

Heaven or Hell: Finding Forgiveness

Marcia Kimpton

The Swedenborgian Church of San Francisco Spiritual Message, October 5, 2008

Hello, I am Marcia Kimpton and I have been a member of the Swedenborgian Church for 7 years and have been attending the church for 16 years. I grew up as a protestant and attended the United Church of Christ church just north of Chicago for most of my childhood.

Christ, God and religion have been a part of my life since I was 12 years old when I first became aware that something outside of myself existed and I really have never believed anything differently since that day I knew in my heart Christ does exist eternally for all of us. I explored Buddhism during college and after but it wasn't until I moved to San Francisco did I find this wonderful church. At the time, I was married and pregnant when my husband and I moved 4 blocks away. When I entered this beautiful church that first Sunday morning, never did I think I was entering into a new awareness that would profoundly change my life. The church services felt like the UCC church I had grown up with and I really enjoyed both the Rev Jim and Rev Rachel's sermons. My daughter was baptized here and I attend maybe one service per month for the next 9 years.

The reason I tell you this background is that it wasn't until my father died in March of 2001 did I even question the name or the denomination of this church. I had no idea who Emanuel Swedenborg was nor did I take the time to find out when I attended this church for over 9 years. But when my father died, I desperately wanted to know where he had gone since the ending of our relationship was strained and very incomplete. I had never had someone really close to me die. I set up an appointment with Rev Jim and asked him point blank "Do you think my father went to heaven?" Obviously he couldn't answer this question but after he listened compassionately, he recommended the book "Awaken from Death" written by Emanuel Swedenborg. This was the beginning of 7 years of studying Emmanuel Swedenborg at the Swedenborgian House of Studies.

I should be telling you that I should have my masters by now at Pacific School of Religion but honestly I haven't been ready to give up my TV career for a career in religion. Nor did I want to take any other classes but on Swedenborg, Buddhism and Hinduism and if you get your masters in theology you have to take the hard, challenging courses on the bible. So I stand before you not an expert on the bible but a real student of Emmanuel Swedenborg. Maybe one day I will make all those classes count towards a master but for now I interested in only learning.

To give you a little background on Swedenborg for those, like me, who are unfamiliar to him. He was born in Sweden in 1688 and died in 1772. He was an inventor, scientist, civil servant, philosopher and theologian. He was a brilliant man who had a calling from God at the age of 56 where he was given a new spiritual vision. It was the relationship to Divine love and truth through the relationship of the spiritual and natural world that caused him to write many books about this new vision, which are usually called by

Swedenborgians, “the writings.” I have read many of his books during my studies, but the book that profoundly changed me was “Heaven and Hell.” And the book I am referring to in my sermon is by Grant Schnarr who is a Swedenborgian minister; he wrote “Return to the Promised Land.”

What I have learned in taking 15 Pacific School of Religion classes and 9 of them specifically directed towards Swedenborg is that I believe, as Swedenborg, that there is a heaven and hell and that my father did go to heaven. Rev Jim could not confirm to me on that day if my father went or not but he certainly was an expert in Swedenborg, so he directed me in the way I could find the answer through God. If you asked me today why I believe there is a heaven, I can and will answer you in that you must take the spiritual journey to find out, question the facts you hear and see, and like any scientific experiment decide for yourself if the results warrant you to believe in heaven. As you know there is no scientific, empirical evidence that says there is heaven but there are those, like myself, who believe that it heaven does exist. Now how did I come to believe this to be true for me?

This is where the story of Exodus became important in my life and you may see how it relates to your life. Swedenborg takes the story of Exodus and finds correspondential symbolism of how the story of Exodus is a journey of spiritual transformation. To briefly summarize the parts that relate to today’s sermon the Israelites are slaves to the Egyptians and are ruled by a Pharaoh who is a tyrant that acts like God. They escape this bondage only to walk 40 years wandering looking for food in the wilderness. Their path to the Cannan or the Promised Land, if walked in a straight line should only take two and half months, but even with the many times God contacts them on their journey, it ends up taking forty years.

What I found in my journey to the Promised Land, is that it took me 46 years instead of 40 years, but for you it could have only been 10 years or less. The number 40 is used as a symbolic number to convey the time that it takes you to transform in a spiritual way that allows you to live daily in the Promised Land. I personally can say I have been spiritually aware of God since I was 12 years old, but I can only say recently I have been living in the Promised Land.

