it. If you go to AA, you'll meet alcoholics who know they are always going to be alcoholics, but their success is in knowing that's how it is for them, now and now and now.

We're told that when we think of God as "highest," it's just a way of putting it because it appears like that to us; really God is innermost. Isn't that helpful? God is always right here. I have a theory about this healing of the paralysed man. When he was healed, Jesus said, "Arise, take up your bed and go to your own house." And we think, "Off he went, down the road." But perhaps it helps to think that the house where the healing happened was the man's house and he went round to the door after he was healed, saw the crowd, felt paralysed by that, got taken up on the roof and down to Jesus, healed and told to pick up his bed and go to his own house, so he went round to the door and so on—over and over and over again. Now that makes sense. Amen.

*God is
always
right here.*

Monday, January 17

When he entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, appealing to him and saying, "Lord, my servant is lying at home paralyzed, in terrible distress."

Matthew 8:5&6

Some people cherish the notion that God turns his face away from people, spurns them, and casts them into hell, and is angry against them because of their evil. The real doctrine of the church, which is from the spiritual meaning of the Word, teaches that the Lord never turns his face away from anyone or spurns anyone, never casts anyone into hell or is angry.

Heaven and Hell #545

Tuesday, January 18

And he said to him, "I will come and cure him." The centurion answered, "Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; but only speak the word, and my servant will be healed." *Matthew 8:7&8*

The Lord is goodness itself, love itself, and mercy itself. Good itself cannot do harm to anyone. Love itself and mercy itself cannot spurn anyone, because this is contrary to mercy and love and is therefore contrary to the divine nature itself. *Ibid.*

Wednesday, January 19

"For I also am a man under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes, and to another, 'Come,' and he comes, and to my slave, 'Do this,' and the slave does it." *Matthew 8:9*

Since the Lord's divine nature constitutes heaven, nothing flows into us from the Lord but what is good, and nothing from hell but what is evil. So the Lord is constantly leading us out of evil and toward good, while hell is constantly leading us into evil.

Heaven and Hell #546

Thursday, January 20

When Jesus heard him, he was amazed and said to those who followed him, "Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith." *Matthew 8:10*

The Lord is constantly flowing into every individual with good, just as much into the evil person as into the good. The difference is that he is constantly leading evil people away from evil, while he is constantly leading good people toward the good. The reason for this difference lies in us, since we are the ones who accept. *Ibid.*

Friday, January 21

"I tell you, many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the heirs of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." *Matthew 8:11&12*

We can gather from this that we do evil from hell and good from the Lord. However, since we believe that whatever we do comes from ourselves, the evil we do clings to us as though it were our own. This is why we are at fault for our evil, never the Lord. *Heaven and Hell #547*

Saturday, January 22

And to the centurion Jesus said, "Go; let it be done for you according to your faith." And the servant was healed in that hour. *Matthew 8:13*

People who have intended and loved what is evil in the world intend and love what is evil in the other life, and then they no longer allow themselves to be led away from it. This is why people who are absorbed in evil are connected to hell and actually are there in spirit; and after death they crave above all to be where their evil is. So after death, it is we, not the Lord, who cast ourselves into hell. *Ibid.*

JAN 23 The Year of the Lord's Favor

Rev. Dr. William R. Woofenden

Isaiah 61:1-6

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

They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations. Strangers shall stand and feed your flocks, foreigners shall till your land and dress your vines; but you shall be called priests of the Lord, you shall be named ministers of our God; you shall enjoy the wealth of the nations, and in their riches you shall glory.

Luke 4:14-20

Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.

Sermon

Millions of people (ourselves included) accept the teaching of Christ as true and valid. I doubt that any avowed Christian would quarrel with the mandate of our text. We would all readily agree, I'm sure, that if every confirmed Christian tried to live out even the obvious implications of this scripture, this new year would go down in history as one of astounding victory for the forces of human compassion and goodwill.

Our text is part of the record of the first events in the Lord's public ministry. Just before this he had been baptized by John in the Jordan, then tempted by the devil in the desert, and now he had "returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him had spread through the whole countryside. He taught in their synagogues, and every one praised him."

When William Cowper wrote that hymn we just sang, "God moves in a mysterious way his wonders to perform," he was right on target. Swedenborg, in his book *Divine Providence*, began Chapter Nine with these words: "It is a law of divine providence that nothing of the operation of divine providence should be evident to our perceptions or senses, but we should nevertheless know about it and acknowledge it." William Wunsch, in his translation of this book, simply called this chapter "The Law of Hidden Operation."

The reason for this hidden operation is discussed and validated in four points: (1) If the operation of divine providence were evident to us, we would not be able to act from freedom in accordance with reason; nor would anything appear to be of our own choosing. It would be the same if we knew what was going to happen in advance. (2) If we were allowed to see clearly what God was planning, we would intrude on the process and pervert or destroy it. (3) Following this, we would either deny God or fancy ourselves to be God. (4) For these reasons, it is granted to us to see divine providence in the back and not in the face.

What this passage is saying to us, in the idiom of today, is that the crystal ball, or some sort of magic, is not the answer to the world's problems; the decisions by myriads of individual men and women to enter of their own free will into the human process of becoming spiritual beings is the answer. As our church's teachings use the word, "reformation" is part of a larger process called "regeneration." It is intended to occupy a large part of our adult life, and basically involves systematically putting our outer lives in order. It is a process we must enter into willingly and with some degree of understanding as to what sorts of things we should expect to happen to us because we have willingly entered into the process. It also involves a sort of pledge on our part that we truly want to cooperate with God in healing the nations.

With these thoughts as background, are we ready to join together and have all of us ask, "How do we go about cooperating with God in this enormous task?" We need to note that in order to ask this question it first has to be assumed that we want to work with God! There is no one answer to this question. But one valid and practical answer will be found in part by looking

in greater depth at the words of Isaiah which Jesus read to the people in Nazareth.

Understood at the level of their deeper or symbolic meaning, these words are a summary of a means to spiritual renewal which is forever relevant and in harmony with the way God's providence works. The Isaiah formula is based on the premise that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah, the Christ, who became fully God, the one and only Divine Humanity, and who therefore has the power to carry this program to completion—but only through the help and cooperation of men and women in all ages.

First, a basic condition must be met: it is only as we place ourselves in full commitment to the Lord that we will be able (1) to see the urgency of the task, and (2) to allow the spirit of the Lord to descend on us as individuals. Put another way, we all have to be willing to become present-day Isaiahs. For it was this prophet who wrote, "I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?' And I said, 'Here am I. Send me!' Are we ready to say the same?

It is only as we respond positively to God's question that there is any sense in looking at the Isaiah formula in greater detail. Let's assume that we are ready. Let's look at this recipe for spiritual renewal which Jesus read aloud in Nazareth. Let's examine in turn each of the ingredients of the recipe or formula to be sure we know why each ingredient is essential to the success of the final product.

1. "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor." "Wait a minute," you say. "I'm no preacher!" Sorry, that is begging the question. Refresh your memory on a fellow named Moses who faced a big, difficult job. Recall his words to God: "No, Lord, don't send me. I have never been a good speaker, and I haven't become one since you began to speak to me. I am a poor speaker, slow and hesitant." The Lord said to him, "Who gives man his mouth? Who makes him deaf or dumb? Who gives him sight or makes him blind? It is I, the Lord. Now, go! I will help you to speak, and I will tell you what to say." But Moses answered, "No, Lord, please send someone else."

I suppose we have to admit he was at least polite in his refusal! "Please send someone else"—but just think what it would have meant in the history of the church if Moses hadn't finally, reluctantly, accepted God's call. It's no different today. God is still trying to rouse all of us who claim to be Christians to respond

to his call, to help him in a job that he really can't do alone. In the long run it is irrelevant whether or not a person is a "good speaker" or a "preacher." Let's just say that "preaching the good news" is often done far more effectively by illustrating the effect of the good news in one's own life and actions than by the use of many words.

This first ingredient, sharing the good news, has a twofold use: first, we are to share the good news with "the poor in spirit" mentioned in the Beatitudes, those who know they are spiritually poor but long for more knowledge and experience of Christian truth and goodness. So our first task is to share at least something from our own experience of God's gifts to us. We're not expected to be learned theologians. No one is expected to know all the answers. But all of us here in this church today are here because we have had some clear experiences that we know came to us through the love and mercy of God. And all we are asked to do is to share the faith that we do have with others who are longing for more goodness and truth in their lives.

The second and often overlooked use of this first ingredient might be called self-dosing with this good news. To put it another way, we need to face the fact that to some extent we are all "spiritually poor," and therefore need to purge ourselves of any sense of self-sufficiency. We all need to admit to ourselves our need for closer communion with our Lord.

2. The second ingredient in the recipe is: "He has sent me to heal the brokenhearted." Let's change the emphasis. All together: "He has sent ME to heal the brokenhearted." Me! Not the guy down the street; not my sweet, kindly next-door neighbor; not the professional religious person. Each of these obvious alternatives is free to make his or her own choices and decisions. Here again we need to put ourselves in Moses' shoes when he was confronted by God at the burning bush. And again, God is talking straight to each one of us! Need I say that we don't have to look very far in today's world to find people who are brokenhearted? Is there any one of us who is not in some sense or degree "brokenhearted"? There is a trite phrase often used in a negative sense. It goes this way: "It takes one to know one." Let's use it in a good sense. Only the person who is in some degree humble and contrite, conscious of his or her own shortcomings and longing to improve spiritually, is able to minister to the heartbreak in others. There's a word for it: empathy. One of its definitions is "understanding so intimate that the feelings, thoughts, and motives of one are readily comprehended by another." But it doesn't

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is.*

just happen. We have to work at it. We have to want to share our “mutual woes” as a means to helping to heal another’s brokenheartedness.

