

March 15th 2015
“**Holding Infinity in the Palm of Our Hands**”
San Francisco Swedenborgian Church

Good morning, warm greetings to all. Great pleasure to be back at the church to share a message.

What I want to spend my morning with you thinking and meditating on is **time**, both big and small. We can talk about time in various ways – we can economize it, in how our everyday language with our smart phone calendars and constant connectivity is always asking us if something is *worth* our time, or not – or we could put time into the framework of science, and talk about Isaac Newton and Albert Einstein, and what more recent quantum theories of relativity have done to complicate linear start-to-finish models of time. Is poor Schroedinger’s cat in the box alive or dead, or both simultaneously.

This morning I hope to help us meditate on time from a different point of view, a spiritual one. My message title, to “hold Infinity in the Palm of our Hands,” is paraphrasing part of a famous poem by the great British Romantic poet William Blake, who felt that under the right conditions we could, in his words, “see a world in a grain of sand / and a heaven in a wildflower / hold infinity in the palm of your hand / and eternity in an hour.”

How might William Blake’s words be more than just pretty metaphors and poetry, but point to some kind of reality we can occasionally experience – that little tiny

things like sand and wildflowers actually do contain a sort of infinity, and our holding them might actually bring us closer to heaven?

It is appropriate to think of time and infinity today, perhaps, as yesterday was – does anyone know what it was? – yes, that’s right, it was “pi day” – “pi” not “pie” day -- an informal acknowledgement of the most famous so-called irrational number we call pi – 3.141519, and so on and so forth, onto infinity. Maybe some of you saw on Facebook or your twitter feeds yesterday’s screen captures of friends who tried to capture the very moment when the time on March 14th 2015, was 9 hours, 26 minutes, and 53 seconds.

Besides the so-called super pi day, it’s also good time to have a Sunday message or a sermon on time as we are in the thick of the Lent season, that long slow march through the liturgical calendar towards the epochal event of Easter, for Christian traditions around the world. These six weeks leading up to Easter Sunday remind us of a transcendental kind of time, a religious space of life and death, and a life after death, that Christians have ritualized and memorialized for millennia. The depth of this time, the hundreds and hundreds of consecutive years of Christians thinking towards the crucifixion and the resurrection, is something almost **vertical**, running up and down over the centuries, and this vertical time of believers cuts against the horizontal nature of our months and years and calendars and clocks, all the electric reminders in our smart phones of the things that we are supposed to be doing, that perpetuate the illusion that we humans are in control.

Not so coincidentally, our movement in this liturgical calendar towards Easter happens to fall on the seasonal upswing into spring, back into green life and renewal, a regeneration of the natural world mirroring the spiritual regrowth that the Lord's resurrection at Easter symbolizes. Our English word Easter comes from an old old English word for the fertility Goddess Eostre who was celebrated in the spring. We have reminders of this cyclical and circular time embedded in the beauty of this church, this building that was to "teach its lessons," according to its first minister Joseph Worcester, particularly within the four landscape paintings by William Keith that show the transition and changes of the California weather patterns, from rainy winter into the dry summer and harvest. Perhaps fittingly for this church and its association with the environmental movement, the only image of the cross in this sanctuary – which is normally quite large and prominent in Christian sacred spaces – is the small inconspicuous and nondescript cross behind me, made out of pine cones. Again, a suggestion of the cycles of regeneration and new life and growth in the natural world.

Emanuel Swedenborg was greatly preoccupied with time, both as a natural scientist and later theologian. His large book the Principia, his scientific magnum opus, anticipates a kind of geological deep time as Swedenborg attempted to imagine the birth of our solar system, and how the planets were spun out of the spinning solar mass of the sun. This stunning insight – what later scientists and cosmologists would call the nebular hypothesis – underlies still current understandings of how our solar system began. Swedenborg understood and deeply felt, and struggled to articulate in his science, what Carl Sagan would later say that when he wrote that we are simply "star dust taking destiny into our own hands."

In Swedenborg's Principia and other scientific works, he more or less says that the keys to understanding and unlocking everything in the universe boils down to three things: 1) our rationality, 2) our experiences of induction, of observing empirical facts and building towards larger hypothesis, and 3) the mathematical points and analysis of space provided by geometry. So, rationality, experiences, and geometry.

His later theology, however, overturns this last point about geometry. To understand anything about how the spiritual operates in the natural, writes Swedenborg in works like DLW and DP, we have to abolish our earthly concepts of time and space. Thinking about time and space prevents us from grasping a notion of eternity; in the passages from Swedenborg's Heaven and Hell that we had as readings for today, Swedenborg writes that time and space cause our minds to get anxious when we contemplate infinity. Instead of time and space, Swedenborg says, we need to think about heaven and eternity from the perspective of states. Not linear time and Newtonian space, but state – emotional and affective feeling, the colors of our moods and being that shade the minutes of our days.

This idea of state is perhaps somewhat abstruse and hard to grasp, particularly in western civilization, and it is an aspect of Swedenborg that makes his thinking and theology share more with eastern traditions. Heaven and infinity, and also hell, are not so much future things that we go to, Swedenborg writes, but states we experience in the here and now of our being. When the great Zen scholar of Japanese Buddhism, D.T. Suzuki, was asked at a dinner party what the parallels were that he found between Swedenborg and Mahayana Buddhism, he famously

picked up a dessert spoon from the table and brandished it, and said “This spoon *now* exists in Paradise; we are *now* in Heaven.” Heaven is here for the taking, if we are in the right state. Or as Blake puts it, again, “see a world in a grain of sand / and a heaven in a wildflower / hold infinity in the palm of your hand / and eternity in an hour.”