Swedenborg compares the Israelites in the beginning of their journey as being more of a natural person rather than a celestial person. This is a person who is enslaved by their ego. EGO can stand for edging God out. The ego creates a bondage of self where the world revolves around you and your life rather than have God or the higher self control your life. The ego is needed in surviving as is formed as a young child in order to separate from the parent but the ego without you knowing can take over your life. It the voice that talks to you in your head about fear, judgment, resentment and survival. You need the ego or the mind to help you find creative solutions to a problem, but it is God who finds the peaceful, loving solution to any problem, by just letting go and trusting the voice of God inside.

So, as the Hebrews wander through the barren desert looking for food they are enslaved by fear of not finding the Promised Land and starving to death. The ego or the bondage of self without God is controlling their life. When God offers them manna which is bread for them to eat they try to hoard it. They grab it, store it and control it which makes them doubt God will be giving them more food later. They realize you can not hoard spiritual food even if your ego tells you to take as much as you can but instead to trust God will provide each day the bread we need. When they realize that God is the source of all life and that it is God who directs one's life and not the ego they are no longer slaves but finally are in the process of being transformed and closer to reaching the Promised Land. It is at this turning point that God contacts them specifically when they are ready to spiritually hear him and he gives Moses the Ten Commandments at the bottom of the Mt Sinai.

Every time we have a spiritual breakthrough, we are at the bottom of Mt Sinai, and climbing the mountain symbolizes elevating our comprehension so we can receive the revelation of God. The final leg of the story is that the Israelites can see the Land of Canaan so they send spies which include Joshua and Caleb to make sure the land is safe. Joshua and Caleb report there is milk and honey and to not be afraid. But the other spies put doubt and fear in the minds of the people and they consider going back to Egypt. They begin to mistrust God after he spoke to them at Mt Sinai, feed them manna and protected them from the enemy. They become victims to the entire journey. They begin to blame God and God appears again and says "You will not enter the land. You will die in the wilderness." And they do die. This is the realization of our old self, which is a fearful victim, who questions God, and who needs to die before a new self is born. It is the second generation, Joshua and Caleb, who at the end of 40 years are able to enter the Promised Land because of their trust and knowing and belief in God.

The way I can relate this story in my life is a very painful and challenging time of custody battle following my divorce. Some of you may have experienced that directly or perhaps more indirectly through people you know, and I'm sure all of you can imagine how spiritually challenging going through a legal custody fight can be. During this court battle I had begun my spiritual journey of studying Swedenborg and was still in the process of trying to figure out if there really was a heaven. This court battle brought me right into hell on earth. All of sudden I had an awareness, which Swedenborg terms as influx from God and that is when you not only open your channel to listening to God but you hear God through a revelation or an ability for greater awareness.

So I was aware of heavenly moments in such experiences as appreciating a beautiful day in San Francisco, a bonding moment with my daughter, helping a friend, seeing some great rock n' roll band or just doing what I love to do and that is create a new TV production or film. Swedenborg speaks that following your love whatever that may be, is a service to God because you are one with God at this moment. So I have been fortunate to know and to experience many heavenly moments but while I was going through this custody battle which I thought had been settled 10 years ago I was in hell

and I was watching my daughter be pulled into hell with this inadequate court system evaluation process.

The net result is that my daughter and I had long separations when she was sent to the East Coast to a boarding school and our interactions were severely limited, I believe as much to her chagrin as to mine. I wondered, "How could this happen when I had such a wonderful relationship with my daughter?" I began a two-year process of deep reflection and during that process I kept on getting more and more ill.

Now, today, as I stand here healthy and vibrant I understand I was breaking down the ego. My ego had been shattered. My career in TV had come to a dead stop, and I was too ill to get back to work. I had fallen victim to the circumstances. In order to change, I moved to Stinson Beach thanks to a good friend who offered their home as a way to help me through this dark tunnel. As I sat on the beach day after day watching the waves, I let go of everything I had ever thought my life was supposed to be, and who I thought I was, only to find one year later I am now living daily in the Promised Land. I lived the story of Exodus as we all do, but there is only one way to get to the Promised Land, and that is through God's guidance.

Once we break down the ego, either because of tragic life circumstances, or because of our willingness to go to a deeper level with God on the spiritual journey, we find the land of Canaan. The slavery the Israelites felt were the feelings of fear, anger, restlessness and resentment. When one understands these are emotions that are driven by the ego that keep our mind in hell, we have the opportunity to rid them so we can find trust in God, accept God's will and find peace, be not engaging nor accepting the ego's willingness to bring us into hellish moments.

