

March 2009

Our Daily Bread

Sermons and Meditations of the Swedenborgian Church



Strange Angels

In This Issue:
Hark! The Guarded Humans Sing
The Power of Gratitude
Pretty People
Heroines of the Everyday
Holy Hospitality

Invitation

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

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

Prayer

O Lord, shine your light into our minds and hearts,
That we might welcome you where now we exclude you.
Open our ears to those we would prefer not to hear,
Open our lives to those we would prefer not to know,
Open our hearts to those we would prefer not to love—
And so open our eyes,
That we might see how often Christ comes to us in a stranger's guise.

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Dear Reader,

As the new editors of *Our Daily Bread*, we extend to you a sincere apology for the lapse in this magazine’s publication. Because of that lapse, we are extending all subscriptions by one year.

We have spent the last few months retooling the production of the periodical. In addition, we are expanding *Our Daily Bread’s* mission to include an active internet presence that will offer additional devotional resources; you can access the fledgling *Our Daily Bread* site online at <http://www.odb-online.com>. We welcome your comments, suggestions, and reflections; you can reach us by email at ourdailybreadmag@gmail.com.

Since long before the birth of Christ, humanity has wondered about the precise nature of the mysterious creatures called angels, whose name means “messenger” in Greek. This month’s theme, “Strange Angels,” focuses on God’s resourcefulness when it comes to choosing and sending these divine message bearers. Whether taking the form of a person, a place, or an event, an angel may be “strange” because unfamiliar, surprising, or just plain odd from our human perspective. Whatever our doubts, however, entertaining these unplanned guests connects us more deeply to the Lord.

We hope you will enjoy reading this issue and trust that it will open your eyes to the angels, both familiar and strange, who wait on you in the Lord’s name. May this magazine be a messenger of divine love in your life.

Blessings,

Leah Grace Goodwin and Rev. Kevin Keith Baxter

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MAR 1 Hark! The Guarded Humans Sing The Reverend Kathy Speas

Angels are always with us. But who (or what) are they? How are we to connect with our heavenly companions? Why do they speak to us at all, and what happens when they do? Rev. Kathy Speas addresses these questions in a Christmas sermon that is relevant and moving at any time of year.

Luke 2:1-20

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

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

they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them.

But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.

The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Do you think angels are as fascinated with us as we are with them? Do you think they sport our pictures on mugs, T-shirts, calendars, and decorative plates? Visit museums full of grand and glorious paintings of us? Attend seminars and read articles entitled “Getting Through to Your Guarded Human?” Sing seasonal carols like “Hark, the Guarded Humans Sing?” That would be a nice one for them at this time of year—mostly the guarded humans are bumbling along, driving in their cars, running errands, worried about all kinds of ridiculous nonsense, watching TV, but at Christmas, hark! The guarded humans sing!

*Who are these
beings that have so
captivated humanity?*

Some see the popular fascination with angels as a sign of a recent resurgence of spirituality. But images of heavenly spirits have been at the heart of our collective unconscious for centuries. Angels appear in countless paintings, sculptures, and songs, as well as in drama, poetry, architecture, and film—not to mention on thousands and thousands of websites.

Who are these spiritual beings that have so captivated humanity?

The Bible doesn't mention much specifically about angels. They're part of the landscape. They drop in and out to deliver messages, steer people the way God wants them to go, and intervene in the occasional impending disaster, but biblical angels definitely don't fit the modern profile of Guardian Angel as Loving Protector Who Will Always Shield You from Everything You Don't Like. If you take your understanding of angels only from the Bible, you would probably not

want to experience an angelic presence. They appear in horrific visions, make Isaiah eat a coal, and pick Ezekiel up by the hair—and when they appear, they usually have some awe-inspiring, monumental, life-altering task for their audience to take on. Suffice it to say, it is for good

Angels loved the earth, watched sunsets, listened to the waves, fell in love.

reason that the angels in the Bible have been known to introduce themselves by saying, “Fear not!” Biblical angels are not the “best friend, perfect mommy, glows in your favorite color” angels of the New Age.

The early Western church developed the theme of guardian angels from ancient Near Eastern tradition. St. Jerome supposedly said, “The dignity of a soul is so great that each has a guardian angel from its birth.” By the time Swedenborg was writing, the prevailing ecclesiastical view on angels was of a complicated divine bureaucratic hierarchy of agents of God, executing God’s will here on earth, essentially using humans as pawns.

Swedenborg, who has probably written more about angels than any other author, departed radically from the prevailing contemporary view of angels as a race of divine creatures that God created and put in heaven to save us from the Devil. Angels play a central role in Swedenborg’s theology. He says that “The Lord’s divine providence has for its object a heaven from the human race,” and that we are angels in training, using our earthly life experience to learn to choose the divine community over the material world of self-absorption. He also says—and this is one of my favorites—that we each have four spirits with us at all times: two heavenly angels (one of love and one of wisdom) and two hellish spirits (one of selfish intentions and one of false perceptions). Swedenborg experienced both divine angels and hellish spirits as consisting of the spiritual bodies from which our material bodies separate at death. In other words, all angels have lived on the earth as people.

Think about that—angels loved the earth, watched sunsets, listened to the waves, fell in love. And God works through these former people to guide humanity.

In the Swedenborgian view, angels comprise our spiritual companionship, which we choose through our states of mind and heart and soul. You know how you want to keep your kids from hanging out with companions who are, shall we say, “less than truly inspirational”?

How you want to involve your kids in activities where they will make friends with other kids who spark their creativity and happiness? The same is true for our spiritual companionship. The activities we involve ourselves in and the states of mind we cling to in life pull us toward different kinds of spiritual companionship. Angels are not separate beings that swoop in from overhead to control us from above. They are the spiritual qualities we attract as our spirits grow toward God. Angels are wisdom and compassion and love and creativity. They are friendship and fun and music and inspiration. And our relationship with them is two-way—we generate spiritual qualities, and the embodiments of these qualities, in turn, lead us along; the process builds on itself. Swedenborgian theologian Robert Kirven says, “Angels inspire us with good affections, so that we will intend and accomplish things that improve our human communities.” Another writer, John O’Donohue, expresses a Swedenborgian perspective on angels when he writes, “In a certain sense, your angel is the voice and presence of ancient divine longings within you. This urges you forth from all false belonging until you come into the divine rhythm where longing and belonging are one.”

