

***Theme:** We are meant to move during our lifetimes from a state of chaos/immaturity toward freedom/salvation/conscious competence/the New Jerusalem, on the individual level as well as on the community and global levels. The Lord's word to us during this journey is, "Do not be afraid".*

**August 22, 2010**

**Jeremiah 1:4-10**

**(Psalm 71:1-6)**

**Luke 13:10-17**

**"The Journey Toward Freedom"**

**Rev Jeffrey Cheifetz**

**The Swedenborgian Church of San Francisco**

**Jeremiah 1:4-10**

<sup>4</sup>Now the word of the Lord came to me saying, <sup>5</sup>"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations." <sup>6</sup>Then I said, "Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy." <sup>7</sup>But the Lord said to me, "Do not say, 'I am only a boy'; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you, <sup>8</sup>Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord." <sup>9</sup>Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the Lord said to me, "Now I have put my words in your mouth. <sup>10</sup>See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant."

<sup>11</sup>The word of the Lord came to me, saying, "Jeremiah, what do you see?"

**Psalm 71:1-6**

<sup>1</sup>In you, O Lord, I take refuge; let me never be put to shame. <sup>2</sup>In your righteousness deliver me and rescue me; incline your ear to me and save me.

<sup>3</sup>Be to me a rock of refuge, a strong fortress, to save me, for you are my rock and my fortress.

<sup>4</sup>Rescue me, O my God, from the hand of the wicked, from the grasp of the unjust and cruel. <sup>5</sup>For you, O Lord, are my hope, my trust, O Lord, from my youth. <sup>6</sup>Upon you I have leaned from my birth; it was you who took me from my mother's womb. My praise is continually of you. <sup>7</sup>I have been like a portent to many, but you are my strong refuge. <sup>8</sup>My mouth is filled with your praise, and with your glory all day long. <sup>9</sup>Do not cast me off in the time of old age; do not forsake me when my strength is spent.

**Luke 13:10-17**

<sup>10</sup>Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. <sup>11</sup>And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. <sup>12</sup>When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." <sup>13</sup>When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. <sup>14</sup>But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day." <sup>15</sup>But the Lord answered him and said, "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? <sup>16</sup>And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?" <sup>17</sup>When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing.

**Swedenborg**

Some quotations from the theological writings of Emanuel Swedenborg:

'A holy sabbath to Jehovah shall tomorrow be' means the joining together of goodness and truth into eternity. This is clear from the meaning of 'sabbath' as the joining together of goodness and

truth, dealt with below; and from the meaning of 'tomorrow' as into eternity, dealt with in 3998. Anyone who does not know what the sabbath represented, and what it was consequently a sign of, also cannot know why it was held to be the holiest institution of all. It was held to be the holiest because in the highest sense it represented the union of the Divine and the Divine Human within the Lord, and in the relative sense the pining together of the Lord's Divine Human and the human race. This is why the sabbath was the holiest. And since it represented those realities it also represented heaven in respect of the pining together of goodness and truth, that is, the joining together called the heavenly marriage. And since the joining together of goodness and truth is accomplished by the Lord alone and nothing at all of it by man, and since it is accomplished in a state of peace, people were most strictly forbidden to do any work on that day. From all that has been stated it is evident that the Lord is Lord of the sabbath, in accordance with His words in Matthew 12:1-9. It is evident too why a large number of healings by the Lord were performed on sabbath days, Matt. 12:10-14; Mark 3:1-6; Luke 6:6-12; 13:10-17; 14:1-6; John 5:9-18; 7:22, 23; 9:14, 16; for the sicknesses from which the Lord healed people involved spiritual sicknesses which exist as a result of evil, 7337, 8364.

Arcana Celestia #8495.1, 5

**Theme:** *We are meant to move during our lifetimes from a state of chaos/immaturity toward freedom/salvation/conscious competence/the New Jerusalem, on the individual level as well as on the community and global levels. The Lord's word to us during this journey is, "Do not be afraid".*

I was scared. I had to give a speech; my testimony. I was probably 21 years old, and definitely a new convert to Christianity. My college Christian group leader asked me to talk briefly about my experience at what I remember as a rather large young adult gathering; perhaps there was also a film or slideshow, and some refreshments – I don't remember. I could have declined the invitation, but instead I accepted it. He asked me to speak for about 5 minutes, which would give him time to set up the various electrical connections needed for an audio-visual presentation.