3. The next ingredient is “to proclaim freedom for the prisoners.” This means giving support in all the ways we can to help free those who are enslaved in body, mind, or spirit. It may be the most difficult task of all to carry out. It is surely one for which we need all the help we can get. It may be that we have the most justification here to refer the spiritual prisoner to one we know to be more skilled than we are in helping loose such bonds. Or it may be that we can effectively share with such sufferers a personal experience we have had of being freed in some aspect of our lives. If so, that near-mystical element of empathy is again brought into play.

4. The fourth ingredient is “recovery of sight for the blind.” We are not expected to be physical miracle workers. Our Lord, while on Earth, did heal some who were physically blind, but this was to serve as an example to us to seek out and try to help those who are spiritually blind. To be spiritually blind is to be so engrossed in material or worldly considerations that one loses sight of the critically needed concern for spiritual values. We live in a society that is widely considered by other nations of the world to be grossly materialistic. We are often quick to deny this, pointing self-righteously to all the good we do in the world.

It was of the self-righteous Pharisees that Jesus said, “They are blind leaders of the blind; and when one blind man leads another, both fall into a ditch.” To add this ingredient—recovery of sight to the blind—one has to be willing to search for his or her own blind spots first, then to change the figure, first to remove the beam from our own eye, in order to see clearly how to help remove the mote from our neighbor’s eye.

5. We’re nearly at the end of the recipe. We are “to release the oppressed.” It may be easier to see what is involved here if we know that the original word translated “oppressed” is a very strong word, and that “crushed” might be a more accurate rendering. How many there are who are crushed under the burdens of life today! There are the depressed, the maladjusted, the bitter, the frustrated—all madly running to anyone who professes to be a healer, all reading manmade formulas in mind-cure books.

To be crushed in life is principally a disease of ignorance, to be unaware that the only true and lasting

cure is to be found in the good news given to the world by the Lord. Again, releasing the oppressed has to start at home. To administer this ingredient to ourselves, to self-dose in this instance, involves owning up to our own degree of ignorance of spiritual truth. It requires more than paying lip service; it demands facing it with the will to do something about it. For results will come only as we believe that he was talking to us individually when the Lord said through Isaiah, “Seek the Lord while he may be found; call on him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn to the Lord, and he will have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will freely pardon.” [55:6-7]

It is only as we respond to this call with a genuine sense of humility that the Lord is enabled to release or set at liberty the oppressed areas of our own minds, so that we can then be at least to some degree equipped to bring aid to the great suffering segment of crushed humanity.

6. Only at this point are we entitled to proclaim this as “the year of the Lord’s favor.” So that’s the formula, the recipe. It is simple yet profound. If we ponder it thoughtfully and with a sense of personal dedication, we shall see clearly what a marvelous program it sets before us, as individuals and as a church. It is an offer from the Lord to make us channels of his grace; and then to be to our fellow human beings heralds of the good news of the Lord.

May the spirit of the Lord be on each one of us more fully from this day forth. May each of us pray for the grace to say in true sincerity and humility, “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the prisoners, and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” Amen.

Prayer

Enter my heart, O Holy Spirit; come in blessed mercy and set me free.

Throw open, O Lord, the locked doors of my mind; cleanse the chambers of my thought for thy dwelling; light there the fires of thine own holy brightness in new understandings of truth.

O Holy Spirit, very God, whose presence is liberty, grant me the perfect freedom to be thy servant today, tomorrow, evermore.

- Eric Milner-White (1884-1964)

Releasing the oppressed has to start at home.

Monday, January 24

"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.

Luke 1:68

It is not so hard to lead a heaven-bound life as people think it is. *Heaven and Hell #528*

Tuesday, January 25

"He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us. *Luke 1:69-71*

People who have lived honestly and fairly because of divine laws act wisely when their outer natures are stripped away and they are left to their inner natures, because they are united to heaven's angels, who share their wisdom with them. *Heaven & Hell #530.3*

Wednesday, January 26

"Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant,

Luke 1:72

People who at heart have acknowledged the Deity and have attended to divine laws in the deeds of their lives... Coming into their inner natures is like coming from darkness into light. *Heaven and Hell #531.3*

Thursday, January 27

"The oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. *Luke 1:73-75*

Anyone may recognize that thoughts tend to follow where intentions lead, or to go where we aim them. Thought is actually our inner sight and behaves like our outward sight. It turns and dwells where it is directed and aimed. *Heaven and Hell #532*

Friday, January 28

"And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. *Luke 1:76&77*

The purpose that focuses our inner sight or thought is our volition, since our intentions determine our aims and our aims determine our thoughts. So if we aim for heaven, we focus our thinking on it, and with our thinking, our whole mind, which is therefore in heaven. *Heaven and Hell #532.3*

Saturday, January 29

"By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace." *Luke 1:78-79*

The life that leads to heaven is a life of thoughtfulness, a life of behaving honestly and fairly in every duty, every affair, every task, from our deeper nature and therefore from a heavenly source. The source of this life is within us when we act honestly and fairly because doing so is in accord with divine laws.

Heaven and Hell #535.3

John 13:12-17

After Jesus had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them."

Sermon

How old were you when you first realized that Juan Valdez was not a real person, but a symbol, a marketing tool, a human face for a marketing company? Or have you ever had to explain to a small child who Uncle Sam is—that he is a representation of our country in the form of a person? It really is not an easy concept to wrap your head around. I mean, shouldn't Uncle Sam have three heads—one for each government branch?

In both art and literature, humanity has a long history of turning everything from trees to dogs into human-like creations. This anthropomorphizing or personification—giving human qualities to something that is not—can be seen in all sorts of arenas. And it has not gone unnoticed in the world of theology and religious studies. However, theologians and scholars of religion dismiss personification as a human tendency to be self-referential whenever we seek meaning or understanding.

I think we can all see where this is heading: God, a man with a long white beard, sitting on a throne.

It's not hard to come to the conclusion that anthropomorphic or self-referential thinking is a sign of arrogance or weak-mindedness. After all, we first thought our villages were the center of all creation—and a small creation at that. Eventually, we realized our home was a much bigger place, and our biggest worry became not falling off the edge. When we realized the world was round, we immediately assumed that the sun revolved around us. And now that we understand that the whole universe exists, people claim that it exists to fulfill human purposes. Clearly we do tend to want to reside at the center of creation.

What has come of this tendency, however, is an assault on the image and likeness of God as a person. And when you add very valid concerns about sexism to the image of God, the tendency is to make God into an abstract mist or some wizard behind a curtain. God is basically reduced to analogies to nature or science—a far less effective approach to understanding God. In fact, there are only two options if we trace this line of thinking to its logical conclusion: (1) we lower God to our earthly level, or (2) we cannot even begin to conceive of God.

But then again, I grew up in this church, which believes very firmly that God is a person, and a person who embodies both genders. This church also believes that God took natural, physical form in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, to save all of creation from eternal damnation through the process of glorification. Glorification can be briefly put as the purification of Jesus' natural body. This he accomplished by undergoing temptation and the pangs of human life, until his inner self, the divine self, actually transformed his natural self into synergy with the spiritual world.

Theologically, we understand that the attacks of the hells had to be fought against—balanced out cosmically—so the Lord came to do just that. Christ's coming, then, can be classified as a salvific event for all persons everywhere (and Swedenborg asserted that aliens were people too). "Why did God have to take human form?" one might ask. Because God had to find a way to keep human freedom intact while also removing some of the influence of the hells on us. What we do not often realize is that we are spirits clothed in a human body. We exist in the spiritual world as well as the physical. Sometimes the word "spiritual" confuses us, because in our tradition we also use it to describe the state a person exists in when she has achieved love of the neighbor. Yet not all things in the spiritual world are spiritual—see how that is confusing? Now if I say, "Not all things in the spiritual world are loving," that makes sense, doesn't it? We humans, precisely because we have free will, exist in both the loving parts and selfish parts of the spiritual world at once, making us prime targets for the hells and hellish spirits, which in the spiritual world run from God. When God took human form, he was able to draw all the excess power of the hells to attack him, so we ordinary folk could be left in freedom.

God's presence here on earth makes sense within our church's overall approach to freedom and salvation, but it also does something far more powerful for our daily lives as Christians: it creates a God each of us can relate to in a new way. It could be claimed that in our understanding of Christ we are trying to create God in

our image; however, if I were going to do that the Bible would have been full of way more stories about Jesus watching television, playing board games, and eating ice cream. The Lord is not made into my image; I am called to form myself in his image. I cannot love like the wind. I cannot have compassion for my neighbor like a tree. These metaphors do not make sense to me. I can, however, dream of trying to be a more compassionate, more patient, wiser, more truthful person.