Hearing angels, listening to them, is not a matter of summoning them through channeling, performing a ritual so that a real one will appear, or hanging up a picture and saying “This one is my angel.” It is not angels we seek. It is God, whose will they manifest. In the Buddhist tradition, spiritual writings, practices, and teachings are seen as “the finger that points at the moon.” Our task is to see the moon, not worship the finger. Do not confuse the messenger with the message.

It is not angels we seek. It is God, whose spirit they manifest.

So how do we connect with our spiritual companions? How do we hear them, how do we know them, and what do we do when we have heard them?

Think about how they appeared at the birth of the Christ child, about how they brought the central message of this season, which is not glory or salvation or eternal life (that’s Easter), but simply hope. It’s Christmas. All we’ve got is a baby. Hope. Mystery. Infinite possibility.

Angels appeared at Christ’s birth, not to prophets this time, not to potential leaders like Moses, but to the working man—the shepherd. They did not appear in a blaze of saving glory in the middle of the town

square at noon, when the greatest number of people would see them and be awed. They came at night, in darkness, in stillness, in silence. And it was not the angels who saved the day—they merely announced the birth of hope. In the light and joy and singing and fellowship and love and celebration of this season, we forget that, at least in the northern hemisphere, this is a time of darkness and stillness for the earth's seasons,

It is God who fills us, not with promises, but with hope, with faith in God's glory and our part in co-creating it.

a time when life retreats into silence. It's especially easy to forget that here in California, where we aren't confronted with a view of frozen, barren fields that were once full of florid corn and will not be thick with sunflowers for several more

months. According to O'Donohue, "the sacred has both a silence and a secrecy around it...the very nature of angelic presence is totally alien to the garish, neon attention it has been given."

We hear the angels in a place within us that Thomas Merton calls the "*pointe vierge*," the virgin point, "a point untouched by illusion, a point of pure truth...which belongs entirely to God, which is inaccessible to the fantasies of our own mind or the brutalities of our own will." The *pointe vierge* is an experience that transcends the commonplace experience of relaxation or a few moments of peace and quiet, or even the calm and comfort we feel in church. The *pointe vierge* is the ultimate depth of the rarest, most profound moments of prayer or meditation, when we set ourselves aside and stand in awe before the Mystery. It is at this point that we, like Mary, realize that it is God who fills us, not with promises of an eternally happy heaven, but with hope, with faith in God's glory and our part in co-creating it, even when we don't know yet what promise and mystery this seed within us holds. Perhaps it is at the *pointe vierge* that we can fully understand the meaning of the virgin birth: each one of us brings something into the world that no one else can bring, something we receive in darkness and silence and bring forth into the light of life. And this capability is why God saw fit to protect each one of us with a guardian angel.

The Christmas season is about clearing out the clutter in our souls, even before we have something to replace it with. Get rid of the old emotions that no longer fit, the dusty boxes of feelings we have been saving for a rainy day, the worldviews we once held dear and now keep

only for sentimental or decorative reasons. Prepare the fields for spring. Make room for the angels.

Irish poet Denis Devlin says, "It is inside our life that the angel happens." Now is a time of year to keep the stillness and darkness of the shepherds' nighttime watch within us, even as we are playing with our kids, and cooking, and answering the doorbell to receive friends, and sending cards and wrapping gifts.

There is a pivotal moment at the solstice when the earth is farthest away from the sun—one instant when the pendulum swings to the nadir of darkness and then moves back into orbit, toward the light. It is at this moment, in which hope collides with fear, that we hear the angels—not their trumpets, not their heavenly choirs, not their message of transformation and liberation, but the simple "Fear not" that lets us know we are not alone.

The Reverend Kathy Speas was ordained in 2004. She serves as a hospice chaplain near San Francisco, CA, and has won Pacific School of Religion's graduate preaching award.



Prayer

Write your name on our hearts, Lord, that we might remember you are with us and within us, for we too often forget that heaven is so near. Lift our darkness, we pray. Let us see without fear the radiance of your angels, for you are everywhere and everything, and nothing shall be impossible in you. Amen.

Daily Meditations

Monday, March 2

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. Luke 1:26-27

By "an angel," in the highest sense, is meant the Lord; and, in a relative sense, the heaven of angels, as also an angelic society. *Apocalypse Revealed* 548

Tuesday, March 3

And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. Luke 1:28-29

Angels who talk with us do not talk in their own language but in ours, or in other languages in which we may be fluent—not in languages of which we have no knowledge. The reason for this is that when angels talk with us they turn toward us and unite with us. *Heaven and Hell* 246

Wednesday, March 4

The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Luke 1:30-33

It is provided by the Lord that angels flow into a person's aims, and thus through a person's aims into the things that follow from those aims. *Arcana Coelestia* 5854

Thursday, March 5

Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?"
Luke 1:34

Conversation with angels is not granted except to people whose deeper levels have been opened by divine truths all the way to the Lord, since it is into these that the Lord flows within us, and when the Lord flows in, so does heaven. *Heaven and Hell* 250

Friday, March 6

The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." Luke 1:35-37

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 and Wisdom* 170

Saturday, March 7

Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her. Luke 1:38

For these subjects to be God's dwellings and homes, they must be receptive of his love and wisdom apparently of their own accord, subjects who with apparent autonomy raise themselves toward the Creator and unite themselves with him... We are those subjects, people who can raise themselves and unite with apparent autonomy. *Divine Love and Wisdom* 170

MAR 8 The Power of Gratitude

The Reverend Dr. Rachel Rivers

Not every life event or circumstance offers obvious cause for gratitude. In this sermon, Rev. Rachel Rivers explains how welcoming the strange angels of life's vicissitudes can open our hearts to receive new life from the Lord.

Psalm 92:1-5

A Psalm. A Song for the Sabbath Day.
It is good to give thanks to the Lord,
to sing praises to your name, O Most High;
to declare your steadfast love in the morning,
and your faithfulness by night,
to the music of the lute and the harp,
to the melody of the lyre.
For you, O Lord, have made me glad by your work;
at the works of your hands I sing for joy.

How great are your works, O Lord!
Your thoughts are very deep!

Ezekiel 36:25-26

I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.

I extend to each one of you today an invitation. It is an invitation to cultivate gratefulness as your basic attitude toward life. It is an invitation to cultivate gratefulness as the very ground of your being.

Gratefulness is one of the most powerful forces in the world. It makes all the difference between going through the motions and really being alive. Gratefulness is the difference between having a heart of stone and receiving a heart of flesh from the Lord.