What do such heavenly states feel like for all of you? Swedenborg also writes that angels are not just some future supernatural beings we might encounter in the afterlife, but lived presences that are with us in our here-and-now, forces of good that can shape and influence the patterns of our thought—our mental and spiritual states. When we are in a heavenly state, and feel the presence of eternity in an hour, as William Blake would put it, we experience the words from Psalm 91 that we heard earlier – that the Lord’s angels are commanded to guard us in all our ways, bearing us up with their hands, so that we will not dash our feet against a stone.

That our spiritual and mental lives are structured by our experiences of states, and not the linear measurements of minutes, hours, and days, is born out by all of us, I believe, if we were to recall and a very happy, special and warm memory and then contrast it with our experience of something terrible, or boring, an occasion in our lives that was decidedly un-heavenly. Why don’t you try this right now – to recollect one of your great moments of joy, and then one of intense discomfort, pain, or boredom.

I got to experience this back-to-back only yesterday. I had been invited to celebrate the wedding of a friend and student at the GTU who was tying the knot at a local

church in Berkeley. I was solo-parenting all weekend, as my wife Suzanne was doing her monthly weekend yoga teacher training immersion. Stressed and frazzled out, unable to fix my two daughters' clothes and their hair the exact precise way they wanted, we were running late to the wedding, and tore off in our car in various states of tears and yelling. On a very narrow part of the road that goes off the hill where we live, I encountered a car coming up on a stretch of the road that narrows to a one lane passway. Annoyed and irritated with this inconvenience, I had to back up around a curve to allow this other car to pass – in my haste and rush, and my complete lack of mindfulness, I backed our car into a guardrail for a steep embankment – there was a sickening crash and crunch of metal and plastic as our car bumper impacted into the back door of our car.

Time seemed to slow down in a terrible kind of way then, with a sickening pit in my stomach as I ran out to check and saw the damage to the car. The remainder of the trip to the wedding seemed to take forever, and I was filled with all kinds of anxious questions – how much will this cost to repair? What in the world will my wife say when she sees this when she comes home tonight?

And yet, however, just some thirty minutes later, I found myself in the special sphere and ambiance of my student and friend's wedding. As I watched Meredith and Chris exchange their vows, I was able to put off the accident and forget about my stupidity and haste, and focus on the beautiful words of the officiating minister. It immediately brought back the sense and memory – what Swedenborg would call a state – of my own wedding fifteen years ago, and what a beautiful and sweet thing it was to come to my best friend in the name of the Lord, and for us two to

become one. The wedding, and the happy joyous reception that followed thereafter, went by so very quickly – I couldn't believe when we came in the door at 11:00 pm that evening that we had been celebrating the wedding for some six hours.

Since Swedenborg's moment in the 18th century, various psychologists and cognitive neurologists have measured and shown how our subjective experience of time is demonstrably quite different from the ticking measures of the clock, and that our happy states of bliss, where we forget ourselves, often create the sense of time going by more quickly than we were aware of, of accelerating. Again, as Blake puts it, "eternity in an hour." By contrast, negative states, and also states of boredom, where we are taken away from the present moment by our anxieties or concerns about the future or the past, create a sense of time as lasting longer than expected, of stretching out. This is embedded in our everyday parlance when we say things like "the watched pot never boils."

So, how do we get more of heaven, more of eternity into the palm of our hands?

In closing, I think the message from both Swedenborg and the Bible is pretty straightforward and simple. We need more mindfulness and meditation, an orientation towards the present. When Swedenborg writes in his advised "Rules of Life" as his first principle to "Diligently read and meditate on the Word of God," I sometimes wonder if Swedenborg means here meditation less as thinking and pondering, and more breathing and mantra. One thing that makes Swedenborg again so unusual in the western tradition of Christian mystics is his own praxis and focus on breath and thought, what is called in Sanskrit pranayama.

We have some of this, too, in the Christian tradition's own well-known words from Jesus's sermon on the mount, where we are told:

do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? 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.

This is Jesus perhaps at his most Buddhist. As many theologians have pointed out, there are deep parallels between these lilies of the field—the wildflowers--and the so-called flower sermon in the Buddhist zen traditions, a story where the Buddha delivered a wordless sermon by standing for a long time in front of his disciples, quietly holding up a single flower to their view. Only one disciple understood what the Buddha was doing, and he quietly smiled. That disciple, Maha-kas-yapa, clearly felt heaven in that flower / eternity in that hour.”

The beauty of the natural world that the sermon on the mount and the Buddha's flower sermon underscore is so wonderfully embedded into this space that surrounds us. In addition to the Keith murals I mentioned, behind me is the newly restored dove window by Bruce Porter, with its blooming pink blossoms of the apple tree. What has struck me so strongly since the window's restoration is the

intensity of the pink blossoms' reflection in the water of the fountain. The reflected petals are almost brighter, more intense, than the flower of the tree itself – to meditate on the colors, the play of the tree with its reflection, is -- for me-- an appropriate symbol of the inner reality of our spiritual subjective states. Our material world, with its Newtonian coordinates of space and place, is but the outside container for some kind of deeper, more intense spiritual reality that we sometimes can glimpse, shining through. It is such heavenly moments – of beauty, happiness, of losing ourselves in the joy of others – that truly make us able to hold infinity in the palm of our mortal hands. In closing, may we all learn to better perceive heaven in wildflowers, or grains of sands, or wherever it is in our lives that the brighter colors of the spiritual world are able to shine their way through. Such moments contain angels who are sent to guard us in all our ways, bearing us up with their hands.