My time came. I was called to the front. My knees were shaking. I got up in front of everybody, took my place behind the microphone, and began speaking. Fast. Perhaps with a shaky voice as well - I don't remember that, or what I said. Probably I talked about my conversion experience. I know I referred to Psalm 40:1-3, which reads,

*<sup>1</sup>I waited patiently for the Lord; he inclined to me and heard my cry. <sup>2</sup>He drew me up from the desolate pit, out of the miry bog, and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure. <sup>3</sup>He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God. Many will see and fear, and put their trust in the Lord."*

I wrapped up my talk, and began to sit down. I saw the leader look my way from where he was kneeling in front of the projector, with a surprised look on his face, like, "Uh oh, done already!?" You BET I was done! I have no recollection of what happened next – I just know that I sat down somewhere. The main thing was that I was done! Hallelujah!

Each of us has a place in our lives where we are deeply challenged, often defeated, and wish we could overcome it, defeat it, and go beyond it. Perhaps this is visible and known to others, and perhaps we are able to keep it hidden, most of the time. Nonetheless none of us have become what we were created to become. We have more maturing to do in the spiritual and emotional sense. We have more to learn, we need more wisdom – and we need to use what we already have. None of us is as charitable, loving, truth-telling, aware, or effective in bringing justice into this world as we could be.

It is just as true that the Lord takes each us as we are and loves us as though we are the only one in the world to love. That love is poured out into our lives to bring us deep peace that overcomes anxiety, to bring us awareness of the Lord's presence and activity in others' lives, teach us the humility needed to forgive and receive forgiveness, and increase our love for the Lord and the stranger.

All of this is based upon the truth that the Lord created us, has been with us throughout our lives whether or not we have been aware of that presence, and moves us toward our best use in the world – what evangelical Christians might call "God's plan for my life". Jeremiah's realization of this primal connection with God shakes him to the core; for the Lord's purpose for his life – prophet to the nations – does not square with Jeremiah's own self image – "I do not know how to speak, for I am but a boy"; that is, he is not of age, not mature enough, not skilled enough, not self-confident enough, not schooled enough, not enough – to live into God's desire for him. Sounds like most of us when we begin to doubt ourselves, despite what others say to us about what they see in us that is good and strong and meaningful and right and true.

Yet the call comes to Jeremiah. He could just say 'no', I suppose, and set his own path, though in doing so would set him at cross-purposes with divine intention. We have free will, we are able to make our own choices. Making choices and experiencing their results is one way the Lord teaches us deeper truth about ourselves and our place in the world. The good news is that saying 'no' to God is not the end of the story, but rather a place where the Lord accepts us, and works with us, wooing us toward our unique place in the universe. Paul Tillich wrote, *"You are accepted. You are accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you don't know...Simply accept the fact that you are accepted. If that happens, we experience grace."*

Others in the Biblical record had that experience – Abram was called to leave Haran for Canaan, the judge Deborah was moved to lead the Hebrews into battle against their oppressors, Mary humbled herself and accepted the Lord's work in her, seeing cosmic significance in her assent, and Paul and Peter proclaimed the good news about Jesus to all who would listen. So have many more in the 2000 years between their time and our own. Joyce Hollyday, a former associate editor of Sojourners magazine, wrote: *"So we are invited to step forward with boldness and confidence, trusting that God will overcome whatever inadequacies we feel; knowing that we preach a truth that is far greater than our weaknesses and doubt. We join a long line of people of faith. And they are waiting for us to build a new world with them."*

Those places of deep challenge exist in more places and ways than we can comfortably name. Dan Clendenin, a writer who has visited 40 countries, recalled one of his experiences in this way: *"Back in 2005 when I was in Ethiopia, I took a day trip to the mountains that surround the capital city of Addis Ababa. At the summit our group prayed over the city, enjoyed the panoramic views, identified buildings in the distance below, and gasped for breath after walking uphill in the alpine air. That was the fun part.*

*"The disturbing part was our climb from the city center at 7,000 feet to the summit at 11,000 feet. As our mini-van belched clouds of light blue exhaust, the higher we went the more women and girls we passed carrying loads of firewood back down the mountain. Barefoot and bent over at the waist, these women carried seventy-five pound bundles of eucalyptus saplings, seven feet wide, down to the city center about ten miles away, all for a few pennies. The firewood carriers in Addis Ababa are a common sight, so much so that you can read about them in guidebooks like the Lonely Planet.*

*In Dan's online article there is a photograph of a young girl carrying one of those bundles, with the caption, "My name, Amaretech, means 'the beautiful one'. I am the youngest of four children*

*in my family. Today, I spent from 0300 to 1500 collecting the branches of eucalyptus trees which people use as firewood. I will sell this big bundle at the market for about \$2. This will feed my family for a couple of days."*