Back to Uncle Sam. Uncle Sam embodies more than the sum total of any one citizen of the United States; no one person embodies the totality of all that this symbol represents. I can dream of being a person who is as smart as, say, Einstein, or as loving as Mother Teresa, even though they do not contain the fullness of the Lord. Is it still anthropomorphic if we turn the understanding on its head and say we are a poor reflection of the one true Life? Possibly, but then we can go one step further than a mere image. Through our use of correspondences, we understand all of creation to be present within God, and the totality of creation yields a human form.

But what is a human form? While we might perceive it as a shape, heaven does not operate in length and width or shape like a human, and yet it still is human. Why? Because it operates in states or places of certain types of love. These states range from interior to exterior, just as in the human body. All of these places and states communicate, have divine energy, and function seemingly independently, but are always under the auspices of God. The human form we speak of is less about shape and more about sheer beingness. It is not about drawing a picture of God, but understanding that our being is in God.

And as the Lord was glorified, and in him God was glorified, all who are within God are also glorified. That means us. All people are in the Lord. We are just left with the question of what to do now. Do we look to the Lord, or to the parts of us that disappear after death? Amen.

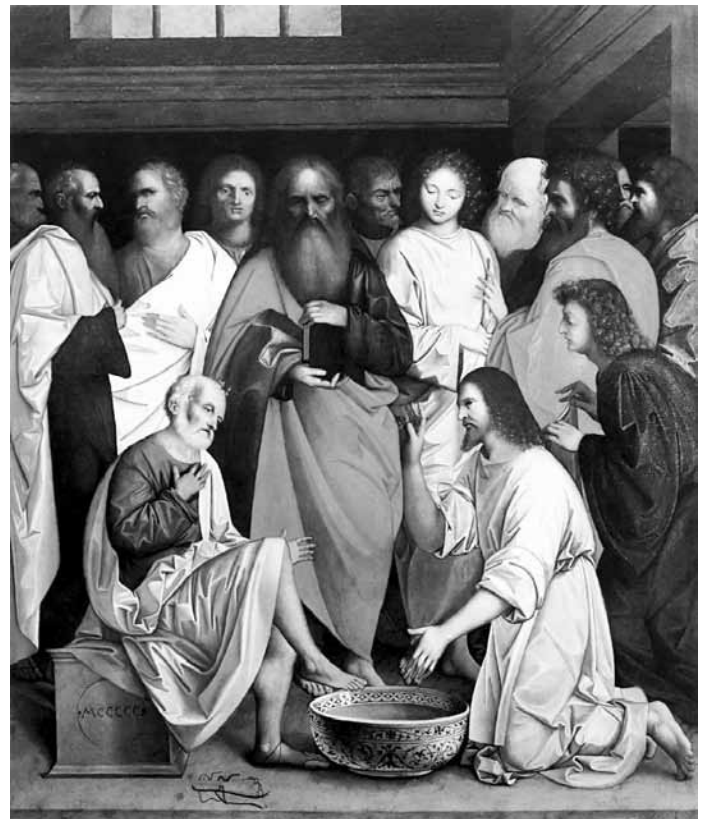
Prayers

I do not venerate matter, but the Creator of matter, who became matter for my sake, and accepted to dwell in matter, and through matter worked my salvation; therefore I will not cease to reverence matter, through which my salvation was worked.

- John Damascene (c. 675-750)

In the life which wells up in me and in the matter which sustains me, I find much more than Your gifts. It is You Yourself whom I find, You who make me participate in Your being, You who mould me. Truly in the ruling and in the first disciplining of my living strength, in the continually beneficent play of secondary causes, I touch, as near as possible, the two faces of Your creative action, and I encounter, and kiss, Your two marvelous hands—the one which holds us so firmly that it is merged, in us, with the sources of life, and the other whose embrace is so wide that, at its slightest pressure, all the springs of the universe respond harmoniously together.

- Teilhard de Chardin, S.J. (1881-1955)



Giovanni Agostino da Lodi, c. 1500

Daily Meditations

Monday, January 31

The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks about earthly things. The one who comes from heaven is above all. *John 3:31*

The whole of Sacred Scripture teaches that God exists and that there is one God, and therefore so do all the theologies of the churches in the Christian world. The whole of Sacred Scripture teaches that God exists, because at the core of Sacred Scripture there is nothing but God, or the divine quality that comes from God.

True Christian Religion #6

Tuesday, February 1

He testifies to what he has seen and heard, yet no one accepts his testimony. *John 3:32*

The recognition that God exists and that there is one God flows universally from God into human souls. There is an inflow from God into us. This is obvious from everyone's ready admission that everything good that is truly good and that exists in us and is done by us is from God. *True Christian Religion #8*

Wednesday, February 2

Whoever has accepted his testimony has certified this, that God is true. *John 3:33*

As a result, every nation in the whole world that possesses religion and sound reason acknowledges that God exists and that there is one God. From the divine inflow into human souls, discussed just above, it follows that in everyone there is an inner voice saying that God exists and that there is one God.

True Christian Religion #9

Thursday, February 3

He whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure. *John 3:34*

For various reasons, different nations and peoples have had and still have a diversity of opinions on the nature of that one God. The first reason for this is that knowledge about God and therefore acknowledgment of God is not possible without revelation; and knowledge of the Lord and therefore acknowledgment that all the fullness of divinity dwells physically in him is not possible without the Word, which is a garland of revelations. *True Christian Religion #11*

Friday, February 4

The Father loves the Son and has placed all things in his hands. *John 3:35*

On the basis of many phenomena in the world the human reason is capable of perceiving and concluding, if it wants to, that God exists and that there is one God. This truth can be corroborated by countless phenomena in the visible world [around us], for the universe is like a stage on which proofs are constantly being demonstrated that God exists and that there is one God. *True Christian Religion #12*

Saturday, February 5

Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever disobeys the Son will not see life, but must endure God's wrath. *John 3:36*

If there were not one God the universe could not have been created or maintained. We can infer the oneness of God from the creation of the universe, because the universe is a work connected together as one thing from beginning to end, all dependent on one God as the body depends on its soul. The universe was designed to allow God to be omnipresent, keep every detail of it under his supervision, and maintain it perpetually as one entity, that is, preserve it.

True Christian Religion #13

Looking Back to Find Yourself

Rev. Jonathan Mitchell

Luke 17:20-21

Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, "The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There it is!' For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you."

John 14:8-14

Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves.

Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.

Sermon

In the office, Laura, our ministry coordinator, has on her desk a Zen calendar with a saying for every day of the year. The seed of today's service comes from one of those sayings, a quote from a sacred text of the Hindu tradition known as the Upanishads: "God made the senses turn outwards, therefore people look outward, not into themselves. But occasionally a daring soul, desiring immortality, has looked back and found himself."

In this sermon I want to talk about looking back and finding ourselves at three successively deeper levels.

Often we hear it said that you should take a close look at yourself in the mirror, and that you should see yourself as others see you. That, I will point out, is still an external way to look at yourself. It doesn't

require you to look within, but rather to take into account what you look like from the outside. Now, I'm not about to say that looking at yourself in the mirror and seeing yourself as others do are bad things exactly. Certainly we are more effective in our day-to-day public lives if we understand how we look to others. This is a very good skill to have. Still, I would say that there is a trap in that kind of knowledge if we are not careful.

The danger was brought out clearly in the children's story that Cathy read this morning. In that story the main character, a happy and friendly dog, is quite unaware of the size of his ears until he is taunted with "Get out of the way, Big Ears!" Well, because of that, he looked at himself in the mirror, saw himself the way others saw him, and found that it didn't enhance his enjoyment of life! Quite the contrary—there is always self-limitation involved in adopting a merely objective view of who we are. I have big ears, therefore I can't... well, what exactly? In this case, I guess, I can't go out in public without feeling self-conscious. I'm good at math, so it doesn't bother me to do A, B, C, but I'm not so artistic, so I avoid having to do X, Y, Z. I'm shy, so I'm OK with doing A, B, C, but don't ask me to do X, Y or Z! And so on.

A deeper way to understand ourselves is in terms of our freedom. Whatever I may typically do, whatever I may have done in the past, is the now moment I choose. Many of you here have been studying *The Power of Now* by Eckhart Tolle. Part of the power of now is that it is only in the now moment that you can choose. In fact, in a very real way, in the now moment you cannot do anything other than choose. Right now, it is pointless for me to say of myself "I am this" or "I am that," as if those were objective facts. I can only choose what to do next. In fact, paradoxically perhaps, I have to choose what to do next.

Seth Lloyd, a physicist, describes this paradox of human freedom in a particularly clear and engaging way.

"For years my wife and I would go for lunch to Josie's in Santa Fe. I, after spending a long time scrutinizing the menu, would always order the half plate of chiles rellenos, with red and green chile, and posole instead of rice. I felt strongly that I was exercising free will: until I chose the rellenos half plate, I felt anything was possible. My wife, however, knew exactly what I was going to order all the time." (*Programming the Universe*, p. 36)

While Seth's wife is able to predict what he's about to order, the important point to grasp is that Seth

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himself cannot predict what he is about to order. He can only order—that is to say, he has to choose. Of course, that is in the now moment. Seth may very well predict, and accurately, what he will order next week. Still, when the moment arrives the self-prediction is without force; he can only choose.

A large part of our spiritual growth consists of expanding our sense of what we are capable of, to understand ourselves not in terms of what we are or have been, but in terms of what we can do. I can sing! I can dance! I can write!—whatever would be a good and life-enhancing stretch for you. Years ago, when my ministers at the time suggested to me that I could preach, the mere thought was laughable—I was way too shy. But as you can see... And most importantly, any of us can affirm these possibilities: I can forgive! I can love God! I can love the neighbor!

