

"For the Beauty of the Earth"

Sunday Message for the San Francisco Swedenborgian Church, 06/11/2011

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- Thanks for invitation to give message. Honor. Family present.
 - Wonderful to be in space. London – September / August at British Library as 2010 Eccles fellow in American Studies researching chapter in book on Worcester, Muir, Keith. Spent a lot of time reading about this structure – imagining it – so wonderful to finally be here in the flesh.

In thinking about message for today, what would be appropriate, I thought the building itself posed a wonderful question, one that lies at the heart of a lot of my work on Swedenborg's influence on 19th century Romanticism. What was it about a particular spiritual experience in the wild that pushed Joseph Worcester and the other architects of this structure to make this so particular and unique space -- to bring the wilderness indoors, into a sacred church?

Though the room and space we sit and stand in are resolutely in the city of San Francisco, everything in this room is designed to remind us of non-civilized wild nature – the rough wilderness of the Sierras that Worcester, Keith, and John Muir all loved and occasionally hiked together in. The madrone trees used as arch supports have their bark intentionally left on ; there is no painting or gilded materials on the walls around us, emphasizing the natural unadorned state of the building materials. In lieu of a program of stained glass windows on the north wall, landscape paintings by William Keith show us scenes of unspoiled wild nature, at different seasonal points, reminders of the turning cycles and circular time of the natural world. If you've seen some of the oldest existing photographs of the interior of the church, you'll know, too, that instead of flowers at the front there were often large cuttings of rough tree branches, with leaves

left on them, that would adorn the area around the altar. Coming inside here was like entering a forest temple, making quite explicit the ways that forest groves have underwritten Christian architecture since the pillared naves of the Gothic cathedrals in Europe, that were meant to echo the tall trunks of medieval forests.

Joseph Worcester – that first formative minister and architect of this church, and a key figure in the emerging Arts & Crafts artistic movement – famously said that this building should teach its lessons. The space should teach its lessons. Worcester at the time was being criticized by more traditionally trained architecture friends that this space was too unadorned, too rough, that it did not fit the architectural norms of the period. Worcester snapped back that he cared nothing for the standard canons of architecture, and that this church must teach its lessons.

I want to spend my time with you this morning deliberating about what precisely this lesson might be. To try and let the space speak for itself, and provoke some reflections. It seems to me that it requires thinking carefully about what the experience of wilderness meant – theologically and spiritually – to Worcester and his circle. I would argue that at the core of this experience was a sense of the beautiful in nature, and that the beauty showed God's presence making itself manifest in the world. The architectural historian William Kostura has written how "Joseph Worcester viewed the natural world as a as a manifestation of God, and felt that buildings should relate well to the environment rather than disrupt it. Nature was beautiful and buildings which resemble nature were the most beautiful of buildings."

Also, it's quite appropriate to think about Worcester bringing the beauty of the wild indoors today, of all days. This Sunday is Pentecost – Whitsun Sunday, in England, Pfingstensonntag if I were back in Germany. A day that commemorates the apostles receiving the Holy Spirit after the death of the Lord, in the book of Acts, on the feast day Shavuot. If we recall the text, as this is recorded in the book of Acts, the Spirit makes itself present as a sound from heaven – "a rushing of a mighty wind," the text reads – that fills the whole house with its sound. Flames descend upon the apostle's heads, and they begin to speak in tongues.

I like recalling this moment today, of a rushing mighty wind filling the interior of the feast chamber – it's the raw power of the wild making itself present in the most intimate domestic space, an upper chamber devoted to feasting and fellowship.

So, as we can look around in this space and take note of all the things designed to remind us of the wild, I want to think in particular about how this beauty in wild nature is connected to an awesome transformative power, and is an important part of theology.

I think it's important to think carefully about our words and what they mean here, however. The kind of beauty in this sacred space – the beauty that Keith found in the Sierra mountains and tried to capture in his landscape paintings – is not the commercialized beauty that fills so much of our postmodern world. We are surrounded by, even constantly bombarded by, a steady stream of images and advertising that often preys on our insecurities about personal beauty. That we need this product, this kind of clothing, in order to be beautiful.

Don't get me wrong, I am no enemy of fashion. I've loved the years I've spent living in glitzy cosmopolitan cities like New York, Munich, and London. But thinking about beauty in this room and space, and our sense of the Divine, I am reminded of how commodified beauty is – maybe I am all the more aware of this now with my four year old daughter now fully entering a stage where she loves anything and everything having to do with pink fairy princesses, and becoming keenly sensitized to how this is marketed and pitched.

But this is not the kind of beauty Worcester brought into this church. Rather, it seems the wild raw power of beauty on the mountain, or in the wind that blows in on Pentecost works precisely because it so un-human, so unlike us, that it packs a particularly powerful punch to our spirit. The experience of beauty opens into a space of wonder, of unknowing, that leaves space for the contemplation of God.