The twentieth-century Protestant theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer said that it is only through gratitude that life becomes rich. The Koran says that if you count God's blessings, you will not be able to number them. And there's a Jewish proverb that says we will never know all that should make us grateful to God.

Gratefulness is extraordinarily powerful. Thomas Merton, in his book *No Man is an Island*, said that someone who is ungrateful admits to not knowing God. He goes on to say that if we are not aware of our gratitude, we don't really know who we are; we are not in touch with our life and what it means to be alive, to truly be.

To be grateful is to recognize, acknowledge, and accept that we are recipients of a gift. The most basic gift is life itself. Each of our lives is a given: a gift given to us. Emanuel Swedenborg is very clear, especially in his book *Divine Love and Wisdom*, that we ourselves are not life, but recipients of life, receptacles of life, vessels of life—cups into which life is poured. Life itself is holy. Life itself is divine. Swedenborg says that the more open our hearts, the more open we are to receiving this divine influx of life; hence, the more full of life we are.

***Gratefulness is
extraordinarily
powerful.***

One of the most powerful ways to open our hearts, to allow God the freedom to remove our heart of stone and give to us a heart of flesh, is by getting in touch with our thankfulness, our gratitude. Sometimes this is really easy, right? When things are going just how we want them to go or when something surprises us in a most delightful way, it feels spontaneous: gratitude just wells up in us and we feel joy. But at other times, every now and then, it's a little tougher.

Benedictine monk Brother David Steindl-Rast has delineated three steps that can help bring us into a state of gratitude. These steps happen spontaneously when things are going well, but at other times they are helped along by our conscious effort. The three steps rely upon the work of our intellect, our will, and our emotions.

The first step calls upon our intellect. In order to feel grateful, we need to recognize the gift we are being given. Sometimes this is really easy, and sometimes it's hard. In order to recognize the gift we need to wake up, we need to notice, we need to see: Ah! A gift! God has planted, sprinkled, placed gifts uncountable in every moment, but our intellect needs to recognize them as gifts.

The second step toward gratitude calls upon our will; that is, we need to acknowledge the gift. First we must recognize the gift, and

then we need to acknowledge it. We need to say, "Ah, you! I know you!" To acknowledge a gift means that we're acknowledging something outside of ourselves, because a gift does not come from our own self. To acknowledge a gift is actually very powerful, because when we acknowledge a gift, we are letting something outside ourselves come in. We are allowing ourselves to be touched, to be moved.

There's a tendency in human beings, especially we Americans, to think that we're self-sufficient and independent and that we don't need other people. Being able to acknowledge a gift is stepping out of our false sense of utter self-reliance. It is stepping out of our fortress of isolation. When we are able to do this with our will, we are able to connect and form a common unity and begin to step into intimacy.

The third step we take in order to experience gratitude requires our emotions. We need to accept the gift with our whole heart. We need to say, "Yes!" It's as though someone is saying, "Dance with me" and we accept with our whole heart. It means saying, "Yes, I will step into this crazy, wild, chaotic, confusing, sometimes distressing dance of life. Here I am!"

The only way to say yes and accept the gift is with open arms. We can't accept a gift with our arms folded across our chest; we can only accept a gift with our arms wide open.

But we all know what's scary about holding our arms wide open, don't we? Let's say we're at a dance and it looks like someone across the room is looking at us and smiling at us, and the impression we have is that they are asking us, "Will you dance with me?" and we say, after some hesitation, "Yes!" And then they walk toward us and go right by us to dance with the person standing behind us! We feel crushed and humiliated and embarrassed—because we were open.

To acknowledge a gift means that we're acknowledging something outside of ourselves.

Being grateful does not protect us from rejection, pain, or sorrow—it doesn't protect us from any of that. But if we are able to incorporate gratitude into our basic attitude toward life and make it a part of the ground of our being, we have another way of responding to what is taking place. When those painful or sad feelings happen, they are not all of what's happening. Counting our blessings does not mean that we no longer feel the grief we feel, or the confusion or the sorrow. It means we're feeling all of that, but we're also feeling a sense of warmth, peace, and connection.

Let's take the example when where we're mistakenly thinking that we're being asked to dance. How can we find gratitude in that moment? Well, we can be grateful that we realize we want to dance. And then we can go out and discover ways to bring dancing into our life.

I want to share with you one example from my own life of turning an experience around by finding gratitude, and then I'm going to give you three suggestions for how to practice gratitude.

Last Thursday morning, I had three errands to do in different places around this wonderful city of ours. At the first place I could not find a place to park. Can you believe it, in this city? I looked and looked, and I finally gave up on that first errand and headed off to the second errand.

Being grateful does not protect us from rejection, pain, or sorrow.

I couldn't find a place to park there, either. I finally did stop in a yellow loading zone, ran in and out, and went on to the third errand.

By that point I was talking to myself. I was saying, "What is this city coming to? You can't even go on a simple errand and park in front of where you want to go. This is ridiculous!"

As I was talking to myself, I realized that I had picked up a pretty self-righteous sense of entitlement. And then it must have been because I was working on this sermon that a little thought came into my head. "Oh, my goodness! I'm alive! It's a beautiful day! I'm in one of the most beautiful cities in the world. If I need anything materially, I can go to a store and get it. And, no, I might not be able to find a parking place convenient to where I'm going."

I realized what my false sense of entitlement was doing to me—it was making me feel angry and self-important. Then I let go of it and recognized the gift. I acknowledged the gift. I accepted and welcomed the gift. And then I saw another gift, and then another and another, and I saw that my gifts were countless. I practically forgot what errand I was doing as I felt a rush of appreciation for my life. And then I received a bonus gift, because I soon realized that I could use this experience as my example on Sunday. I can't tell you what that's worth!

There are, of course, countless ways to incorporate these steps of gratitude into our daily lives, but here are three quick ones.

First: "This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it." We can say this to ourselves each morning when we wake up. What a wonderful way to start the day and invite gratitude in!

Second, when we say a prayer at our evening meal, either by ourselves or with family members or friends, we can have each person name one thing for which they're grateful that day. Remember that all reasons for gratitude are acceptable, from the mundane to the profound.

