

## **Swedenborg's Struggle for Faith: Its Contours and Meaning for Us**

Sermon of July 8, 2007  
The Swedenborgian Church of San Francisco

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In examining Swedenborg's struggle for faith, I want to make a comparison to Mary—the Lord's earthly mother. The discussion of faith focuses on two actual historical figures, real people, because God never works abstractly in our lives but always concretely. Mary and Emanuel Swedenborg mirror for us two paths of faith.

Several years ago, one of my students characterized Emanuel Swedenborg as the Mary of the second coming. I was struck by the beautiful analogy. What Mary did on the natural physical plane, so Swedenborg did on the spiritual, intellectual plane. Mary carried the Lord in her womb, and her body nurtured his physical body for nine months, and brought him forth through the physical travail and pain of labor into the world, helpless and vulnerable, covered with vernix, connected by the umbilicus soon to be severed; then she cleaned and swaddled him, held and nursed him—not for just an hour or a day, but day after day, for a year or two, and more— tending to his every obvious need. What devotion—what faith.

### **Mary's Call—the Maidservant**

Every Christmas we are delighted to hear the story of the Lord's birth on earth and of Mary's strong but simple faith, as she responds to the annunciation by the angel Gabriel: "Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word."  
Luke 1:38

We are strengthened when we reflect on Mary's firm faith, and we love to hear her song, sung after being greeted by Elizabeth, who said to her: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb." Luke 1:42

Mary's song is a celebration of what has already come to pass and an affirmation of the wonder of the Lord: "Who is, and Who was, and Who is to come."

My soul magnifies the Lord,  
And my spirit has rejoiced  
in God my Savior.  
For He has regarded the lowly  
state of His maidservant;  
For behold, henceforth all  
generations will call me  
blessed.  
For He who is mighty has  
done great things for me,  
And holy is His name.  
And His mercy is on those  
who fear Him  
From generation to generation.  
He has shown strength with  
His arm;  
He has scattered the proud in  
the imagination of their  
hearts.  
He has put down the mighty  
from their thrones.  
He has filled the hungry  
with good things,  
And the rich He has sent away  
empty.  
He has helped His servant  
Israel,  
In remembrance of His mercy,  
As he spoke to our fathers,  
To Abraham and to his seed  
forever. Luke 1:47-55

Our response to Mary is warm and open. In awe we think, "if only my faith was as sure and firm and as trusting as her's." Then we could say, "be it done to me according to your word." She is an inspiration and we never tire of being touched by her story.

While Mary was initially troubled by the angel Gabriel's sudden coming to her and by his greeting, he said, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God." Luke 1:29-30  
When she learned she would conceive and bring forth a son, she asked only, "How can this be, since I do not know a man?" She was satisfied with Gabriel's answer: "the Holy Spirit will come upon you; the power of the Highest will over shadow you . . ." and "with God nothing is impossible." Luke 1:35,37

Again we marvel at Mary's faith and acceptance of her "call" to be the mother of the Lord.

### **Emanuel Swedenborg's call—The servant of the Lord Jesus Christ**

There is indeed a parallel between Mary's call to bring the Lord into the world, and Swedenborg's call to receive the doctrines of the New Church in his understanding and to publish them by the press. (TCR 779) But the process whereby his faith was developed was fundamentally different. At the beginning of his call he struggled with his faith, and while he yearned to be a "servant" and even a "slave" to Christ as early as 1744, it is on his final work, *True Christianity*, that he wrote "Emanuel Swedenborg, Servant of the Lord Jesus Christ." What was his preparation? What did he need to do to open his heart and mind to the Lord? What were the obstacles, what were the challenges, what were the temptations?

What is our response to Swedenborg's story, his song of faith? Is it warm and open? Are we awed and inspired by his journey? Or are we troubled by his struggle to find his faith and humble his heart? Is perhaps one of the problems we confront with Swedenborg, that his journey is **too much** like our own? Are we **too much** like Swedenborg, even as we yearn for the simple faith of Mary? And where is the angel to say to us, "Do not be afraid, with God nothing is impossible?"

While, of course, Swedenborg's journey of faith began in the innocence of childhood, a time in which he, like all of us, was blessed with a full store of heavenly associations, it begins in earnest in his private *Journal of Dreams*—his journal that documents the fierce battle for his soul. Childhood memories are the armaments that he dons, in his first dream entry, when he writes, "dreamed of my youth. . . ." (# 11, 6) Only nine brief entries later he writes, "How I set myself against the spirit. And how I then favored it, but found afterwards that it was madness, devoid of all life and connection." (#13, 7)

### **The Uniqueness of Swedenborg's Call**

Swedenborg was called by the Lord to be a prophet in the eighteenth century; millennia after the age of the Old Testament prophets had passed and long after the era of miracles associated with the early Christian church was over. It was during the age of the

Enlightenment in which “the skeptical, the empirical, and the scientifically demonstrable” were emphasized. (Roszak, 1981, 54)