The relationship between our public, observable, predictable selves and our inner freedom is, to be sure, complex and dynamic. Sometimes it seems as though we know ourselves only too well. We get so used to our own habits and foibles; we understand so clearly our own strengths and weaknesses. We see ourselves do the same things over and over again—often to our chagrin and despite our best intentions to do things differently this time! I would insist, however, that in the now moment all of that is beside the point. We always have the potential to surprise ourselves.

Jesus says in our reading from Luke that the Kingdom of God will not come with things that can be observed. I am inclined to read that as saying that the Kingdom of God is not, and never will be—at least not primarily—an objective fact. It is rather a possibility, a freedom, something you can choose to do. Thus it is “within” you. Or to use the alternate translation, thus it is “among” us. The Kingdom of God will arrive in the external world when we collectively choose to do the Kingdom of God.

There is a way of understanding ourselves which is deeper still, one I will approach indirectly.

First, let's consider the nature of silence. Several years ago, I wrote a sermon called “Be Quiet!” in which I explored physical and spiritual silence. One of the blessings of hiking in the mountains or the woods is the opportunity it provides to experience natural silence. But you may have noticed an odd fact: sometimes the chirping of a bird or the snapping

of a twig only intensifies our awareness of the surrounding silence. It is as if these sounds help us to “hear” the silence they interrupt. If you reflect on it, I think you can come to perceive that whenever we hear a sound there is an implied silence “underneath” it. We cannot hear a soft sound in the context of a much louder one—say, a human conversation over the noise of a jackhammer. The jackhammer itself would be inaudible against an even greater racket. There is also a practical limit as to how loud a humanly audible sound can get. Sound at a certain decibel level would destroy our ears; anything louder than that is also inaudible. Whenever we hear a sound we are in the presence of an implied silence.

Something analogous can be said about light. We cannot see the stars during the day; their light is overwhelmed visually by the blue glow of the sky. And again, a bright enough light would destroy our eyes. If we see light, it is only because it is shining in the darkness. Something similar holds as well for solid objects: no two can fill the same space at the same time. If we experience solid, extended objects, it is only because they fill an implied emptiness. I don't quite know how to argue the point, but perhaps the same thing can be said of motion: every motion we perceive moves against an implied motionlessness. Certainly for our human senses, there are motions that are either too slow or too fast to be perceived.

For this sermon, these examples are offered to provide analogs to our thoughts and feelings. We cannot consciously attend to more than a few things at the same time. In fact, “multi-tasking” doesn't come naturally to us, and in my opinion it is not spiritually healthy. We are at our best when we focus on one thing at a time. And again, it is possible to feel a mix of emotions, but the stronger an emotion gets, the more it excludes other emotions. Then too, there is also an upper limit of intensity of thought and emotion beyond which we collapse. This suggests to me that there is an implied—what to call it?—“zero point” or “still point,” say, of thought and feeling underneath any conscious thought or feeling. To use Zen-like language, underneath any motion of the mind there abides no-mind.

I invite you all, then, to take in the following words slowly, to savor them, to enjoy the release they have to offer.

*We are at our
best when we focus
on one thing at a
time.*

...Silence...

...Darkness...

...Emptiness...

...Motionlessness...

...Stillness...

It often seems to me that our contemporary world has pushed the pendulum as far as it can possibly go in the opposite direction. Sound! Lights! Busyness! Speed! Drama! It wouldn't surprise me—I could be wrong, but it wouldn't surprise me—if the pendulum started swinging the other way in the years to come. I suspect that many people are developing a deep-seated inner thirst for simple peace and quiet.

When you read about the Buddha, the great medieval Christian mystics, or the great spiritual masters throughout all times and places, it does seem as though there have been people who let go of ego enough to live from the still point. I am not one of them—at least not yet. But I will say this: any time you can get even an inkling of the stillness beneath the hubbub in your life, any time you can remind yourself of it, any time you acknowledge it, it is strengthening, it is calming; indeed, it is freeing.

Many of the mystics would say that our deepest selves are a sort of fertile nothingness—that silent, dark, empty, motionless, still place in which God can most freely create. To touch that place and then to return from it is to return free and open to all our divinely given potential, including the highest.

Today I have been trying to illustrate how there can be more inward and more outward ways of seeking and finding ourselves. At the deepest level we find a nothingness in which God grants us our potential and our freedom. As we unfold our freedom in the choices we make, our public, external selves become manifest to those around us. I would affirm the whole trajectory. To grow into loving presences in the world—currently my favorite short answer as to why we are here—requires that we get to know ourselves well on all levels. May the Holy One watch over us all as we come to grasp more and more clearly what we are and who we are called to become. Amen.

Prayer

We bless you that we were made to love,
as the stars were made to shine.

Grant that such love may never die within us,
but being daily rekindled in our souls,
may burn in our hearts
and forever renew our whole being.

This we ask through Christ our Lord.

- Florence Allshorn (1887-1950)

As the hand is made for holding and the eye for seeing, thou has fashioned me for joy. Share with me the vision that shall find it everywhere: in the wild violet's beauty; in the lark's melody; in the face of a steadfast man; in a child's smile; in a mother's love; in the purity of Jesus.

- Gaelic, tr. Alistair MacLean

Lord, I thank you for teaching me how to live in the present moment. In this way I enjoy each simple task as I do it without thinking that I must hurry on to the next thing. I do what I am doing with all my ability and all my concentration. My mind is no longer divided, and life is more peaceful. Thank you for teaching me how to do this, and please help me show others the way to learn to trust you more completely and to do everything which has to be done at your time and your speed.

- Michael Hollings and Etta Gullick, in *The Oxford Book of Prayer*, George Appleton, ed. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1985), p. 97.

Holy Spirit of God,
let us not seek you in the distant land,
for you are here among us.
Let us welcome you in the heart
which is your dwelling place
and let us rejoice in the glory of your presence,
the only fountain of goodness and love.

- Amy Carmichael (1868-1951)

Daily Meditations

Monday, February 7

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. *Luke 4:1&2*

Since Divinity itself is present with angels and with us through its spiritual warmth and light, we look at people who are caught up in the truth of divine wisdom and the goodness of divine love, who are moved by them, and who are therefore in heartfelt thought, and we say that they are being “warmed by God.”

Divine Love & Wisdom #148

Tuesday, February 8

The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.” Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone.’” *Luke 4:3&4*

... no purpose occurs apart from its means and result, or no means by itself, without a purpose as its source and a result that contains it, or no result by itself without a means and a purpose. *Ibid.*

Wednesday, February 9

Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, “To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.” *Luke 4:5-7*

A purpose cannot exist in itself alone, but must exist in something that takes place because of it, something in which it can dwell with its total being, something which it can accomplish by its effort as long as it lasts. The reality in which it “lasts” is that final end that is called its result. *Divine Love & Wisdom #168*

Thursday, February 10

Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’” Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here.”

Luke 4:8&9

The grand purpose, or the purpose of all elements of creation, is an eternal union of the Creator with the created universe. This does not happen unless there are subjects in which his divinity can be at home, so to speak, subjects in which it can dwell and abide.

Divine Love & Wisdom #170

Friday, February 11

“For it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,’ and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’” *Luke 4:10&11*

Through this union, the Lord is present in every work he has created, since in the last analysis everything has been created for our sake. As a result, the functions of all created things rise level by level from the lowest things to us, and through us to God the Creator, their source. *Ibid.*

Saturday, February 12

Jesus answered him, “It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time. *Luke 4:12&13*

God the Creator is constantly drawing up out of the earth forms of service in their sequence, a sequence that culminates in us, who are from the earth as far as our bodies are concerned. By accepting love and wisdom from the Lord, we are then raised up and furnished with all the means for the acceptance of love and wisdom. *Divine Love & Wisdom #171*

Finding God, Finding Ourselves...in Fractals

Rev. Kim Hinrichs

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Psalm 139

O Lord, you have searched me and known me.
You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you
discern my thoughts from far away.
You search out my path and my lying down, and are
acquainted with all my ways.
Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know
it completely.
You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand
upon me.
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high
that I cannot attain it.
Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee
from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in
Sheol, you are there.
If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the
farthest limits of the sea,
even there your hand shall lead me, and your right
hand shall hold me fast.
If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the
light around me become night,"
even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as
bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you.
For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit
me together in my mother's womb.
I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works; that I know very well.

John 15:4-8

Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch
cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine,
neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine,
you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in
them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can
do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown
away like a branch and withers; such branches are
gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide
in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever
you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is
glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become
my disciples.

Heaven & Hell 99

Even though we completely correspond physically
to all of heaven, we are still not images of heaven in
outward form, but only in inward form. Our deeper
reaches are receptive of heaven, while our more
outward ones are receptive of this world. To the extent,

then, that those deeper reaches do accept heaven we
are heavens in least form, in the image of the greatest;
but to the extent that our deeper reaches are not
receptive, we are not heavens or images of the greatest.
Nevertheless, our more outward aspects, which are
receptive of the world, may be in some form that is
determined by the world, and therefore in more or less
beauty. Outward, physical beauty has its origins in
our parents and from our formation in the womb, and
thereafter is maintained by a general inflow from the
world. This is why our natural form differs markedly
from our spiritual form.