Finally, throughout our day, if we find ourselves getting irritated or a bit upset, we can take it upon ourselves as a challenge to find gold in the moment and in the experience. That doesn't mean we have to be grateful that things aren't going the way we want them to; we don't have to be grateful that we can't find a parking place, or that we can't find a job. But we can still find gratitude in the experience. We can have it be like a treasure hunt with ourselves and God.

Remember those puzzles where the object is to find the objects hidden in the picture? Take this as a challenge: whatever the experience, find the gratitude in it. And let that gratitude touch you and fill you.

The Lord said, "I give to you a new heart and I put a new spirit within you. I remove from you your heart of stone and I give you a heart of flesh." Amen.



The Rev. Dr. Rachel Rivers is the former pastor of the San Francisco Swedenborgian Church. She is also a pastoral counselor.

Prayer

O Lord, you are everywhere and in everything. But your ways sometimes challenge us, and your goodness can be hard to see. Help us to look more deeply into the troubles, frustrations, and pain we face each day, that we might find the blessings and beauties hidden within. Soften our hearts so that your Spirit may rest in us and all our works be praise. Amen.

Daily Meditations

Monday, March 9

It is good to give thanks to the Lord,
to sing praises to your name, O Most High;
to declare your steadfast love in the morning,
and your faithfulness by night,
to the music of the lute and the harp,
to the melody of the lyre.
For you, O Lord, have made me glad by your work;
at the works of your hands I sing for joy.

Psalm 92:1-5

By its very nature, spiritual love wants to share what it has with others, and to the extent that it can do so, it is totally present, experiencing its peace and bliss. *Divine Providence 27*

Tuesday, March 10

How great are your works, O Lord!
Your thoughts are very deep!
The dullard cannot know,
the stupid cannot understand this:
Though the wicked sprout like grass
and all evildoers flourish,
they are doomed to destruction for ever,
but you, O Lord, are on high for ever.
For your enemies, O Lord,
for your enemies shall perish;
all evildoers shall be scattered.

Psalm 92:5-9

Divine love (and therefore divine providence) has the goal of a heaven made up of people who have become angels and are becoming angels, people whom it can share all the bliss and joy of love and wisdom. *Divine Providence 27*

Wednesday, March 11

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.

Psalm 103:1-5

The joys proper to desires for what is good and true have their source in the Lord, so they come from the center of our being. So they fill angels and make them virtually nothing but delight.

Divine Providence 39

Thursday, March 12

The Lord works vindication
and justice for all who are oppressed.
He made known his ways to Moses,
his acts to the people of Israel.
The Lord is merciful and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
He will not always accuse,
nor will he keep his anger forever.
He does not deal with us according to our sins,
nor repay us according to our iniquities.

Psalm 103:6-10

We are all given the means of amending our lives after death, if we can. The Lord teaches and leads us through angels.

Divine Providence 328.9

Friday, March 13

For as the heavens are high above the earth,
so great is his steadfast love towards those who fear him;
as far as the east is from the west,
so far he removes our transgressions from us.
As a father has compassion for his children,
so the Lord has compassion for those who fear him.
For he knows how we were made;
he remembers that we are dust.

Psalm 103:11-14

The evils in our outer self and the compulsions to evil in our inner self [are] as closely connected as [a tree's] roots and trunk. Unless the evils are expelled, then, there is no opening.

Divine Providence 119

Saturday, March 14

As for mortals, their days are like grass;
they flourish like a flower of the field;
for the wind passes over it, and it is gone,
and its place knows it no more.
But the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting
on those who fear him,
and his righteousness to their children's children,
to those who keep his covenant
and remember to do his commandments.

Psalm 103:15-18

The Lord enters us only from the inside, that is, by means of the Word and by lessons and sermons based on the Word.

Divine Providence 131

MAR 15 Pretty People The Reverend Eric Hoffman

The gospel story of Zacchaeus is one of mutual recognition: both Zacchaeus and Jesus realize the fullness of God's presence, the angelic nature, in a person viewed by others as socially unacceptable. In this sermon, Rev. Eric Hoffman reminds us of a challenging yet deeply comforting truth: true beauty is more than skin deep, and we all deserve to be known as the divine instruments we truly are.

Exodus 4:10-17

But Moses said to the Lord, "O my Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor even now that you have spoken to your servant; but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue."

Then the Lord said to him, "Who gives speech to mortals? Who makes them mute or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord? Now go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you are to speak."

But he said, "O my Lord, please send someone else."

Then the anger of the Lord was kindled against Moses and he said, "What of your brother Aaron, the Levite? I know that he can speak fluently; even now he is coming out to meet you, and when he sees you his heart will be glad. You shall speak to him and put the words in his mouth; and I will be with your mouth and with his mouth, and will teach you what you shall do. He indeed shall speak for you to the people; he shall serve as a mouth for you, and you shall serve as God for him. Take in your hand this staff, with which you shall perform the signs."

Luke 19:1-10

He entered Jericho and was passing through it.

A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of

the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way.

When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today." So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him.

All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner."

Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much."

Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."

The message of this morning's sermon is a simple one; in fact, it is so amazingly simple that to bring it up anywhere but in the pulpit might come across as patronizing. Even so, it is a message that everyone, I feel, needs to hear from time to time, regardless of how spiritually advanced they may be.

The message is simply that people do not always conform to their outward appearance, even though we sometimes assume that they do.

I find this a fitting subject to bring up in the context of worship because we live in a world that is inundated with the belief that a person is defined by their appearance. Perusing the magazine rack at the local grocery reveals scores of fashion magazines depicting countless pretty faces, all striving to present what this society considers a beautiful person.

***Our world believes
that a person is
defined by his or
her appearance.***

Our television commercials do the same thing—they seek to sell their product through the use of physically attractive people, because they know that consumers respond more favorably to beauty. In the working world, employers often urge, and even require, employees who spend time dealing with clients face-to-face to dress nicely—to look their best. Sadly, in some firms only those women who are willing to wear the

shortest skirts and possess the most accommodating personalities are selected to hold executive secretarial positions.

The world can be very superficial, and that superficiality can be subtle and contagious. Here in worship, we are invited to reflect in safety on the degree to which we too have fallen victim to superficiality.

Once you start to think about it, it's not only how a person looks or dresses that invokes judgment; people are also assessed by their behavior. How many people have you seen ignored or avoided because they appear mentally ill, or opinionated, or flighty? It happens frequently.

Occupation makes a difference in the way people are perceived, as well. I've heard it said that the worst thing you can tell someone at a party is what you do for a living; most every job bears its own reputation or stereotype.