In the prophetic age, God seemed to come unbidden to men and women unprepared for the astonishing eruption of His power into their lives. As Isaiah wrote, “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am an unclean man of unclean lips and I dwell among a people of unclean lips.” (Isaiah 6:1) Prophets were called to be God’s mouthpiece—to “tell for” Him a message to a people with dull wits, deaf ears, and blind eyes. (Isaiah 6:1-8) Swedenborg commented on the nature of this type of prophecy in *Heavenly Secrets* after he had been fully initiated into his own unique role. He called this type of revelation, external, a form which he contrasts to internal revelation, or revelation from perception. He writes:

The prophets of the Jewish Church; they heard a voice, they saw a vision, and they dreamed a dream; but as they had no perception, these were merely verbal or visual revelations without any perception of what they signified. For genuine perception comes through heaven from the Lord, and affects the intellect spiritually, and leads it perceptibly to think as the thing really is, together with internal acknowledgement . . . . (HS/AC # 5150)

With regard to miracles Swedenborg wrote in the *Spiritual Diary* that:

There are spirits that are adverse to anything said concerning the things revealed (to me), but it was replied that they are instead of miracles, . . . (SD #4123, 1748, Dec. 9)

Although Swedenborg was raised in the deeply religious home of his father, the Lutheran priest and Bishop, Jesper Swedberg, he was profoundly attracted to the world of science and empirical demonstration. In fact he wrote in the introduction to the *Soul’s Domain* (the book he was working on at the time of his call) that:

These pages of mine are written with a view to those only, who never believe anything but what they can receive with their intellect; consequently, who boldly invalidate, and who deny the existence of all supereminent things, sublimer than themselves, as the soul itself, and what follows therefrom—its life, immortality, [and] heaven. These things . . . they reject, and consequently they honor and worship nature, the world and themselves, in other respects, they compare themselves to

brutes, and think that they shall die in the same manner as brutes, . . . thus, they rush fearlessly into wickedness. For those persons only am I anxious . . . and to them I dedicate my work. For when I shall have demonstrated truths themselves by the analytical method, I hope that those debasing shadows will be dispersed; and thus at last, under the favor of God, who is the sun of wisdom, that an access will be opened and a way laid down, to faith. My ardent desire and zeal for this end is what urges and animates me. (*Soul's Domain*, 1843, vol. I: 14-15)

In this Introduction to (what Swedenborg believed was) his crowning work of philosophy, we see him plan to use the analytical method in order to lay down a way to faith through his philosophy for natural and materialistic unbelievers. Scholarship and a love of truth for its own sake have become transformed from ends in themselves into means. Faith has become the primary end, with his philosophy as the means. Such an end is ultimately perhaps more compatible with the love of saving souls, which is a priestly rather than a philosophic love. Truth was no longer the sole end for which he was striving; rather it was for rational or analytical truth as the way toward the good, as the path to salvation, to God. Philosophy could not be the ultimate or final means toward that end, even with the favor of God. In all his previous work, the analytical method was never the way to faith, but only a means to confirm faith.

It would appear that Swedenborg was now attempting to cross the divide (the abyss as he himself called it) between the natural and the spiritual by using merely natural means. Something had to give and, while he was abroad in The Hague, publishing the first two volumes of this work, he was beset by troubling dreams. His love, his project, and his very life hung in the balance. It must be realized that once the process of temptation was underway, a positive outcome was not inevitable. Swedenborg was free to choose either God's way and God's work, or his own way and his own work

Swedenborg in his private record of dreams (in his *Journal of Dreams*) acknowledged his self-love, his ambition, his impatience, his over intellectualization, and his inability to love. Regarding his self-love, in one dream he stated, "I found that it was dwelt upon in thought from the point of view of self-love. For instance, if any person did not regard me according to the estimate of my own imagination, I discovered that I always thought to myself, 'Ah, if you only knew what grace I have, you would act otherwise.'" (Dream # 75) Reflecting on his ambitions, he wrote, "Wondered at myself for having nothing left to do for my own honor." (Dream # 12) In another he said, "Saw a

bookseller's shop. Thought immediately that my work would do more than others." (Dream # 78) And finally, he wrote about his ambition, "My kissing Henning Gyllenborg (See note 170 Documents) and seeing so many people showed that I was not only pleased with the power of being in the world but that I also like to boast of my work." (Dream # 134) He spoke of his impatience in the following dream, "Indeed, I sometimes fell into impatience and into thoughts [doubts]. and would have given way to insolent demand whenever the matter did not go as I had wished, as I did nothing for my own sake." (Dream #13) About his intellectualization he wrote, "I see from this how difficult it is for the learned, far more difficult than for the unlearned, to come to this faith." (Dream # 151) And one dream among many about his lack of love, he wrote, "Began weeping because I had not loved at all . . . ." (Dream #36)

It would appear that these and many other thoughts that surfaced in the dreams initially were revelations to him, revelations that he gradually accepted and strove to deal with, but had others during his lifetime shared similar judgments about his character with him—communications that he had ignored because he was not ready for them, and thus did not hear them? In fact, his Aunt Britta Behm had made such accusations against him. She called him: "ungovernable," "self-willed," "intractable," "obstinent," and in 1727, she said: "he now betrays himself; for delay would be a means whereby he, meanwhile would continue to profit at her expense. She wrote, that she would "like to see how he would find himself at the end before the highest judgment seat."