In the case study that I am using here from my own life, I had to attempt to act through love in what I experienced as unloving circumstances. That's one of the painful situations that many of us must face: acting spiritually in response to hell. It was up to me through God's love to accept what happened and to rid all anger and thus find full forgiveness. I know see today that which I couldn't see when I was in the barren desert although I did trust God, but I knew I wasn't in the Promised Land, and that boarding school was a great situation for my daughter. By her getting away, she was able to form a sense of self-confidence and independence that I think happened at an earlier age because of boarding school.

I am of course lucky to have her exposed to a great education, but the most important lesson for her was that she was able to forgive her father and accept him for who is and all his shortcomings. She, through my sense of faith, has a greater knowing and trusting of God at a much earlier age because today she is so happy. She is now at a west coast boarding school after convincing her father to listen to her needs. I too learned how to fully forgive, and by fully forgiving, I reached the Promised Land.

What was interesting to me, is that once I could finally accept God's will and trust that something better will come of result of this tragedy, that was the moment I could forgive.

It is our free will to take action either towards God or away from God. I feel that I know the intentions of the both the evaluator and my ex-husband were away from God, but I can choose to go towards God as a result of their actions.

As angry as I was when it first happened, I realized this emotion only perpetuated the hell I was already in. But to ask God to help me forgive my ex-husband, I was able to put a final chapter on this story. It was through my awareness I could no longer be a slave to the voice inside which was the ego and only the voice that was God's which was the voice of love. It has taken me years of prayer and meditation to finally figure out if it is my ego talking or God guiding me.

Once I could hear God's voice, I could rid the pain and ask for forgiveness. But forgiveness according to my experience takes time. You have to ask it for it every day, and then one day you wake up and you know it's happened. You no longer get angry when you hear that person's name or see him and you actually have compassion for anyone who cannot operate from love all the time. I found by studying Swedenborg's concept of heaven and hell, that heaven and hell are right here and now and all we do here is prepare for the transition into our eternal soul.

If one understands that it is our responsibility to regenerate, a term Swedenborg has developed in describing our transformation out of the barren forest and into the land of Canaan, then we understand this is the only purpose to our every action and thought. So when I could rid the anger towards those I was facing down in the legal system and exercise my spiritual freedom and power to forgive them, I experienced a change of state. In at least one plane of my life, I crossed the River Jordan into the Promised Land of spiritual peace and strength.

Swedenborg tells us that if we can take the time to spiritually transform every aspect of our life to reflect the Promised Land, we not only create the Promised Land for others, we reflect heaven on earth. Swedenborg talks about three heavens that he believes people go to after their death. The first heaven is the more natural heaven and this is a good person who is not fully aware of God in their life on earth, but performs acts of goodness. The second heaven is the spiritual heaven and this is a person who is aware of God fully, but analyzes him from the mind. He is trying to figure out God rather than feel God. And then there is the celestial heaven, and this is heaven where people fully know and feel God in their heart and operate in every action with this awareness.

These three heavens appear to me every day through people. I watch people and I can see if they are operating more from the ego, or a natural place, or they are good but they are trying to figure out God, or are they are a reflection of God because God is in their heart. I can now actually be thankful for this painful custody battle and see that before the custody battle, I was still ego-bound, not fully trusting God. Now I know God is in my heart and I try in every aspect of my life to operate fully with this new awareness. As much as I live in the Promised Land, I still have an ego that I have to check every day. I have a daily practice through prayer, meditation, gratitude and

forgiveness to all of those who have trespassed against me. I ask God to guide my every thought, word and action.

I can't explain why we witness terrible atrocities like Darfur or children in poverty or abuse, but I do know God has given us the free will to choose heaven or hell and unfortunately some people do not understand that heaven is so accessible through faith and love of God. There are many people that are given challenges way more difficult than my personal example today, like Nelson Mandela, and I am humbled to know that through their adversity they chose to reflect God's glory rather than anger.

Can you say with personal hardships that you have forgiven everyone in your life and you are trying daily to reflect God? If the answer is yes, then you are living in the Promised Land. So just know all those moments of reflection that result in better action prepare you not only for a place after death, but allow you also to live now in a place of harmony and love.