

Crossing Borders

Jeff Munnis
Swedenborgian Church of San Francisco
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Children's story:

The Texas border, cowboys, and Indians.

The two steps up to the altar: Holy Ground. What do we expect it to be like? Our thoughts about what is Holy Ground. Is there something we expect to be there like I expected to cross over the border into Texas and see cowboys and Indians? As you take your plants up to the altar, remember each step is crossing into sacred space. But it is sacred space because we acknowledge that it is sacred. But every space holds holiness or sacredness if we are willing to see it. So we can use our memory of this space when we look at all the other places we go in our lives.

Deuteronomy 34:1-5 (*New International Version*)

Then Moses climbed Mount Nebo from the plains of Moab to the top of Pisgah, across from Jericho. There the LORD showed him the whole land—from Gilead to Dan, all of Naphtali, the territory of Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the Mediterranean Sea, the Negev and the whole region from the Valley of Jericho, the City of Palms, as far as Zoar. Then the LORD said to him, "This is the land I promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob when I said, 'I will give it to your descendants.' I have let you see it with your eyes, but you will not cross over into it." And Moses the servant of the LORD died there in Moab, as the LORD had said.

Matthew 1:18-21 (*New International Version*)

This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

From the Writings of Emanuel Swedenborg:

Outermost parts and borders in heaven are different from outermost parts and borders in the world, in that in the world they have to do with things that are spatial, but in heaven they have to do with forms of good joined to truths. Divine Good joined to Divine Truth, which serves as the outermost part, border, confiner, and container of heaven may be compared to the belt of air in the world which flows around a person, holding the entire surface of his body firmly together, so that it does not fall apart. But in the world it is a natural force which does this, acting on the human body since this is material, whereas in heaven it is the Divine Celestial and the Divine

Spiritual from the Lord which acts around an angel, preserving the angel in the form and in the power he or she has. (*Arcana Coelestia, paragraph 9499*)

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How many of you remember the movie *City Slickers*? There is a point in the movie where the main character played by Billy Crystal senses that Curly, a character played by Jack Palance, that Curly knows the secret to life, so he asks him. Curly holds up one finger, but gives hardly any more explanation. One of the story lines running throughout the rest of the movie is “What is the one thing?” Well, my sermon today is not about the one secret of life, but I really do want to make just one major point with you today. I hope I do it in a way that you will not forget, or at least I hope I make it easy to recall, because it has so much to do with Advent and Christmas. I’ll start with a story:

Every day for 30 years a man drove a wheelbarrow full of sand over the Tijuana border crossing. The customs inspector dug through the sand each morning but could not discover any contraband. He remained, of course, convinced he was dealing with a smuggler. On the day of this retirement from the service, he asked the smuggler to reveal what it was that he was smuggling and how he had been doing so. “Wheelbarrows; I’ve been smuggling wheelbarrows, of course.” (From *Border Crossings* by Daniel Boyarin).

There are a number of layers of potential meaning in this story.

First there is the border: **this somewhat arbitrary crossing point where we go from one state or country to another.** Overnight something that was just a short walk can become an almost insurmountable obstacle, like the border between Gaza and Israel or the Berlin Wall. International borders are imaginary lines when you look at the world from outer space. Walls and fences. Language. Clothing. Doors and windows. Gates. Money. Everything disappears when we

look from that perspective. But borders can also disappear from ground level. If you have seen the movie *Babel* there is a wonderful sequence in the film with quite a lot of tension, where a woman is lost in the desert near or on the border between Mexico and the United States. She looks in every direction and the landscape is the same. She knows where she is but at the same time she can't tell where she is. She has absolutely no sense of the direction to go for help, and she realizes how desperate her situation has become while standing virtually on top of the invisible border.

Another part of the story is deception. The man with the wheelbarrow understood the subtlety of how our minds work. Sometimes the most obvious thing is the most invisible.

Then there is self-deception. How often do we find that the way we look at the world is not as objective as we think? There is often a flaw in how we look at things, especially when we have a successful way of doing something and try to use the same method in every situation. We may not even know that there is something wrong and we just work harder doing the same thing. I can just see this customs inspector starting with a shovel, then using his hands, then screening the sand through wire mesh, convinced there is something in the sand.

How about expectation? How often does what we want become an expectation? It is like the carpenter with a hammer going in search of nails to hit. If he is not careful every problem he has begins to look like a nail, or something he can use the hammer to fix. Perhaps the next time there is a rough spot in the wood he taps it down instead of taking the time to find sandpaper. When a nail bends over, instead of starting over or pulling it out he smashes its twisted form deep into the wood and ruins the finish. The inspector was taught to look at anything being carried across, he expected it to be hidden, and it did not occur to him that the vehicle was the contraband.

What about roles? In this case the border guard feels a need to find something because somehow he would feel like he didn't or wasn't doing his job if someone was able to deceive

him. If he gets too paranoid he might picture everyone trying to deceive him and it ends up coloring his interaction with every person that passes across the border. Everyone becomes the target of his suspicion.

