

Fit for New Purpose

A spiritual message given by Joy T. Barnitz at San Francisco Swedenborgian Church on Sunday, 29 December 2013

Readings

- **Responsive Invocation: Psalm 126**
Stephen Mitchell's translation from the Hebrew
- *Old Testament: Malachi 3:1-3 (NRSV)*

Behold, I send my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord who you seek will suddenly come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight; behold, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like the fullers soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, till they present right offerings to the Lord.

- **From the Jewish Study Bible** (p. 1273) - (Tanakh translation) the "messianic tone" is in v.1-2 (also in 3:23 - the last verse, which in some translations is the last verse of Ch. 4). Who is the messenger? Is it a pun on the name of the prophet - Malachi means "messenger" or is it a pseudonym for the author.? Is it Elijah? There's a long history of interpretation. The New Testament merges the opening verses with Isaiah 40.3 and identifies the messenger as John the Baptist (Matt. 11.10, Mark 1.2, Luke 7.27)
- *New Testament: Mark 13: 32 - 37 (NRSV)*

But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake."

Note on Gospel - the meaning appears to be considered obvious: **keep awake!** WATCH! Ch. 13 of Mark is sometimes called "The Little Apocalypse" - it also resembles prophetic texts. We are cautioned to be awake, watching for the real Messiah, and ignoring the false prophets, prepared and ready for God's return.

- **Swedenborg: Apocalypse Revealed No. 158** (Rogers translation)

"Be watchful." This symbolically means that they should have truths and live in accordance with them. To be watchful has precisely this symbolic meaning in the Word, for a person who learns truths and lives according to them is like someone who awakens from sleep and becomes alert. By contrast, a person who lacks truths, but who is engaged simply in worship, is like someone who is asleep and dreaming. Natural life, regarded in itself or apart from spiritual life, is really no more than a state of sleep, whereas natural life that contains spiritual life is a state of alertness. This alertness, moreover, is obtained only through truths, truths which appear in their own light and in their own clarity when a person lives in accordance with them.

Note on Swedenborg passage based Whitehead's translation (1915) - this passage comes from the explanation of the third chapter of the Book of Revelation to John, specifically from the explanation of the letter to the church in Sardis. The chapter describes "those in the Christian world who are in dead worship, which is without charity and faith; those who are described by the church in Sardis (n. 154-171). No. 158 refers to the opening words of the second verse of Ch. 3: "**Be watchful ...**" Swedenborg cites a number of passages: *Matthew 24:42, Luke 12: 37, 40, Mark 13: 33-37, Matthew. 25: 1-13.* After these citations, Swedenborg concludes No. 158 with: "Because the Lord's coming is called 'morning (n. 151) and then truths are opened, and there is light, therefore that time is called 'the beginning of the watches' (*Lamentations 2:19*); and the Lord is called 'a Watcher' (*Daniel 4:13*); and it is written in *Isaiah: 'Thy dead shall live, Awake, ye that dwell in the dust' (Isaiah 26:19)*. But that the state of a man who is not in truths is called 'slumbering' and 'sleeping' may be seen (*Jeremiah 51: 39, 57; Psalm 13: 3; Psalm 66: 6; Luke 8: 23; and in other places.*" In No. 159, Swedenborg elaborates that "Dead worship is altogether similar to living worship in its external form, because they who are in truths do the same things ... therefore they who are in dead worship have need of nothing more than to learn truths and live according to them..."

Short talk for Children of All Ages

In invite you to take a **deep** breath ... And let it out slowly ... while staying awake. This story may not be factual; it strikes me as true.

A woman who had studied this passage in Malachi, was curious to learn how silver was refined so she went to visit a silversmith to learn how it was done. After it was described to her, she asked the silversmith if he sat and watched while the refining process was going on. He answered that he did, that he sat with his "eye steadily fixed on the furnace, for if the time necessary for refining be exceeded in the slightest degree, the silver will be injured." The woman found that very beautiful and very comforting. She viewed it as God refines each of us, that through love and wisdom God purifies us in the best manner for us, individually. Satisfied, she prepared to leave the shop only to be called back by the silversmith who said that he had forgotten to mention something *very* important: "the only way that he knows that the process of purifying is complete is when he sees his image reflected in the silver ..." ¹

¹ Adapted from http://www.therefinersfire.org/refiners_fire.htm (accessed 27 December 2013)