Some examples:

Lawyers are always looking for ways to interpret the letter of the law to win the most money.

Politicians are not to be trusted.

Psychologists are always analyzing everything you say.

Remember, it wasn't because Zacchaeus was a short person that people warned the Lord he was evil; it was because he was a tax-collector—a "publican." One minister relates that whenever he tells someone he's a preacher, they become different people around him, explaining how

The real measure of a person is the quality of their spirit.

they used to go to church quite regularly but haven't lately, while apparently thinking back through the conversation just in case they've said something they should apologize for saying to a minister. Such encounters happened often enough that this preacher finally began telling people he was in the insurance business.

The point? We assess the people we meet according to many and diverse criteria, and our perceptions are not always accurate, because the real measure of a person is not how they look or dress or behave, or what they do for a living. It is instead the quality of their spirit, the "content of their character"—not something we can determine by simply looking at them.

It is easy enough to decide consciously not to be swayed by appearances, but sometimes we assess people unconsciously. Sometimes we meet someone who reminds us of another person who has been kind (or cruel) to us, or who acted a certain way. When this kind of connection occurs, we don't mean to, but we expect the same behavior from the new person. Without any good reason, we don't trust them, or we expect them to behave like the person they resemble, and when they act contrary to our expectations we are thrown off balance—we may become angry or dejected. Psychology calls this phenomenon “transference,” and everybody does it to some degree. In itself, transference is not a bad thing, but when we don't seek to come to terms with those unconscious associations, when we keep them suppressed, we run the risk of pushing people away—of isolating them. And, my friends, there is nothing more hurtful than to hold another person at arm's length without some explanation. It's hurtful to them, and it's hurtful to us. A state of worship and self-reflection brings these potentially damaging tendencies to the surface, where we can be healed of them.

*Zacchaeus was a
child of God, no
matter his height or
his livelihood.*

There is another danger in making assumptions about people, and it stems from being on the receiving end of a judgment. I'm sure that we can all recall an instance in which we have been rejected because of something we were—for myself, it was being the only vegetarian in a conservative Christian town—and I'm sure we realize that it hurts to be rejected. In many cases, if it happens repeatedly, we begin to believe that we are less than worthy as people.

Moses serves as an excellent example. When God said, “You shall be my spokesman,” Moses felt unworthy because of a speech impediment. (I can easily imagine that Moses was the brunt of a few jokes in his youth). Now, God knew Moses didn't speak well, but he chose Moses anyway, because he had the gifts needed to lead the people out of Egypt. The outside eloquence wasn't important; it was the real, inner Moses that God recognized and spoke to.

Christ essentially told Zacchaeus that it didn't matter how tall he was or what he did for a living; he was a child of God just the same. It likewise falls to us to look past the outward appearances of people—to get to know them as beautiful children of God in their own right—and

to look also within ourselves to see the real person just aching to find expression.

There is a very comforting message in the stories of Moses and Zacchaeus: that no matter how eloquent we are or aren't, no matter what we look like or how we dress, no matter what our station in life may be, God loves us. God loves us completely and unconditionally. God has faith in us, believing that we can fulfill our highest potential as vehicles for the divine love and wisdom. Speaking as one who has never looked like those pictures in the fashion magazines, I find that to be a wonderful thing.



The Reverend Eric Hoffman is the pastor of the Virginia Street Church in St. Paul, Minnesota, and is also on the Executive Committee of the Council of Ministers.

Prayer

Lord, we are too often spiritually blind—blind to the beauty in others' hearts, blind to suffering we cannot bear to witness, blind to our own failings—but you are light, oneness, and vision. Help us to see beyond the surfaces of this world, that we might see others and ourselves more fully through your love. Let us ever remember that all people have the seeds of your divine being inside them. Give us the wisdom to seek you out in all whom we meet. Bestow on us true sight, Lord, so that we may see your radiance in others and cherish it, heed suffering and find courage to soothe it, find our life in your life, and be filled to overflowing. Amen.

Daily Meditations

Monday, March 16

The lawyer, wanting to justify himself, asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Luke 10:29

As it is the quality of the good which determines how everyone is the neighbor, it is the love which does this; for there is not any good which is not of love; from this comes forth all good, and from this also comes forth the quality of the good. *Arcana Coelestia* 6709

Tuesday, March 17

Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side." Luke 10:30-32

People love the neighbor who are in the love of heaven; while those who are in the love of the world love the neighbor from the world and for the sake of the world; and those who are in the love of self love the neighbor from self and for the sake of self. *True Christian Religion* 411

Wednesday, March 18

"But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.' Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" Luke 10:33-36

Hence it may be known that they are the neighbor who are in good: "the oil and wine," which the Samaritan poured into the wounds, also signify good and its truth. *New Jerusalem and Its Heavenly Doctrines* 87

Thursday, March 19

He entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax-collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. Luke 19:1-4

Love constitutes a person's life, and that life is such as the person's love; not only the life of the mind, but at the same time also the life of the body; and since what a person loves in mind he also wills, and in the body does, it follows that love and actions or works make one. *Apocalypse Explained* 842

Friday, March 20

When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today." So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner." Luke 19:5-7

The presence of the Lord with a person is first vouchsafed when she loves her neighbor; for the Lord is in love, and so far as a person is in love the Lord is present; and in the degree in which the Lord is present he speaks with humanity. *Arcana Coelestia* 904

Saturday, March 21

Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much." Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost." Luke 19:8-10

It is by means of faith from charity, that man is reformed and regenerated, and also renewed, vivified, sanctified, and according to the progress and growth of these is purified from evils. *True Christian Religion* 142

MAR 22 Heroines of the Everyday

The Reverend Marlene Laughlin

Mothers, whether biological or spiritual, are angels. Parenthood also has a way of bringing angels (whether familiar or unexpected) out of the woodwork: Jesus' mother Mary encountered many strange angels along the way, each of whom revealed some fragment, alternately promising and terrifying, of the fullness of her son's divine nature. And mother love given or received is itself an angel of a strange and terrible kind; the power (and the burden) of parental love, as Rev. Marlene Laughlin so poignantly describes it, comes from the ability it imparts to "nurture, to care for and about" one's child, all the while knowing that ultimately that child must be "given up to God's best use."

Matthew 2:13-23

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

Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, "Out of Egypt I have called my son."

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

When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead." Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that

Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, "He will be called a Nazorean."