Sermon

About twelve years ago I worked at the biotech
company Genentech in South San Francisco. I worked
as an administrative assistant first, then as a tech
support person, and later as a web developer. Over
the time I was there I worked on a lot of different
computers, and one thing that I really liked was a
particular screen saver that Genentech had. Over
and over again, I would find myself captivated by
the slow and precise animation that would start with
a tiny collection of pixels in one part of the screen
assembling in a tight, geometric design. The design
would grow out from that small beginning, replicating
itself in larger and altered iterations of the same
initial configuration, in fantastic ways. The screen
saver used dramatic combinations of vivid colors too,
and as the design completed itself it would include
large, dynamic curves and arcs juxtaposed next to
intricate geometrical patterns. By the time one cycle
of the screen saver was complete, it had created an
absolutely breathtaking geometrical image. And then
it would start over again, and I would get captivated
all over again. (And just for the record, despite my
fascination with screen savers, I did manage to get
work done while I was there!)

I found out that these fantastic geometric designs
were called fractals. A fractal is a fragmented geometric
shape, generated by a mathematical formula, that can
be subdivided into parts, each of which is (at least
approximately) a reduced-size copy of the whole.
They appear similar at all levels of magnification
and so are often considered to be infinitely complex.
Fractals were discovered by a mathematician, Benoit
Mandelbrot, in 1975, who discovered a mathematical
formula that more accurately described the variegated

and irregular structures of nature than Euclidian geometry. ($Z=Z^2+Z$, where Z is a complex number.) Some natural objects that approximate fractals are clouds, mountain ranges, lightning bolts, systems of blood vessels, pulmonary vessels, and broccoli! Mandelbrot published a book in 1982 entitled *The Fractal Geometry of Nature* that showed how this mathematical formula is present throughout the natural world, and even extends to describe stock market fluctuations, architecture, and music.

The aspect of fractals that I find so fascinating is that they are what the mathematicians call “self-similar.” The whole has the same shape as one or more of the parts. If you isolate one tiny piece of the fractal and look at it, you will also see the whole, and vice versa: if you look at the whole, you will see the image of every constituent part. The minute and the infinite are reflections of one another.

I have come to see that if we were asked to come up with an illustration of Swedenborg’s thought, we might very well propose a fractal. I’d like to tell you why, and I’d like to tell you why I think Swedenborg’s vision itself is a stunningly beautiful design.

Swedenborg stands in a line of Christian thinkers who believed the Bible could be interpreted according to an inner or symbolic meaning. Although this method, referred to as “spiritual exegesis,” was unusual in his day, the notion that the Bible’s often confounding stories actually point to a deeper, spiritual truth was commonplace in ancient and medieval times. In the Jewish mystical tradition known as Kabbalah, there is a very old and very rich tradition of seeing mystical truth within biblical words and even in the shapes of the Hebrew letters themselves.

So Swedenborg was not the only one to suggest that the Bible could be read according to what he called correspondences, but the interpretation that he arrived at through his method is as vast as it is unique. Swedenborg suggests that the Bible can be read on multiple and concurrent levels. The first is the literal sense: what the stories appear to say at face value. This level is rich and dense with information, history, and meaning—enough that one could spend a lifetime studying it! But there is another layer. The second is the continuous internal story of how spiritual growth happens to us, how we move from an unregenerated state of being primarily self-centered to an enlightened state in which we act completely from

love of God and others. This second level of meaning is pretty extraordinary, but as if that weren’t enough, he proposes a third layer of meaning as well. This is the story of the enlightenment process of Jesus Christ himself; the story of how he became both fully human and fully divine. And that’s pretty extraordinary too, but as if that weren’t enough, Swedenborg also says that this story of spiritual growth—the gradual move from love of self to love of God—is also the story of the evolution of human consciousness. He believed that we are on a continuum of human history that is slowly but surely moving toward greater understanding and compassion.

So just to make sure you got that, I have described four layers of meaning. First: the literal meaning of the biblical texts themselves; second: a description of our own spiritual growth process; third: a description of the Lord’s enlightenment or glorification process; and fourth, a description of the growth of human consciousness itself. Remember

the fractal? The whole has the same shape as one of its parts. The story of our own individual spiritual growth process is a reflection of the story of the glorification of Jesus Christ himself, which is in turn a reflection of the growth of human consciousness. In other words, what happens to us as individuals is a reflection of the story of human history. And vice versa: the story of human history is a reflection, ultimately, of what happens to us as individuals. The macrocosm is a

reflection of the microcosm. The infinite reflects the infinitesimal. Now, I am just running quickly over some very complex material, but I hope you can sense that the design we have just glimpsed with Swedenborg’s theory of correspondences would form a very stunning fractal image.

But it doesn’t stop there! Swedenborg’s theory of correspondences also applies to his understanding of heaven. Swedenborg wrote extensively about heaven, and in his opinion, heaven was not a place, but a state of being that was alive, conscious, loving, and relational. The image that he said best corresponded to this state was a human being, so he called it the *Maximus Homo*, or Grand Human. On a cosmic scale, then, heaven resembles an enlightened human person. The reverse is true, too: on a minute scale, an enlightened human person resembles heaven: alive, conscious, loving, and relational. In the passage in our bulletin that is reprinted from *Heaven and Hell*, Swedenborg says, “To the extent that the deepest reaches within us



accept heaven, we are heaven in least form.” What that means is that within us, distinct from our external appearance and engagements with the natural world, there is a deep and inner landscape of spiritual love and wisdom. To the degree that we foster the growth of that deep, inner, spiritual knowledge and being, we more closely resemble heaven. We let more of heaven into us, and we become more of heaven.

A couple of years ago I found myself struggling with some issues in my life that, as much as I tried, I could not unlock. I thought about going to see a counselor, but I resisted it for many reasons. I hemmed and hawed, on the one hand trying to convince myself of my relative health and privilege and that I should just get on with things, and on the other hand struggling so much that I felt like I was losing my head and endangering myself and everything important to me. I asked my trusted colleague, Rev. Rachel, for advice. She told me how strongly she believed in the therapeutic process and encouraged me to start. She told me that when we understand ourselves deeply, we can function like a well-tuned machine that is more able to help others and be of service in the world. She told me, further, that according to Swedenborg’s thought, when we work on our own spiritual and psychological growth, we actually affect the cosmos. I thought that was a nice thing for my minister to say, but to be honest, I didn’t believe her. Nevertheless, I took my confused, hurting, and guilt-ridden self to therapy.

Two years later I can say that it has been a fascinating journey. Issues that seemed to be major turned out to be window dressing on other, more important but unexpected issues. Pieces of my past that I had never noticed were drawn out and examined and found to be potent, unusual, sometimes painful and sometimes life-giving. Some days I would feel overwhelmed at how screwed up I was. Some days I would feel the weight of grief over something I had lost a long, long time ago. Some days I would feel thunderstruck with creative energy as new options seemed to open for my life. Gradually, over time, I began to feel better, mainly because I came to realize two things I hadn’t known I needed to know: first, that I could heal; and second, that I could be myself.

What I also found along the way is that as I got better, I was better able to help others, just as Rachel had predicted. I could listen better to others, had more energy and creativity to extend to others, had much more patience and love for my daughters, more desire to be in relationship with people, more of a sense of

humor, and more energy to devote to my work and other activities.

But the strange thing I began to glimpse was that other piece that Rachel had said about the relationship to the cosmos. I saw that the particular wounds I addressed were not unique to me, and that in fact issues of love, loss, grief, family, birth, and death—just to name a few—are part of being human. To the extent that I accepted my own pain, I actually bonded more with the experience of being human and awakened an ability to connect more with others. It awakened compassion within me. The more I accepted my pain, the more I accepted my need for healing, the more I had to accept that the presupposition of healing is that health is more normal than disease. That, in turn, led me to slowly accept a belief that my mind had learned in theological school but that my heart had not truly accepted: that the essence of being is good.

Now I can’t know whether I will actually affect the cosmos, but I do believe in ripple effects. And I’m certainly not enlightened, but I do feel better about being human, and if we go back to our fractals and to Swedenborg, we are reminded that the more we embrace our deep humanness, the more we embrace God.

What I am coming to understand is that within our own lives and within our own stories is contained everything we need for spiritual enlightenment.

We don’t need to go out and do or be something different than who we already are to find enlightenment. If we live fully into our own experience, we will feel and witness the breadth of what it means to be human. We will live through joy and grief and love and heartache, idealism and injustice, ecstasy and depression. I think what Swedenborg meant with his theory of correspondences is that what is contained in the Bible is also contained within us. When we begin to make those connections, we begin to understand and change the cosmos. Each one of us is a minute and infinitely complex expression of the infinite complexity of human creation.

Remember the fractal. Just as the microcosm reflects the macrocosm, just as a part of the fractal reflects the whole, we are each a reflection of God. As we open ourselves deeply to who we really are, we will find joy and healing and compassion. When we discover who we are in our deepest and inmost being, we discover God. Who we are is God. What surrounds us is God. And what we can be together is heaven. Amen.

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is a minute and
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Daily Meditations

Monday, February 14

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. *Isaiah 7:14*

Divine love and wisdom cannot fail to be and to be manifested in others that it has created. The hallmark of love is not loving ourselves but loving others and being united to them through love.