*He continues, "Ever since then the firewood carriers of Addis Ababa have reminded me of the crippled woman in Luke's gospel for this week. Luke is the only gospel to tell this story. It's the last time in his gospel that Jesus enters a synagogue to teach. Luke writes that the woman had been "crippled by a spirit for eighteen years" and as a consequence was "bent over and could not straighten up at all" (13:10–17). In Addis Ababa I kept wishing that those women and girls who were "bent over and could not straighten up at all" could be freed from their bondage."* (<http://www.journeywithjesus.net/index.shtml>)

Perhaps that is another image that speaks about our shared experiences of this interim time. Both of us have faced into those places internal to our being that are damaged, bent over, bound. Here and there along the way we have encountered healing that has enabled us to stand straighter, see more clearly, know more deeply. And we both know that the journey of regeneration, the journey toward conscious competence, goes on beyond this day and this place.

Our time together has been a time set aside for self-examination, and action based upon that look within. It has been a holy time, a liminal time between what was and what is not yet come to be. It has been a journey, an exodus, a road trip from a known place to an unknown location. It has been a struggle, an anxious time, a time of wrestling, a time that has tried our souls. It has been a time of revelation, of discovery. The Church Council made the choice to seek an interim minister rather than go ahead as usual, and in that way it has been a road never before taken by this congregation. But it has NOT been a sabbath time, that is, a time to set aside our usual work, our usual concerns, our usual to-do lists, for a season of contemplative rest and recreation. It has been a time of adding on another layer of spiritual and emotional work; so if you are feeling as though you have undertaken a long and strenuous labor as a community of faith, you would be correct.

It has been like a woman giving birth, or like a young person who goes through that soul-deep struggle to understand who he is, and what she is to be about in the world. It has also involved the movement from pride, and in some cases a kind of arrogance, into wondering who we really are behind the public face and the publicity. It has been an invitation to question almost everything.

Though this has not been a time of Sabbath, it has nevertheless been the Lord's time, both in chronological time, and in soul time. And it has not been wasted. You have heard the call of the Lord, as did Jeremiah and so many others named in the Biblical texts, and many more through the intervening 2,000 years since. They are the cloud of witnesses named in the NT Letter to the Hebrews, and you walk in their footsteps; often haltingly, timidly, anxiously, incompetently; and sometimes boldly and decisively and with great wisdom. But hear this: if the Lord could turn self-deprecating Jeremiah into a living embodiment of the Lord's word, and if the Lord could heal the body and soul of the silent bent woman who knew her place in the back of the synagogue for so many years, and then released her long-silenced voice into shouts of joy, then surely he can work with you, and with me!

The Lord says to you and to me, *"Do not say, 'I am only ....'"*, for you and I are far more than our weakness and ignorance and selfishness and fear. The Lord said to Jeremiah, *"Today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant"*. That's not just hot air; if we live into Jeremiah's faith, into the bent woman's faith, with the Lord's help, and as though doing so is of ourselves alone, then we shall see what we do not see now, and become what we are not yet. Creation's purpose for us is

that we reflect the light of the New Jerusalem, that we become fit for heaven by appropriating as much of heaven as we are able while in this life, and bringing it to bear upon the hurting, beautiful world we live in. "*Jesus modeled the Divine ideal of the spirit of the Law, doing what is good on the Sabbath: honoring the Sabbath by joining Divine Love and Wisdom in acts of love and kindness.*" (F. Robert Tafel, Pastor Emeritus of the Cambridge Swedenborg Chapel, <http://www.swedenborgchapel.com/church/lectionaryC.html>, August 22) That is our use in the world as well.

The prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 58:9b-14) wrote,

*<sup>9</sup>Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am. If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, <sup>10</sup>if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. <sup>11</sup>The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail. <sup>12</sup>Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.*

Remember that the Lord said to Jeremiah, "*Jeremiah, what do you see?*" And he saw what he could not see before that moment. Jesus said to the woman, "*Woman, you are set free from your ailment (disability)*", and he laid healing hands on her, and she stood up straight, and gave God praise. I ask you, "*Church, what do you see?*" Can you see the possibilities that lie before you? Can you claim as your own the words of Psalm 40:1-3:

*<sup>1</sup>(We) waited patiently for the Lord; he inclined to (us) and heard (our) cry. <sup>2</sup>He drew (us) up from the desolate pit, out of the miry bog, and set (our) feet upon a rock, making (our) steps secure. <sup>3</sup>He put a new song in (our mouths), a song of praise to our God. Many will see and (rejoice in awe), and put their trust in the Lord."*

May it be so. Amen.