Christmas is over ... sort of. The presents have been opened. The tree is starting to look a bit bedraggled. There are the leftovers from the Christmas dinner to finish, and probably too many cookies and too much candy ... I know I'm thinking of who I can 're-gift' those "extra" sweets to! We are in a lull time between the festivities of Christmas and those of New Years. Is it time to pack away the decorations? It's a time of conflicting emotions, gladness to see friends and family. Sometimes, glad that it's only a couple of times a year maybe...? Perhaps a bit of envy in reading all those holiday letters telling you all the great times "everyone else" is having. A feeling of being overwhelmed at the thoughts of all the "things" left undone; kind of like dust in the corners. A lot of "should haves" and "ought to haves" pile up about this time of year. My thoughts always turn to what I could have done better ... couldn't I have exercised more? Lost more weight? Eaten "healthier"? Been nicer to the person on the phone trying to sell me carpet cleaning ... It's a bit exhausting sometimes, isn't it?

In our readings this morning, we are cautioned that the Lord will come suddenly and that we should be watchful and "keep awake." We just celebrated Christmas, the birth of Jesus in our world and in our hearts. Shouldn't we be feeling happy and joyful? For me, it's pretty easy to feel

tenderness and calm about the infant Jesus ... but what are we to make of the Lord who will come like a refiner's fire? How is this possible with a loving God? Not quite the image that comes to my mind immediately.

The name Malachi means "my messenger"; there's a lot of debate as to whether this last book of the Old Testament is the named for the prophet / author or a "pen name." It was probably written in the 5th c. BCE; it is the last book of the Prophets in the Hebrew Bible. The people had been back in the holy land about 100 years after returning from captivity in Babylon and the Temple had been rebuilt. The usual interpretation of this passage from Malachi is that the messenger is John the Baptist and it is a prediction of Jesus' birth. Emanuel Swedenborg states² that the refiner's fire is temptation by which means our regeneration, salvation, purification occurs. We are the 'sons of Levi,' we are people seeking to do good and to live a good life.

The Lord will come suddenly and will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver. How can this be a picture of a loving God? I invite you to think back to the story I just told. The silversmith says that he must watch closely, keep his "eye steadily fixed" during the refining process or else "the silver will be

² Emanuel Swedenborg, *Heavenly Secrets*, No. 8159; see Dole Study Notes. Vol. Four, p. 238

injured." And that "the only way that he knows that the process of purifying is complete is when he sees his image reflected in the silver ..."

Think back of a silver container, such as a bowl or a pitcher that you may have seen at a family dinner. It's probably accumulated a bunch of dings, it may be tarnished so much that even silver polish doesn't quite restore it to its original shininess. It looks worn. Maybe even worn out. When you look at it you think maybe it would be better, be worth more "melted down" than in its current state." We might say that this vessel is no longer "fit for purpose" as my British colleagues say. Swedenborgians might say it is no longer "of use" in its current form.

Sort of like us. Sometimes the accumulation of crises, maybe all at once, maybe accumulated over many, many years, maybe provoked by a natural disaster, such as earthquakes and hurricanes, or triggered by more personal tragedies, death of a loved one, loss of a job. Doesn't it sometime just all become too much for us. Our spirit is devastated, we feel abandoned, without hope. What can we do?

Each of us is created in the "image and likeness" of God; we are "organic forms recipient of God." Our quality, our degree of "humanness" depends on our response to God's love and to influx flowing from the Lord.³ We are formed by confronting temptation; struggling to do good through our understanding of the truth. Truth, to which silver corresponds; truth flowing from the Lord, which is one of the ways we "form ourselves" into a vessel into which God's love flows, bringing us life, making us use-full. By studying and understanding God's Word and welcoming God into our hearts, our spirit can be refined and re-formed into a new vessel. The Lord sits as a refiner of silver, a refiner of the "stuff" that we are each made of, refined until God sees His face in us. Thus we are made new: fit for new purpose. Once again, as we live our daily lives, we begin again to accumulate the dings, the dents, the bumps of daily use, the patina of usefulness.

It's the end of the year, it's a good time to reflect on how we may be re-formed, repurposed, made anew; fit for new purpose as we continue our spiritual journey and our work in the world to become our "true selves," and to become fully human. AMEN.

³ Emanuel Swedenborg, *True Christianity*, No. 34.

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