In the long quote from Swedenborg's *Divine Love and Wisdom* that is in the Church Bulletin, Swedenborg writes at length on the wonders of the natural world observable in the tiniest of

details – the growth of an egg, from embryo to chick, the seed taking root and becoming a plant. "If people pay close attention to the nature of these forms," Swedenborg writes, "and think deeply about it, they cannot fail to be stunned."

We cannot fail to be stunned. When was the last time *you* were stunned by nature, or paid attention to nature's forms? To marvel is, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, to be struck with astonishment. Stun is an older, more medieval word: it carries the etymological sense of a loud crash, a tremendous knock of two things against each other, a striking together that knocks one unconscious. When was the last time that nature stunned you in this radical way, taking you out of yourself? Dumbfounded?

Despite all the blessings and convenience that modern technology has brought us—and I will be the first to admit, it was an iPhone that woke me up this morning, and I only got the SF church this morning thanks to my handy GPS -- these have not come to us without a certain cost, a barrier that they can potentially insulate us from the raw, dumfounding potential of nature. Henry David Thoreau wrote, out in the woods at Walden Pond, that "Most of the luxuries and many of the so-called comforts of life are not only not indispensable, but positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind... Our life is frittered away by detail... Simplify, simplify, simplify! ... Simplicity of life and elevation of purpose."

I can remember being a boy at Bethany Beach on our annual family vacations to the shore in Delaware, and night skies above the sand and surf where the stars opened up in such a deep way that I felt something too big to put into words, when I remembered the earth as but a tiny speck in this vast cosmos. As it goes in Psalm 8 that we heard earlier, "When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?"

It is here, I think, crucially an embodied feeling, a sense that comes out of a particular experience where one sees, hears, touches the intimations of an order and pattern in the world that is enormous and complex, and yet somehow a feeling that we in our smallness are part and parcel

of it. It is feeling at locating the presence of the Creator in His Creation. We can't just read about it in Emerson, Thoreau, or Muir – or catch glimpses of it in paintings by Keith and his like.

These texts call us to experience it.

This is part of the message, I think, in the famous passages from the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew that tell us not to worry. I don't think we pay enough attention to the crucial function of beauty in these lines. Christ doesn't just say, stop worrying about what you will eat and drink, and seek first the kingdom of God – trust in me, you'll be taken care of – but he begins by pointing us to look at flowers:

"Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these." The humble flowers of the field are glorious, more glorious than the most fabulous kingly figure of the Old Testament. There is a deliberate juxtaposition of the man-made human world here – Solomon with all his splendid riches – against God's created beauty in nature.

I wonder how seriously we take this command or injunction, to look at flowers, and let our minds be stunned by the wondrous order there. We obediently read and contemplate the Scriptures: but are we contemplating the flowers? My own worrying tends to be controlled, somewhat fatuously, by my iPhone, that has an electronic calendar with a to-do list. When an important date or deadline approaches, it will beep and buzz to remind me that I need to be more busy, and get something done. Perhaps I would do well to find an app for lilies of the field, and install it on my phone there.

The Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard wrote a very long meditation on the meaning of these flowers and birds in the Lord's Sermon on the Mount, and came to the conclusion that their presence is to silence us. They teach us to be silent before God, to be not concerned with cares or worries: the birds and flowers are content with their place in the larger divine design. It is striking to think how our worry and concern often seems to engender more language and words – we complain, we let off steam and frustration to our partner and spouse or friend – and yet, the

theological wonder at natural beauty so often leads *away* from words, into stillness. To go back to the quote from Swedenborg for today, to be dumbfounded literally means to be struck speechless. Found dumb – not idiotic, in its modern sense, but found speechless. So often elsewhere in Swedenborg, where he attempts to describe the beauty he has seen in heaven, he admits language's inability to capture the intensity and power of what he has seen and heard. Angels and their heavenly garden are "indescribably beautiful," he repeatedly writes in *Heaven and Hell*.

Many other Christian mystics and thinkers have said the same thing when it comes to experiencing the beauty of Divinity and Heaven, from Augustine to Theresa of Avila to Jakob Boehme. Nor is this sense of holy wonder at the pattern of the cosmos limited to the Judeo-Christian tradition. The lilies of the field in the Sermon of the Mount have often been compared by theologians to the Buddha's so-called "flower sermon," an account that has been particularly important in Zen traditions. According to tradition, at some point in the fourth century B.C., Buddha stood beside a lake with a number of his disciples who had gathered to hear him speak more of his words of wisdom. As the Buddha waited for his students to sit and settle down, he noticed a golden lotus flower growing in the waters of the lake. He pulled the flower out of the water, and held it up for his students to see. There was a long silence – the students waited, and waited, and waited for the Buddha to begin speaking his message. Suddenly one of his students smiled, getting it – the message was about silence, and in the flower that was being held before them to contemplate. If we follow Kierkegaard, something similar is going on in the silence and stillness of the lilies of the field that we are to consider in the Sermon on the Mount.