Our days pass without our realizing the extraordinary effort we expend in making the most of them. Of course, if your days are like mine, you may feel that some, if not many, of those days pass without too much getting done. Only in looking backwards do we truly perceive what we have accomplished.

I recall a story told about a man who was asked why he bothered to attend church. He simply replied that he felt better after attending. The inquirer asked what the topic of that week's sermon had been. The man said he did not know. Then he added that his wife had cooked him dinner each night of their thirty-two-year marriage. He could not remember all the elements of any of those meals, but he had appreciated and needed them all.

***Faithfulness is
the quality we
remember most...
Constancy has
undeniable power.***

Such faithfulness, I believe, is the quality we remember most about the person or persons who have served as mother and mentor to us. Perhaps the person, as an individual, was not as constant as the woman referred to in the story, but any constancy has undeniable power. If we are loved as we deserve to be, the woman we know as Mother serves as a constant power in our lives, even long after she has died or is not seen on a regular basis.

What is the power of this relationship? Before we are born, we hear the voice of our mother as we grow within her womb. We learn the sound of the music to which she listened, or a song she hummed or sang. Until quite recently, we needed our mother or a surrogate for the food and immune protection that mother's milk provides. Certainly we learn much about our family and cultural heritage from our mothers. This was no less true of Jesus' mother.

We don't know exactly what happened between Jesus' birth and his reemergence in the Jerusalem temple for his coming of age. We learn

from the Gospel of Luke a bit more of the story of Jesus as Mother Mary would have told it to him. The writer of this text probably did not know Jesus, but tradition tells us that much of what he wrote did come from his interviews with Mary. In no other gospel do we gain such intimate details of the Annunciation to Mary, as well as the angelic admonition and encouragement given to Joseph.

It is a story told as a woman would tell it. She revealed to all those who heard what had happened, including the reaction of the unborn John the Baptizer when she spoke of her pregnancy to her cousin Elizabeth. She expressed to Luke, and thus to us, how difficult the journey to Bethlehem had been and her terrible disappointment at not having a decent place to rest. Then we are allowed to remember with Mary the glorious events that took place after giving birth in a stable.

*We share with Mary
the intimate story
of her son, whom
she protected all of
his life.*

This portion of the story of Jesus' life ends with these sentences from Luke 2: "And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds. But Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart." We feel that we have shared with Mary this intimate story of her special son whom she protected all of his life.

We are told that he was circumcised at eight days of age, not only to prepare him for his life as a Jewish male but also to assure us that his parents were going to raise him in the Jewish tradition. He was taught the Law and the Prophets: the five books of Moses (the Torah); the historical books (Judges, Kings, and so on); and the books of wisdom, including Proverbs.

But where did all this teaching take place? We know that Jesus and his family moved out of the range of Herod and his violent paranoia. Some believe that they moved into the desert areas of northern Africa near Egypt. The Gospel of Matthew tells us that "when [Joseph] arose, he took the young child and His mother by night and departed into Egypt, and was there until the death of Herod, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, 'Out of Egypt have I called my son.'"

Another fulfillment of prophecy was the slaying of the Israelite children by Herod. It had been prophesied that a voice would be heard

in Ramah, and that Rachel would mourn for her children and not be comforted. Ramah was a city of the tribe of Benjamin, and the capital of that tribe in former times. Rachel was the mother of Benjamin; she died on the way to Bethlehem just after his birth. She appears here as the mother of the tribe descended from Benjamin, sorrowing because her many children have been slaughtered at Herod's hand.

Herod probably lived for about two years after the birth of Jesus. Upon his death, his son took his place. Therefore, the family did not move back to Herodian-controlled Jerusalem, but stayed at a safe distance from the Herodians' reach. According to tradition, they moved to the city of

This is the true power of mother love: that we are nurtured, cared for and about, until in the end we are given up to God's best use.

Nazareth, again fulfilling a prophecy: "He shall be called a Nazorean." A Nazarite¹ was a male child, usually the firstborn son, dedicated by his parents to God. Other Nazarites mentioned in the Bible included Joseph, Samson, and John. They were not allowed to cut

their hair and were to remain celibate. They were dedicated into service to God as children and generally moved into the temple life early.

The Essene communities of the desert have written numerous books referring to the life of Jesus as a younger person than the man whom we meet again in the gospels as an adult. These communities of northeastern Egypt were made up of Jews who separated themselves from the rest of society. Extremely devout, they believed the direct experience of God to be the most reliable method of directing life's choices. They did follow an extremely strict set of daily rules, but these were only the basis upon which they maintained a method of prayer and meditation that opened them more and more directly to the spiritual leading of God. This idea of following the basis of the Law but being spiritually empowered by God's direct leading is repeated over and over again throughout Jesus' life.

Now I would like you to consider what all this devotion would have meant to Mary. Imagine the worry, the care involved in moving about to avoid the Herodians, in giving up her beloved child to a life that, although admired by some, would certainly never be considered successful.

During the years of Jesus' ministry, Mary did not see much of him. At one point, when she did come to see him, he told her that he had no

family but those who would agree with his point of view. But at the end of his earthly life, from the cross, Jesus made certain that his mother, who had chosen to become a follower and thus part of his spiritual as well as his physical family, was given a son from this same family—his beloved disciple, John. Her well-being was as much a part of his life's love as his well-being was of hers. And we are led to understand that, after the Lord's resurrection, day after day, Mary and her new son John grew and came to understand more and more that they were both working for the glory of God.

This is the true power of mother love: that we are nurtured, cared for and about, until in the end we are given up to God's best use. The greatest present we can give is to offer this same kind of love to others. In this way, we fulfill our spiritual promise as children of God.

1. Matthew's account connects the term "Nazarene," which denotes a person from the city of Nazareth, and "Nazarite," which denotes a person who has taken the Nazarite vow (see Number 6:1-8). While the Lord is not recorded as having taken Nazarite vows, and in fact clearly and repeatedly broke several of the rules mentioned in these vows (touching the diseased and dead, for example), he does share with the Nazarites the characteristic of being one set apart from others, one sacrificed—literally "made holy"—in the name of God. (LGG)

The Rev. Marlene Laughlin is a minister at Wayfarer's Chapel in Rancho Palos Verdes, California.



Prayer

Lord, you came to us, a wailing child, shadowed in earthly wrappings, so that we might know the unknowable, see the invisible, and touch the transcendent. Give us the heart, we pray, to love each other as you love us, to nurture and care for each other as deeply as a mother is meant to love her child. Amen.