Divine Love & Wisdom #47

Tuesday, February 15

He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. *Isaiah 7:15*

The hallmark of love is also being loved by others because this is how we are united. Truly, the essence of all love is to be found in union, in the life of love that we call joy, delight, pleasure, sweetness, blessedness, contentment, and happiness. *Divine Love & Wisdom #47*

Wednesday, February 16

The Lord will bring on you and on your people and on your ancestral house such days as have not come since the day that Ephraim departed from Judah—the king of Assyria. *Isaiah 7:17*

Can anyone fail to see this who looks into the essential nature of love? What is loving ourselves alone, really, and not loving someone else who loves us in return? This is more fragmentation than union. Love's union depends on mutuality, and there is no mutuality within ourselves alone. If we think there is, it is because we are imagining some mutuality in others. *Divine Love & Wisdom #48*

Thursday, February 17

On that day the Lord will shave with a razor hired beyond the river—with the king of Assyria—the head and the hair of the feet, and it will take off the beard as well. *Isaiah 7:20*

We can see from this that divine love cannot fail to be and to be manifested in others whom it loves and who love it. If this is characteristic of all love, it must be supremely characteristic, infinitely characteristic, of love itself.

Divine Love & Wisdom #48

Friday, February 18

On that day one will keep alive a young cow and two sheep, and will eat curds because of the abundance of milk that they give; for everyone that is left in the land shall eat curds and honey. *Isaiah 7:21&22*

... the universe, being an image of God and therefore full of God, could be created by God only in God. God is reality itself, and everything that exists must come from that reality. *Divine Love & Wisdom #55*

Saturday, February 19

With bow and arrows one will go there, for all the land will be briers and thorns; and as for all the hills that used to be hoed with a hoe, you will not go there for fear of briers and thorns; but they will become a place where cattle are let loose and where sheep tread. *Isaiah 7:24&25*

The reason Divinity is the same in all of them is that Divinity is not changeable or inconsistent like everything that involves space and time, or nature. It is constant and unchanging, so it is everywhere and always the same. *Divine Love & Wisdom #77*

In the Image and Likeness

Ms. Joy Barnitz

Genesis 1:26-28

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them...

John 1: 1 & 4

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth...

True Christian Religion #34 (God the Creator)

Man is an organic form recipient of God...The human mind, which makes man to be man, and in accordance with which man is man...is a receptacle of Divine influx; nevertheless, the Divine flows into it no further than man prepares the way or opens the door

True Christianity #84 (The Lord as Redeemer)

God could not have redeemed people, that is, rescued them from damnation and hell, without first taking on a human manifestation...Given Jehovah's inherent nature, despite his omnipotence he could not touch any individual devils in hell or any individual devils on earth and control them or their rage or tame their violence unless he could be as present in the farthest realms as he is in those closest to him. In his human manifestation he is in fact present in the farthest realms. This is why the Word refers to him as the First and the Last, the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End.

Sermon

What does it mean to be created "in the image and likeness" of God?

In May 2006, at the Gathering Leaves retreat for Swedenborgian women, the leader of one of the workshops I participated in asked us each to draw a picture of the Lord. We each had a large sheet of paper, a variety of colored markers and ten minutes. In silence, the group members thought and then began to draw.

I strolled outside, wanting to postpone this activity, as I'm a really terrible visual artist. There I was, surrounded by women busily drawing and using several markers to accent their images, usually faces, with colors.

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I recall thinking that Einstein's famous equation ($E=mc^2$) and Newton's famous equation ($F=ma$) somehow didn't fit the concept for me. Physics and math are the most fundamental and elegant languages of the natural world, but I am not fluent in those languages.

There I was, clutching a black marker and a large piece of newsprint. Time was running out. Just as we were recalled to the group, I scribbled something on my paper and went back inside.

We were asked to show our pictures. Everyone else had a human-like figure or a sun.

I had drawn the double helix. The structure of DNA. The chemical structure fundamental to life on earth.

One of the things I love about our faith tradition is that there has never been a contradiction for me between being a trained scientist and being a person of faith. As a child, I was taught in a New Church school that science is the study of the laws of order by which the Lord governs the universe. In an e-mail exchange in 2009 with Rev. George Dole, he advised me that an alternate translation of "laws of order" might be "elegant design." Thus science is the study of the Lord's elegant design. Just this small shift in wording made a profound shift in my perspective: I hadn't realized that the mathematicians and physicists who speak of "elegance" are using "New Church" language! How cool is that?

And how challenging: our scientific understanding of the world is constantly changing, growing, evolving, just as our individual understanding of God's truth is constantly changing, growing, evolving.

Little did I know that my lifetime would encompass a revolution in our scientific understanding of how life works. Just one example (which will date me!) illustrates this: I started graduate school just as "genetic engineering" and "recombinant DNA" were becoming the buzz words of their time, before the big names of the biotechnology industry such as Genentech and Amgen existed. One year it was impossible to sequence DNA, the next year I was taught how to do it, and a few years later it was an automated process. Now we know the sequence of the

human genome and we have the ability to measure small but significant differences in the genes of each of us to enable us to know our risk of Huntington's disease, to know if the drug Herceptin will work on our sister's breast cancer, to understand why different people require different doses of the "blood thinning" agent coumadin, and the examples go on and on.

In May 2009, *The Boston Globe* ran an article on "do-it-yourself genetic sleuthing" describing the efforts of a 23-year-old former research associate at a now-defunct biotech company who has determined, using a lab set up in her apartment closet, that she has a high likelihood of having the genetic disease that her father has. Such capabilities raise a host of ethical questions concerning how knowing that you have a gene that increases the likelihood of such a disease can alter how you lead your life and your relationships. My point is simpler: in the early 1970s it was not possible to do this at all. Now it can be done by one person in her apartment closet. That's a HUGE change in technology in one person's lifetime!

The rough draft of the human genome (that is, the sequence of all of the DNA specifying a human being) was completed in the year 2000. In announcing this milestone, President Clinton attracted a great deal of attention with the following words: "Today ... we are learning the language in which God created life. We are gaining ever more awe for the complexity, the beauty, and the wonder of God's most divine and sacred gift."

Let me repeat President Clinton's words: "Today ... we are learning the language in which God created life. We are gaining ever more awe for the complexity, the beauty, and the wonder of God's most divine and sacred gift." One of the people who made that announcement possible, as the leader of the government's Human Genome Project, was Dr. Francis Collins, who was named to head up the National Institutes of Health in 2009. Dr. Collins, a physical chemist and physician, is also the author of *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief*, published in 2006.

The completion of the Human Genome Project, and "completion" was defined by scientists seeking to express very precisely the limits of their knowledge as 99% of the gene-containing part of the human DNA sequence finished to 99.99% accuracy, occurred in the spring of 2003 and was timed to coincide with the 50th anniversary of the publication by Watson and Crick of the fundamental structure of DNA.



The structure of DNA is elegant, in the sense that physicists use that word. The structure is easily represented as a ladder with the "coding" chemicals as steps of the ladder. One of the most famous understatements made in a scientific publication is at the end of Watson and Crick's first paper in April 1953: "It has not escaped our notice that the specific pairing we have postulated immediately suggests a possible copying mechanism for the genetic material." Once the structure was visualized as a ladder it was obvious how it replicates: the two strands that form the uprights separate, one half of each "step" on the ladder remains with each "upright," and a "replicate" of the missing half is made by the cell.

Over the years since 1953 scientists have learned to decipher the genetic code, how to translate the detailed sequence of the DNA into the structures that comprise a living cell and continue to elaborate how all of the regulation of such expression occurs. There is a "central dogma" of molecular biology that describes the manner in which this occurs: DNA makes RNA makes protein. And we have come to understand that, like many dogmas, it is incomplete. For example, sometimes RNA is the genetic material, as in the influenza virus we get vaccinated against annually and in the H1N1 "swine flu" virus which caused the pandemic in 2009-2010. Sometimes genes

overlap. In many, maybe most, cases, the coding regions of the DNA in “higher” organisms (we include humans in that category) are interrupted and that “some assembly is required” to produce the final RNA message that is translated into a structural protein, receptor or enzyme. Mostly, however, our simplified view, our “central dogma” of DNA makes RNA makes protein, works to describe how cells go about their daily business.

Among the many surprises is that only about 20,000 to 25,000 genes are required to specify a human being, down from the approximately 100,000 predicted in the mid-1990s when the Human Genome Project was begun.

How elegant: only 25,000 genes to completely specify each of us uniquely.

The DNA sequences of these genes are nearly identical between humans and chimpanzees. Indeed, many of these genes have changed but slightly from those specifying similar structures in the yeast that help make bread, wine, and beer. As individuals, we differ from each other in very tiny ways, sometimes by as little as a single one of those ladder steps in a very crucial location. One single misspelling in the DNA language can make the difference between having sickle-cell anemia or not, hemophilia or not, cystic fibrosis or not. These misspellings are the raw material for adaptation to new natural environments, one step of the ladder at a time.

Again, how elegant! It takes only 25,000 genes to make each one of us a completely unique “one-of-a-kind” work of art; only 25,000 genes to build what Swedenborg describes in *True Christianity* as “the organic form recipient of God.” And it is in this organic form that the “human mind, which makes man to be man, and in accordance with which man is man ... a receptacle of Divine influx” resides.