At the risk of sounding essentialist, perhaps we are **all** hardwired with a capacity for experiencing beauty and wonder in a particular way, and that becomes important for how belief can work and operate in our hearts and minds. It is striking how our wonder at the beauty of Divine design have composed an important theological point in theistic religions around the world, for thousands of years. If there is something universal going on here that transcends time and the particularities of culture, there is accordingly great potential for thinking how this widespread diffusion might aid our growing global ecological crisis – that a common framework

for wonder at nature might become a place for dialogue that crosses national and cultural boundaries. I'm going to come back to this point at the end of my sermon.

In the Christian tradition, we can certainly read back a wonder at the beauty in the wild into some of the oldest parts of the Bible, even into places where we might not expect it. The other scripture readings for today comes from the Song of Songs. This has historically been read as allegory, as something more and deeper than simply exquisite poetry of longing and desire between a man and a woman – that it symbolically expresses the relationship between God and Israel, or the Church and Christ. As a teenager, we always found it bizarre, slightly naughty, with its strange language that compared women's anatomy to fawns and gazelles. Now, when I think about the beauty and power of the wild and read the Song of Solomon, I am struck by how the metaphors for the Beloved are shaped by the language of the uncivilized, of remote mountainsides with rural shepherders. In this imagery, the intimate body of the beloved – whatever she stands for, be it the church, or the Children of Israel – is literally figured as what was the wilderness for the Israelites back then: the mountainy area of Gilead to the east of the Jordan river.

Noticing the power of these places in these sacred scriptures should not lead us astray, however, in thinking that we need to go to an exotic mountain top – to a place like Mount Gilead, or even to John Muir's beloved Yosemite in the Sierras – in order to experience the humbling wonder of the wild. It is often under our noses, all the time. The phrase "lilies of the field" has acquired, thanks to the elegance and enduring popularity of King James translations, an almost sophisticated ring to it – as if lilies of the field were as exquisite and choice a flower as the golden lotus that Buddha plucked out of the pond for his flower sermon. But that's not at all what the original new testament Greek likely implies – most scholars think that Jesus's words are denoting wildflowers – perhaps even a particular red crocus or scarlet anemone that commonly grows on the hills and mountains of Palestine, that might explain the lines about "Solomon in all his glory." There's a very old tradition that sees these common red flowers as symbols of King Solomon's legendary scarlet robes.

So, in other words, "lilies of the field" are as common and ubiquitous as a daisy. We should be able to contemplate something ordinary like this, and be wowed into a placating silence that dissolves our worry.

In Swedenborg, too, the imagery in the quote about seeds growing and becoming plants is also quite homely. He does not write there from the lofty and sublime perspective of a natural scientist, but as an active gardener – someone who worked in the mud and soil of his garden plot in Sodermalm, and knew the cycles of growth and harvest. It was an experiential insight. The original frontispiece to the first edition of Swedenborg's DLW, published in 1763, contained an engraved image – likely drawn and made by Swedenborg himself – of a small winged angel at work in a garden, pouring a watering can over a potted flower. The new century editions of Swedenborg have thankfully restored this image to the text, which I think is so important for connecting to the abundance of natural imagery within the text that follows. We should not lose sight of an image of Swedenborg as a gardener here, and that the words in DLW about wondering at the infinity and design reflected in the natural world are within a context of weeding, digging, watering, and then writing in his little summerhouse, the Lusthus, that lay in his gardenplot at Sodermalm.

The hymn we sang earlier today, "For the Beauty of the Earth," was inspired by the gentle farm landscape of southern England that its composer was struck by. He was 29 years old, living in Bath, in 1864. There were no sublime mountains nearby, no vast oceans to make the fellow – his name was Folliot Pierpoint-- contemplate the infinite – just the calm rolling hills of Somerset county that prompted a meditation on beauty. What is striking in the hymn is how quickly the sense of beauty in the earth expands outwards to encompass broader, even cosmic circles of consideration: "Sun and Moon and Stars of Light." It is a movement from the local out to the global.

The environmental movement of the seventies built a lot of constructive momentum around the catchphrase to "think global, act local." This popular idea seems, unfortunately, to have lost a lot of steam in more recent years, and is perhaps in need of some reinvigoration, and/or rethinking to

recharge it. If wonder and beauty are indeed such widespread cross-cultural and cross-religious capacities in the human, perhaps they should more directly plug into this global-local equation. We need to wonder more at the local, to be dumbstruck and awed at the divine beauty in our backyards. And to communicate and share this power with others, just as Joseph Worcester envisioned this church building to carry a particular theological message to the people who would come inside of it. If we recall the story of Pentecost one final time, the account does not end with the mighty wind and tongues of flame on the heads of the apostle. Crowds gather at this strange sound and sight, and it becomes an opportunity for the apostles to tell their story in a multitude of different languages. “How is it,” wonders the gathering crowd, speaking out loud, “that Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia,^[b]¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome¹¹; Cretans and Arabs—how can we hear them all declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues?” In our 21st century, with its myriad of complex environmental problems that defy national boundaries, from global warming to our overfished oceans, we also need to learn how to speak our wonder into a number of different tongues – to translate our local lilies of the field, wherever they might be, into clear and universal signs of Divine splendor.

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