Daily Meditations

Monday, March 23

All who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. Luke 2:18-19

Divine truths themselves are such that they can never be comprehended by any angel, still less by any person; they exceed every faculty of their understanding. Yet that there may be a union of the Lord with humanity, divine truths flow in with them into appearances; when they are in appearances they can both be received and acknowledged. *Arcana Coelestia* 3362

Tuesday, March 24

Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Luke 2:25-26

The reason divine truths open our deeper levels is that we have been so created that our inner person is an image of heaven and our outer is an image of the world; and our inner person is opened only by the divine truth that emanates from the Lord, because this is the light and the life of heaven. *Heaven and Hell* 250

Wednesday, March 25

Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God. Luke 2:27-28

For people who talk with angels, heaven is actually united to our world and our world to heaven; when angels turn toward us they unite themselves with us so completely that it seems to them exactly as though whatever is ours is actually theirs... In addition, it seems to us exactly as though the things that are flowing in through the angels are really ours. *Heaven and Hell* 252

Thursday, March 26, 2009

Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too." Luke 2:34-35

[When people are involved in something good,] the good flows from their deeper thought into their more outward thought and therefore into their words and deeds. *Heaven and Hell* 499.2

Friday, March 27, 2009

There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem. Luke 2:36-38

If we constantly keep the Lord before our eyes (which happens if we are engaged in love and wisdom), then it is not only our eyes and face that turn to him, it is our whole mind and our whole heart...everything in our intention and mind and everything in our body at the same time. *Divine Love and Wisdom* 137-138

Saturday, March 28, 2009

Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, "Woman, here is your son." Then he said to the disciple, "Here is your mother." And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home. John 19:25-27

The goal of creation becomes manifest in final things, the goal being the return of all things to their Creator, and union... All the results that we call final goals become fresh new goals in an endless series. *Divine Love and Wisdom* 171-172

MAR 29 Holy Hospitality

Leah Grace Goodwin

The command to extend hospitality to acquaintances and strangers alike is an important tenet of many religious traditions. Such a divine directive is not always easy to obey; depending on the circumstances, offering hospitality can seem arduous or even pointless. But as Leah Goodwin points out, hospitality comes in many forms and possesses great power—the power to bring warmth, life, and beauty to both giver and receiver.

Psalm 91:1-4, 9-12, 14-16

You who live in the shelter of the Most High, who abide in the shadow of the Almighty,
will say to the Lord, “My refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust.”

For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the deadly pestilence;

he will cover you with his pinions, and under his wings you will find refuge;

his faithfulness is a shield and buckler.

Because you have made the Lord your refuge, the Most High your dwelling place,

no evil shall befall you, no scourge come near your tent.

For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways.

On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.

Those who love me, I will deliver; I will protect those who know my name.

When they call to me, I will answer them; I will be with them in trouble, I will rescue them and honor them.

With long life I will satisfy them, and show them my salvation.

Hebrews 13:1-2

Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.

There comes a point, during some winters, when the weather ceases to be bracing, edifying, or character-building, and enters the realm of the absurd.

Here in Cambridge, we hit that point somewhere around late January, and the winter was still far from over. It seemed as though the snow would never stop, and when it finally did, the gray and the cold lingered with unusual tenacity. Then again, perhaps winter lingers like this every year, and our Yankee minds protect us from the dread of future winters by blurring the memory of bitter seasons past. Ignorance can be bliss. At the very least, forgetfulness can be fortitude.

Amid winter's grip this year, Easter fell almost as early as possible. Wintry Easters generate an odd mix of impressions; they affirm the Lord's life-giving power with particular potency, but they can also make a person wonder if spring will ever really come. After all, if the queen of seasons cannot fling her splendor over the world on the occasion of God's triumph over the arrogance of the grave, when can she? Early Easters can give theological whiplash, as well: when Easter lands in March and Lent confronts us in February, it seems that the Lord is barely born before he has to die, that he has hardly been presented at the temple before he must set his face for Jerusalem. Birth, death, and rebirth tumble over each other in frantic liturgical haste.

Early Easters can give us theological whiplash.

Sometimes, in a rare calendrical convergence, that haste accelerates to unity. Every so often the variable date of Good Friday, the day of Christ's Passion, coincides with the fixed date of the Feast of the Incarnation, the day on which the Western Church remembers Gabriel's visit to Mary. Thus we remember the first moments of God's humanity at the same time that we remember his last. Womb and tomb converge. Death and life are distinguishably one.

The Feast of the Incarnation has numerous folk names. The sweetly evocative "Festival of the Quickening" is my favorite, because it so joyfully and unabashedly attests to Mary's very embodied, deeply mysterious experience of the human God's first stirrings. Great riches of legend have bloomed from centuries of meditation on the miraculous mundaneness of Mary's pregnancy. The Irish in particular embraced this image, so much so that the midwife at Jesus' birth is said to have been none other than Brigid, a patron saint of Ireland. Brigid is, among

other things, honored as the keeper of the hearth, the hospitable one, the welcomer of pilgrims. It seems fitting that, just as Mary opened body and heart to give physical form to God, so Brigid, figure of welcome, would be present to see the Lord safely into the world.

Brigid's hospitality extended far beyond the hearthside. She had an ecumenical heart, as well. When Christianity came to Ireland, Brigid is said to have been among the first and most devout of the converts, and at the same time profoundly faithful to the Old Ways. She founded a monastery at an ancient shrine, previously a site of goddess worship.

The perpetual fire that she found already burning there she neither extinguished nor reconsecrated, but rather left kindled, believing the flames to be already holy though lit to honor a deity of a different name—for "often, often, often goes Christ in the stranger's guise."

***Hospitality of the heart
can see holiness, purity,
and worth where others
see only offense, filth,
and trash.***

Angels unawares, indeed.

Since the arrival of Bread & Jams, the day shelter and resource center for the homeless that occupies the lower level of our parish wing, the Swedenborg Chapel family has grown yet larger in both spirit and substance. I am humbled when I watch the staffers work with their clients. Like St. Brigid, the Bread & Jams staff practices hospitality at every level. They welcome those who journey, offering food and comfort to the weary and the hungry. Most importantly, they practice hospitality of the heart, perceiving holiness, purity, and worth where others see only offense, filth, and trash. Day after day they acknowledge and offer themselves to people who are unwelcome—or simply nonexistent—in the eyes of the rest of society. In each person fed, counseled, or simply called by name at Bread & Jams, Christ is recognized as a guest. Enacted in God's presence and upon God's body, welcome and care become holy rites, magnificent liturgies performed at the high altar of basic human need.