Swedenborg tells us that the Bible is written in the “science of correspondences.” In particular, the first chapters of Genesis come to us from the first written version of the Scriptures and were understood by those of the Ancient Church as more than stories. Biblical scholars tell us that the story in the Old Testament is related to many other creation stories.

Yet who among us would expect that there WERE an Adam and an Eve?

Two parts of the human genome are especially useful for tracking back through our ancestry. One is the Y chromosome, possessed only by men; the other is the DNA inside the powerhouse of our cells, an organelle (yes, cells have organs, which scientists call “organelles”) called mitochondria, which are derived solely from our mothers. From studying the DNA of these two structures, we can trace the human journeys out of Africa and into all parts of the world. We can trace the genes of the Y chromosomes from our fathers back to an ancestral population in Africa. And we can trace the genes of the mitochondria from our mothers back to the same place and about the same time.

Findings reported in *The New York Times* in May 2009 suggest that the origin of modern humans, thus the location for the “Garden of Eden,” is in southwest Africa near the Kalahari desert, homeland of the Bushmen or San people. The area is currently not very garden-like; however, it is quite possible that the San once occupied a much larger area, stretching from southern Africa to present-day Ethiopia. This research also suggests that a small human group, possibly a single tribal band of as few as 150 people, left Africa about 50,000 years ago near the mid-point of the African coast of the Red Sea. This group populated the rest of the world.

How strikingly like the creation story from Genesis is this scientific story of our origin in and exit from

Africa!

The intellectual work of human minds in understanding the human genome is far from over. In June 2007, a set of papers was published that challenged the then-traditional view of how our genetic blueprint actually gets used by cells. In the words of Dr. Collins, who was then the Director of the NIH National Human Genome Research Institute, “the scientific community will need to rethink some long-held views about what genes are and what they do, as well as how the genomes functional elements have evolved. This could have significant implications for efforts to identify the DNA sequences involved in many human diseases.” This reassessment continues. In April 2009, a set of commentaries published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* focused on the limited value genetic analysis has in predicting common diseases such as diabetes and cancer. The era of personal genomic medicine may have to wait as we untangle the complexity of regulation of gene

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expression and the interactions among many cellular components that result in common diseases.

We've come a long way since our fundamental "Eureka moment" about the structure of DNA, yet we are only beginning to unravel the elegant design, the laws of order that govern the complexity of our organic, human form. We increasingly understand the misspellings that underlie or predispose our organic form to disease. We can screen for these misspellings, we can select suitable medications to relieve the effects; our fundamental understanding remains incomplete.

Our genetics is only one part of the story of our organic form. The air we breathe, the food we eat, and the stresses we experience all contribute to forming the vessel through which our spirits encounter the physical world. Just as our bodies are shaped by these factors and by our biological responses, so are our spirits shaped by our experiences and responses to them.

Even God needed a human form to touch the hells and tame them. "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" because "despite His omnipotence He could not touch any individual devils in hell or any individual devils on earth and control them or their rage or tame their violence unless He could be as present in the farthest realms as He is in those closest to Him."

God in human form is approachable, not aloof or scary. We can choose, each of us, to develop a direct relationship with the Lord. God is here for each of us, now. We are never alone, never cut off from the Lord's eternal, loving embrace. To me it is comforting to be able to call upon the Lord for the strength to deal with everyday challenges. To me it is exciting to study and apply the laws of order to design medicines to improve human health and well-being. For me, this ever-deepening experience of the beauty and complexity of this ever-so-elegantly designed natural world is endlessly profound.

In his book *How Doctors Think*, Dr. Jerome Groopman tells the story of Rabbi Rachel Stein. Rabbi Stein was a successful business woman who became a rabbi and, late in life, became the adoptive mother of a Vietnamese infant girl who was hospitalized for a nutritional deficiency that caused her to have a profound immune deficiency. The author describes Rabbi Stein's struggle to change the minds of the doctors who had misdiagnosed her daughter as having a genetic abnormality. The author asked her how she was "able to think clearly, assimilate complex

medical information about her daughter's illness and press her requests that the doctors re-evaluate her daughter's illness? What kept her from breaking under the stress?"

Her response: was to "explain how she saw the world: 'God is like a best friend for me.' A best friend. A friend you can always call upon. A friend who never deserts you. A friend who offers wisdom and resources without question. A friend you can bounce ideas off of with complete trust in his integrity. A friend you can reveal feelings to without fear that he might exploit your vulnerability."

The Lord made us in his image and likeness and blessed us. God incarnate dwelt among us, full of Grace and Truth, not only to deliver us from the hells, but also so that we might see God as Rachel Stein saw him: as our best friend.

Our organic form is a wonder, a tribute to the elegance that flows from the divine laws of order that created the natural world. But it is to the extent that our mind, which in Swedenborg's words "makes man to be man and in accordance with which man is man," welcomes the Divine influx that we become fully human. It is not the organic form—our body—however elegant, that is the image and likeness of God. And it is not just the intellectual component of our mind either. It is our spirit that is in the image and likeness of God. It is our spirit that is the receptacle of the Divine. We can choose to open our minds and hearts to Divine influx. To the extent that we do so while seeking divine truth, and "embody" that influx in use in the world, we realize our full humanity

Rabbi Stein inserted the following prayer into her well-worn prayer book from which she read daily by the bedside of her infant daughter. It spoke to what she sought from her God:

Dear Lord,
Having been created in Your image
I am full of unrealized potential
The realization of which
Depends upon my acknowledgement of the potential,
My recognition of all the gifts from You with which I
am endowed,
And my exploitation of the opportunities that lie open
before me.
Please Lord, help me rise to meet the challenge.
Let me use those gifts for the benefit of all people.
Dear Lord,
For all that I am
And all that I can be
I thank You. Amen.

Monday, February 21

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. *John 1:1*

Spiritual warmth and spiritual light flow into and affect not only angels but also us, precisely to the extent that we become receptive. Our receptivity develops in proportion to our love for the Lord and our love for our neighbor. *Divine Love and Wisdom #5*

Tuesday, February 22

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.

John 1:2-4

It therefore stands to reason that God is a person and in this way is God manifest—not manifest from himself, but manifest in himself. The one who is manifest in himself is the God who is the source of all. *Divine Love and Wisdom #16*

Wednesday, February 23

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. *John 1:7&8*

Anyone can come to an inner assurance about the presence of infinite things in God—anyone, that is, who believes that God is a person; because if God is a person, he has a body and everything that having a body entails. *Divine Love and Wisdom #18*

Thursday, February 24

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. *John 1:9-11*

If you look at the created universe with an eye to its design, it is so full of wisdom from love that you might say everything taken all together is wisdom itself. *Divine Love and Wisdom #29*

Friday, February 25

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. *John 1:12&13*

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.

Divine Love and Wisdom #30

Saturday, February 26

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. *John 1:14*

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. That is, it dwells in the fact that we are capable of being wise and loving. *Ibid.*

FEB 27 God Unknown?

Ms. Leah Goodwin

Acts 17:16-34

While Paul was waiting for [his companions] in Athens, he was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols. So he argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and also in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. Also some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers debated with him. Some said, "What does this babblers want to say?" Others said, "He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign divinities." (This was because he was telling the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.) So they took him and brought him to the Areopagus and asked him, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? It sounds rather strange to us, so we would like to know what it means." Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new.

Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For 'In him we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we too are his offspring.' Since we are God's offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead."

When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, "We will hear you again about this." At that point Paul left them. But some of them joined him and became believers, including

Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

Sermon

"What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you..." (Acts 17:23)

My text for today comes from the book of Acts, chapter seventeen, verse twenty-three. Today we find the apostle Paul cooling his heels in Athens, waiting for some friends. Earlier in the chapter we are told that he had not intended, at least at this point, to be in Athens at all. Paul has had an unexpected re-routing of his evangelistic flight plan—his preaching of Christ crucified has nearly gotten him stoned in Thessalonica, and the enraged crowd has attempted to follow him to his next stop in Berea with the intention of starting a riot or two. Consequently, his traveling companions have deposited him in Greece, in the relatively tolerant city of Athens, for safekeeping.

Because he is part of the small group preaching the new ideas of Christ, and because he has nothing else to do, Paul takes the opportunity to do a little field research and strolls around the city to take a gander at the religious practices there.

He is, we are told, not pleased with what he finds. In fact, he is "deeply distressed that the city is full of idols." And because he is in the business of evangelism, and because he is Paul—Paul has distinct opinions and beliefs—he takes up the issue with anyone who will listen, in both the synagogue and the marketplace.

He must have made a fair amount of interesting noise, because he attracts the attention of both the Epicureans and the Stoics, two of the most influential and well-established schools of philosophy in the ancient world. They find his remarks somewhat incomprehensible—"What is this babblers trying to say?" they ask. Nevertheless, his arguments and his point about this Jesus figure are sufficiently intriguing, and they invite him to speak at the Areopagus, the marvelous Areopagus in Athens, the hill where the great Athenian council met, the hill dedicated to the Greek war god Ares.

Paul proceeds to make what must, from the Athenians' point of view, have been a fantastically arrogant claim. "What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you." *I know this unknown God*, he says. Or, as Peter Gomes puts it, "That which you in ignorance worship, let me now tell you what it is all about."

Paul does not get the best response. At the mention of such a cheap parlor trick as resurrection from the dead, a number of the people scoff. A few answer his altar call—and I do wonder about Dionysius the Areopagite (a member of that great political council, notice) and the woman named Damaris—but not many seem to be terribly or definitively moved. And so Paul leaves Athens.