Everything I find interesting about this story is the background that gives it energy. Why is there a border in the first place? How do we see ourselves in relation to the characters in the story? Do we identify with the Mexican or the customs inspector? Look at the Mexican. He is taking incredible risk to even cross the border. Just like many immigrants today the need is so great they will go to great lengths to cross the border and in part, I think his ingenuity comes from his need.

Now I want us to do something really radical, at least it feels radical, but I hope it works.

I'm going to tell a similar story with a slightly different cast of characters. It goes like this.

If God is on your side you can go a long way. You can escape slavery in Egypt, cross the Red Sea, go up to the top of the mountain and receive the entire Law as it was revealed to Moses by God. Moses, according to Swedenborg, represents Divine Law, but he also represents to me, someone reaching for God, taking what he has received from God and doing everything in his power to reach the Promised Land. But having the Law is not quite enough, man reaching for God, is not quite enough. It takes us to the border of the Promised Land, we can see it, but it doesn't take us all the way there. But the Law does exist.

After Moses, with the Law, we are somewhat like the customs inspector, patrolling the border, doing our best to enforce the Law. In fact, living according to the Law gives a sense of order to life, but there is something missing. God is not just a God with Laws.

There is a need in creation for God to continuously reach toward us. Love continuously reaches toward us, but we have to recognize it in order to let it cross the border of our own state

of being. We might be tempted to think how do we let this love in, but in reality, this love is in us, we have to let it cross into our awareness, our consciousness, and permeate our being.

God, speaking in a figurative way, like the Mexican in Tijuana, has to find a way to get around the person watching the border according to the Law. Now, the person watching according to the Law believes in the Law, perhaps believes at a level where they have become dependent on the Law in the wrong way. **They have become very suspicious and perhaps a little cynical with regard to everyone that passes by.**

If you were going to do this in a way to break their dependence on the Law, it seems likely to me that you have to break the Law, but this message is not a suggestion for you to go out and break the law, so please don't run out and blindly start breaking laws. In some way we need to show that the Law is not always according to what we perceive. How many laws of the time and place were broken to prepare the way for Jesus? If you believe Mary was a virgin, there are the laws of biology and nature. There is custom. Joseph has to be willing to look at the whole situation in a completely open way. He has to go against custom and conventional wisdom to take Mary as his wife.

What happens when God enters the world through a human being? A border is being crossed. Crossing the border between the spiritual and material, the boundary between heaven and earth, is a big deal. And like the first story we can get caught by our expectations or caught in our own self-deception. We think we understand. Let me ask the question again to make sure that you weren't caught like the customs inspector. **What happens when God enters the world through a human being?**

You might say several things. We might get caught up in how many laws are broken before we realize that many of the laws being broken are human-made not God-made. We might get caught in that tricky little problem of Jesus being human and divine at the same time.

What happens at the border? Remembering our reading from Swedenborg, the border is where Divine Truth and Divine Good are joined together. On the border we are aware of a change about to come, but we don't know what it is. Is the man with the wheelbarrow going to get caught or not? The woman in the movie *Babel* faces some extraordinary moments of truth on the border in the desert. For her the moment of Truth, of what was at stake for her and the children in her care, was so overpowering that the border ceased to exist, there was no way for her to save herself except to give in to the very things she feared and resisted the most. The act of God moving from one state of being to another, a joining of heaven and earth in a human being, can be a border of unspeakable and terrifying truth if you are not prepared to go there. We are like Joseph and Mary, faced with questions that feel overwhelming, especially if you face them without Love. Quite simply, we are constantly at the border between heaven and earth, especially when we begin to understand that the border exists inside of us. Here is an interesting quote from Swedenborg: "It is also a heavenly Arcanum [or secret] that the Lord uses those things that are man's own—both his illusions of the senses and desires—to lead and direct him towards the things that are goods and truths" (AC 24, Elliott). What an amazing thing for God to do, leading us, directing us, to this border between heaven and earth, a place of amazing truth, uncertainty, fear and anticipation, to embody his Love in the birth of a child. In the coming of Christ, the birth of Jesus, we are talking about bringing good and truth together, love and wisdom, together into the world, the Law and the fulfillment of the Law in one person, **that is the promise we anticipate when we celebrate the birth of Christ.**

God is always, in some way going to show us that the Law is not always according to what we see, because the fulfillment of the Law is Love.

Where is the wheelbarrow in the second story? My one point is contained in the question I asked twice before: What happens when God enters the world through a human being? **We tend to see the human being, not God.** This Christmas don't let suspicion or cynicism color your ability to see the birth of Divine Love, Divine Wisdom, Divine Truth, Divine Providence in every human being. We have the story of Christmas, the visible manifestation of God's Love coming in to the world, we are witnesses to the crossing of the border between heaven and earth that is part of the hope embodied in every birth. That is also part of the celebration of this one birth.