In one dream his temptation wore the face of the venal Erland Broman, perhaps the most venal man in the Sweden of his day. In the dream Broman had a dog, that became a serpent, and it turned into a dog again. This dream revealed to Swedenborg his love of dominion. While he was not able to kill the dog, that is his attraction to the luxury associated with domination, the dog could not bite him, and ultimately he was able to squeeze its jowl and nose, and poison squirted out. Cleansed, he said, "that though the dog was not mine, yet as he wished to bite me, I must correct him." It was clear that Swedenborg needed to acknowledge such desires, but he was no longer open to this seduction.

The dream immediately made it clear to Swedenborg, "how great the Lord's grace is, which accounts it to us as if we had stood against temptation, and attributes it to us as our own; when yet it is only God's grace and workings. . . ." After this dream Swedenborg

slept and felt bandaged from the wounds of temptation, and inaugurated into a new life."

While the process of temptation continued for several more months, On the night of October 26-27<sup>th</sup> Swedenborg at last was introduced into a tender relationship with his God. He wrote:

It was said to me before that the 27<sup>th</sup> of October should come again, when I undertook 'The Worship and Love of God.' It seemed it was Christ himself with whom I associated as with any other man, without ceremony. He borrowed a little money from another person, some five *pfenning*. I was sorry that he did not borrow it from me. I took up two [*pfenning*], of which it seemed I let one drop, and *then another also*. *He asked what it was*. *I said* that I have found two; one may have fallen from him. I gave him them and he received them. In such an innocent manner we seemed to live together, which was the state of innocence.<sup>1</sup>

In this vision, Swedenborg found two and one of them "may have fallen from him. I gave them to him. . . ." In this exchange Swedenborg wished to use what was his to return to God that which he received from him. He wants to give/return all that he has been given. Clearly this giving focused particularly on his work "The Worship and Love of God," but more broadly it can be taken to symbolized all the work he would undertake as "Servant of the Lord Jesus Christ."<sup>2</sup>

As a result of this process Swedenborg developed a firm, unshakable, and reflective (rational) faith in the Lord. In comparison to Mary's innocence of childhood, we see Swedenborg's innocence of wisdom. In the *Worship and Love of God* (his work that re-tells the story of creation), Swedenborg sings his magnificat. It is perhaps the ultimate statement of the theme of the entire work: Humankind exists to WORSHIP AND LOVE GOD who showers His love on humankind; that is humankind exists to MAGNIFY and REJOICE in the Lord. In the following passage the whole world had been created but not yet the child of earth:

30. Yet there still was missing any being to judge these pleasures of the senses by referring them to its own mind, or to personal

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<sup>1</sup> Swedenborg, *Journal of Dreams*, # 276.

<sup>2</sup> Swedenborg signed his copy of *True Christianity*, his last published work, Emanuel Swedenborg, *Servant of the Lord Jesus Christ*.

awareness and perception; a being to assess with the faculty of intellect the beauty arising from all these harmonies; then to feel joy from such beauty; from this joy as it proceeded from its true origin, to form conclusions concerning goodness; and finally from this goodness to understand the nature of blessedness. There was missing, I say, that child of earth—a mind in human form that could look upon the paradise of heaven from the paradise of Earth, and from heaven in turn upon the earthly paradise, and thus with a kind of inner vision embrace and measure both simultaneously; who would know pleasure itself to the full at the two realms joined as one; who would then, from a genuine source of gladness and love, venerate and worship foremost the Giver and Creator of all things.

There was nothing, not even the lowliest thing, from which some resemblance of Divinity did not emanate; and so everything yearned to offer itself for the enjoyment of a being who knew how to offer undying thanks to that Divinity on its own behalf and on behalf of every single thing.<sup>3</sup>

This realization came to Emanuel Swedenborg as the fruit of his struggle for faith. In his struggle, through the grace of the Lord, his self-love and his love of domination, were unmasked in dream after dream. In this process their dreadful and poisonous reality were made apparent. Then in prayer and in humble supplication, Swedenborg could truly ask, "Let thy will, not mine be done." Amen

## **Addendum**

Using Swedenborg as a guide in our struggle for faith, we should be willing to be open to seeing the obstacles in our way to faith, such as self-love, ambition, impatience, over intellectualization, or our inability to truly love others. These and countless other passions stand in our way. When we see them, we need to acknowledge them, and be willing to analyze them, as he did, and pray to let them go and give them over to the Lord. We can do this by reading the Lord's word and inviting him into our life, and seeking to establish an innocent relationship with him.

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<sup>3</sup> This passage was translated by Stuart Shotwell and is part of the new translation of *Worship and Love of God* to be published this year by the Swedenborg Foundation.