So what are we to make of this very well-constructed but deeply underappreciated stump sermon that Paul makes?

What Paul is saying, and what disgusts the rationalists in the crowd at the Areopagus, is that in the end, everything he says, all those grand and beautiful proclamations about the Lord of heaven and earth and the oneness of humanity and the one in whom “we live and move and have our being,” comes down to incarnation, to physical existence—something a person can get her hands on and take hold of and look at. “Where there is Reality, there is Presence,” says Swedenborg—where something exists, it takes form. What is unknown only touches us, only unifies itself with us, insofar as we can get a handle on it. There is no way to “grope for” something, as Paul puts it, unless it exists to be groped after.

This idea was not generally appealing to an intellectual of the Greek school. And it seems counterintuitive to us, as well. But having a physical concept of an infinite reality is in fact necessary, and *not* counter to the task of understanding that infinity. Here’s what Swedenborg has to say:

“Divine Good, like the fire of the sun, is unapproachable; but Divine Truth, which is like the light from the sun, is approachable. It provides a person’s inner eye—the eye of faith—with a means and access to Divine Good...

“People cannot think about the Divine in itself except by setting up some concept of a divine person. It is even less possible to be united to the Divine in itself by love without some such concept. If we think about the Divine within itself without some concept of a divine person, we think without boundaries, and a concept without boundaries is no concept at all.

“Intellectuals in this world distance themselves from any personal concept of God, so there is no mediation between their minds and the Divine, which brings darkness on their understanding and their love. But intellectuals in heaven have a concept of the Divine in a human; so the Lord [Jesus Christ] serves as their mediator and is, therefore, a light for their minds.”

The problem with idolatry is that it tries to cut God down to size, and in the process misses him entirely.

Paul arrived in Athens and invited the Athenians to look beyond the altar. It is worth remembering that Athens was a city of intellectuals of a high order, of great philosophers—and, I am sure, also of opinionated crackpots. In short, the Athens of Paul’s day bears a strong resemblance to Cambridge, seething as it is with up-and-coming Harvard students and MIT students and shouters from street corners. Athenians were acquainted with the idea that there could be something divine beyond their knowledge. Paul had observed that they had erected an altar “to an unknown god.” But Paul also suspected that they had missed the point, taking “unknown” to mean “unknowable”—using the altar to an unknown God not as a window onto the infinite, but as a placeholder with which to cover their sacrificial bases and hedge their religious bets.

And, if this was the case, who can blame them? “The devil we know is better than the devil we don’t know,” as the saying goes. The future is enough of an unknown for most of us, and even that we do our best to control—think of horoscopes, our culture’s obsession with world apocalypse, and diversified investment portfolios. As for the nature of the god in charge of that future—well, just put up the altar and keep it well-tended. And as for what that altar might stand for, never you mind.

Paul might just as easily have been speaking to us as to the Athenians of two thousand years ago. It is easier for us, as it was for the Athenians, to have our divinity safely packaged. It is easier to build lovely shrines and marvelous buildings and ornate altars, and park an idea of God there and visit that idea periodically at our convenience. It is much easier—and pretty effortless, actually—to reduce God to “gold or silver or stone,” or a set of values or a particular political party or income bracket or skin color or what have you. It is easier to squash the divine into containers of our own construction. And it is very tempting to prefer that the world and the people in it be that way, too—safely packaged in assumptions, prejudices, and systems of our own construction, even if we are fond of attributing those constructions to God.

The problem with idolatry is not that the object of worship takes a form. For, after all, “where there is reality, there is presence,” and for something to really be it has to have some kind of way of being, some kind of appearance. No, the problem with idolatry is that it limits, and in the process misses entirely, the intended object of worship. Idolatry tries to cut God down to size, or cut him into conveniently sized pieces. In the

process, God disappears altogether. Idolatry involves getting distracted by defining the *thing* in front of us, finding and marking its limits and boundaries.

But Paul will have none of it. He introduces the Athenians to a God that can be known, but not quantified—the God who cannot be constrained by any construct of human making, whether shrine or prejudice. The point here is not so much that Paul exhorts the Athenians to trade the gods they know for the God he knows. The point is that he asks them to trade the gods they can quantify for the God who can be known.

There is a difference. Knowing is not the same as pinning down. The Information Age, with its iPads and BlackBerries and Google search engines, may lead us to believe that we can define the parameters of all that is, but there is still one thing, at least, that we cannot, and that is God.

God, who defines what it means to be human, who in fact encompasses all that it means to be human, who sets the boundaries for sky and earth and sea, does not fit on an altar—any altar. But we can know God. This is not to say that we can define God precisely, any more than we can ever claim complete understanding of a dear friend or a lover—or even ourselves. In every relationship, there are spiritual distances to be crossed between people. From cracks to chasms, every soul must journey to find union or companionship with another soul. So it is with God, to an infinite degree. We trace the contours of his infinity in all their mystery precisely because he took human form and became one with our own experience—in fact, he redeemed our own experience of humanity so that we might have it in freedom.

I love liturgy. I take Sunday morning worship very seriously, and I revel in it—in its beauty, in the richness of the language, in the repetition that burnishes words and gives them new layers of meaning week after week. And because I love and value liturgy so highly, I choose the hymns for Sunday morning with great—some might say obsessive—care.

You might notice that of the hymns we are singing this morning, the first and last speak of the Lord in majesty: “O tell of his might, O sing of his grace, Whose throne is the light, whose canopy, space.” But the hymn before the sermon, you may have noticed, speaks of the Lord in much more intimate terms: “Jesus is my best of friends.”

People have opinions about hymns, and I have been an eavesdropping preacher’s kid long enough to know that sometimes these kinds of contrasts—the majestic with the personal, the mysterious with the embodied,

the “dignified with the cuddly” (as one of my father’s parishioners rather tartly put it)—these kinds of contrasts in hymns seem odd. How can such different visions of God abide in the same service? Do we not, as with all else in life, ultimately have to discern a single correct vision of God?

Of course hymns are a relatively trifling example of this conundrum, this great decision of choosing which God one will serve. But the three we are singing today express the heart of the point fairly acutely. They may be different—attributing different names, different powers, different relationships to God—but all three have in common a profound confidence in God’s care for us, on every level of existence. We *know* the God who is “pavilioned in splendor,” who is the “Ancient of Days,” not only because he shapes and rules over creation, but also because he *is* our “best of friends,” because we abide in his “well-proved love.”

The great scholar of the historical Jesus, Albert Schweitzer, was fortunate (and a bit unusual in his field) never to have lost his sense of the God in the man named Jesus. He had this to say about the paradox that we all encounter in our journey to God’s altar:

“He comes to us as one unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lakeside, He came to those men who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same word: ‘Follow thou me!’ and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfill for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is.”

God does not live in temples made by human hands. He is not, in his deepest reality, “an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals.”

He is too great—and too near to us—for that.

God lives in temples formed by his own hand, temples spacious enough to contain him and radiant enough to reflect his majesty, which is clothed in light like a garment.

He makes his home in all that is. And in the divine humanity of Jesus Christ, he makes his home in our souls, in our daily living and breathing, in our birth and our death. We say, “Come, Lord Jesus!” but in fact he is already here, is always here, is continually on his way. Alleluia! Amen.

Monday, February 28

Incline your ear, O Lord, and answer me, for I am poor and needy.

Preserve my life, for I am devoted to you; save your servant who trusts in you.

Psalm 86:1&2

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

Divine Providence #54

Tuesday, March 1

You are my God; be gracious to me, O Lord, for to you do I cry all day long.

Gladden the soul of your servant, for to you, O Lord, I lift up my soul. *Psalm 86:3&4*

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

Wednesday, March 2

For you, O Lord, are good and forgiving, abounding in steadfast love to all who call on you.

Give ear, O Lord, to my prayer; listen to my cry of supplication. *Psalm 86:5&6*

There is only one essence, only one substance, and only one form from which have come all the essences, substances, and forms that have been created.

Divine Providence #157.2

Thursday, March 3

In the day of my trouble I call on you, for you will answer me.

There is none like you among the gods, O Lord, nor are there any works like yours.

All the nations you have made shall come and bow down before you, O Lord, and shall glorify your name. *Psalm 86:7-9*

People who are rational because of their inner enlightenment also sense certain things the moment they hear that God is one—they sense that God is omnipresent, that everything good comes from him, that everything goes back to what is good and what is true, and that everything good comes from goodness itself and everything true from truth itself.

Divine Providence #168.2

Friday, March 4

For you are great and do wondrous things; you alone are God.

Teach me your way, O Lord, that I may walk in your truth; give me an undivided heart to revere your name. *Psalm 86:10&11*

Since the Lord is the Word, then, it follows that when we are being taught by the Word we are being taught by the Lord alone. *Divine Providence #72.2*

Saturday, March 5

I give thanks to you, O Lord my God, with my whole heart, and I will glorify your name forever.

For great is your steadfast love toward me; you have delivered my soul from the depths of Sheol.

Psalm 6:12&13

We are not human because of our faces and bodies but because of the goodness of our love and the truths of our wisdom; and since this is what makes us human, we are also whatever is true and good about us, our own love and our own wisdom.

Divine Providence #172.3

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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
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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