It is not always easy to offer such welcome. Some visitors to Bread & Jams suffer from illnesses of mind, soul, or body that prevent them from responding with the gratitude generally expected as hospitality's "payment" in the economy of polite society. Far more difficult, though, is the encounter with hospitality's limits. Confronted with desperate need,

the most basic care can mean the difference between life and death. But sometimes, tragically, even the most tenderly or insistently offered care cannot save—cannot defeat the ravages of addiction, or stave off the killing cold of a winter’s night. Hospitality can seem laughably impotent in the persistent presence of untimely death.

And yet welcome and tenderness still matter. It seems fitting that St. Brigid, that most open-minded and deep-hearted of hostesses, is also said to have originated the ancient Irish custom of keening over the dead; for when hospitality can no longer reach out to midwife, feed, or rescue, it remains possible to honor the Christ in every person through the expression of grieving love. This is, after all, what Joseph of Arimathea did when he offered his own tomb for Jesus’ burial; what Nicodemus did when he carried a hundred pounds of spices to the tomb to anoint his converter’s body; what Mary of Magdala did when she crept to the garden before daybreak, carrying myrrh with which to embalm her beloved rabbouni. The practice of just such hospitality has recently blossomed at the chapel, in the form of a ministry of memorial. It is by necessity that this ministry unfolds, for this year, some within the chapel community have not survived to see the radiant beauty of our hard-earned New England spring. Over the course of this murderous winter, we at Swedenborg Chapel have had the sad honor of memorializing two beautiful men: Johan Boer and Terence Berger, both clients at Bread & Jams.

It has often been remarked that eleven o’clock on Sunday morning is the most segregated hour in America, but the communities that gathered for both of these services, held within the ornate Gothic beauty of our sanctuary, shattered just about every demographic statistic and class barrier one might imagine. I found myself simultaneously shamed by my own prejudices and moved by the eloquence, unabashed emotion, and honesty of the eulogies delivered for Terry and Johan. Each service was unique, as the men honored were unique. Both occasions, however, testified to the power of the hospitality extended in communal mourning, for in mourning rites and funerals the dead are honored and the living granted revelation. The Lord appears in the remembered beauty of quirks and qualities lost—and the Lord is welcomed, living and moving among us, in the inimitably egalitarian community that gathers to share grief. Even in death, hospitality begets life: though it

*Welcome and
tenderness matter.*

cannot always preserve the body, the simplest act of welcome opens the eyes of the heart to behold God's beauty.

We humans are created in the image and likeness of God. Nevertheless, we are still mortal, and unlike God, our arms are sometimes "too short to save." We cannot always rescue those who need it, at least in the ways we might desire. Sometimes those whom we love slip through our fingers and defy our best attempts to resurrect them.

But we are loved by a Lord who shows us that there is more than one way to rescue those who call to us, more than one way to answer them, more than one way to be with those who are in trouble. We are loved by a Lord who, though clothed in majesty and wrapped in light as a garment, nevertheless chose to exist with us in the furthest reaches of the divine design; who took our limitations onto himself; who became human and walked the road we walk so that all our journeys might be paved with the possibility of rebirth. We are precious in the eyes of a Lord who chose to take on every bit of what it means to be mortal; who, though infinite and eternal, not only endured finitude and linear time, but also wept over the tomb of a dead friend; who not only died as all people die, but died painfully, publicly, and shamefully as a political criminal. We are rescued by a Lord who let himself be broken and remade, body and spirit, in order that we might have the freedom to understand what it means to be whole. We are hidden safely in the great heart of a Lord who rescues us not only by might or strength of arm, but by compassion—a Lord in whom death and life, and love and grief, are one.

Having weathered the winter, we know something of what it is to die. Wrapped in the shocking beauty of the unfurling spring, we learn again of first quickening and final resurrection, and we know the hospitality found at the feast-table in God's unfathomably generous heart.

Christ is risen; Christ is risen, indeed. Alleluia.



Leah G. Goodwin is a 2007 graduate of Harvard Divinity School and co-editor of *Our Daily Bread*. This sermon was given in 2005, while she was serving as the director of parish ministry at Swedenborg Chapel in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Daily Meditations

Monday, March 30

The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. Genesis 18:1

Conjunction with celestial things gives perception; for in the celestial things that are of love to God are the very life of the internal person... In celestial love, God is present. This presence is not perceived in the external person until conjunction has been effected, because all perception is from conjunction. *Arcana Coelestia* 1618

Tuesday, March 31

He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. He said, "My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant." Genesis 18-2-5a

There is heavenly happiness in doing good without a view to recompense. *Arcana Coelestia* 6392

Wednesday, April 1

So they said, "Do as you have said." And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, "Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes." Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate. Genesis 18:5b-8

[After people join together truth and goodness,] the angels then draw nearer to them and impart to them charity, which is the celestial that comes from the Lord through the angels. *Arcana Coelestia* 2183

Thursday, April 2

They said to him, "Where is your wife Sarah?" And he said, "There, in the tent." Then one said, "I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son." And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him. *Genesis 18:9-10*

The rational supposes from appearances that the good which man does is from himself, and yet there is nothing of good from self, but all is from the Lord. *Arcana Coelestia 2196.4*

Friday, April 3

Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?" *Genesis 18:11-12*

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. Moreover, we are so created that we can accept them if we are only willing to. *Divine Love and Wisdom 171*

Saturday, April 4

The Lord said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?' Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son." *Genesis 18:13-14*

Everything is possible to God. *Arcana Coelestia 2211*

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March 2009

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

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

We believe the Bible is the inspired Word of God, and that in its pages we find two parallel stories: the account of people, places, and events; and within that account a spiritual reflection of our individual and corporate journeys. The Bible, with its infinite depth of meaning, is truly a living Word, guiding us as we strive to make ourselves temples for the Lord by loving and serving others. We believe that, above all, "all religion relates to life, and the life of religion is to do good."

The Swedenborgian Church exists to help people be open to the Lord's presence and leading, and to facilitate their spiritual well-being. We invite you to participate with others who are seeking to deepen their inner life and pursue their spiritual journey.

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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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