

A NEW SPIRITUALITY

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The Prince of Peace

Hundreds of years before the birth of Christ, the prophet Isaiah prophesied these words: "For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given, and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace. This indicates that a baby would be born who would be God manifested in human form. Why did God become a man? It was to rescue fallen mankind and put us back on the right track. God had to accommodate himself to our level in order to accomplish this. God chose not to approach human evil directly. If he did, it would be like the sun approaching the earth in order to "cleansing" it. The "cleansing" would utterly destroy the earth. In the same way, if God came to us pure, as he is in himself, in order to cleanse us of our evils, he would destroy us in the process. It would be like encountering the sun by flying directly into it: we would be instantly vaporised! So God had to come to us in an "accommodated" form - a form in which he could approach us finite human beings, approach the evil that had accumulated within and among us, fight against it, and conquer it without destroying us in the process. He did this by taking on a finite, fallible human nature from Mary that could be tempted. When the influences of hell attacked him he was able to overcome them by the power available to him through his Divine soul. In this way he subdued the hells and restored freedom to the world, enabling us to choose good over evil. We draw on God's strength to counteract the evil tendencies within us which would cause us to do harm. This is the example Jesus set for us to follow. It is the only way we can become more loving and understanding and the world be restored to peace.



The Divine order is that man should set himself in order for the reception of God and prepare himself to be a receptacle and abode into which God may enter.

EMANUEL SWEDENBORG



Mysterious Gifts Unwrapped

By David Roth

In the Christmas story we see the integrity of Joseph, the innocence of Mary, the responsiveness of the shepherds, and the perseverance of the wise men. We hear the words of the angels to the shepherds, "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, good will toward men."

Personally we may be thinking, "When will I have the integrity, willingness, perseverance, responsiveness and peace described here?" The answer is when we take aim and set foot on the journey - the most important journey of our existence, our spiritual journey. The Word of God is all about journeys - and ultimately it teaches us about our inner journey from self-centredness and negative attitudes to possessing positive qualities from the Lord.

One specific journey in the Word is the wise men's journey to visit the infant Messiah. A common question we may have about this journey is, "Why did they bring such unusual gifts? What use did these gifts have to the Lord as a baby?"

The wise men presented the baby with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh for a reason. Symbolically, these treasures picture what we must offer to the Lord in order to attain spiritual life. The meanings of

these gifts are described in the Writings of Swedenborg.

Gold symbolises love, or the commitment in our hearts to love the Lord. Loving the Lord means to love others and to approach them with kindness, compassion, hope for their happiness and a desire to contribute to that happiness.

Frankincense symbolises devoting our thoughts to the Lord, only entertaining thoughts that would be in sync with the attitudes pictured by our gold offering.

The final gift, myrrh, symbolises doing what the Word teaches. It is about our conduct - the way we live. Gifts of only gold and frankincense are not enough. Good intentions and good feelings are nothing if we do not attempt to manifest them in our outward life.

Each of us is on a journey. It is important to know that the Lord is with us on our journey, working to inspire us and lead us to lasting happiness. The more we can offer him our love, our thoughts, and our life, the better he can lead us to fulfillment and joy.

(New Church Connection Magazine Dec. 2007)

The Coming of Love

By Bronwen Henry

The Lord's coming to earth was an action of love. He came to earth with a message of hope, love and forgiveness. What is most special about Christmas time is that we remember to focus on the Lord, to give thanks for his many blessings and to express our gratitude that he is present in our lives.

In Isaiah 40:3 it says, "Prepare a way for the Lord," and in the gospels we are reminded of this prophecy. I believe that as we prepare the way for the Lord in our lives, he prepares the way for us to experience heaven on earth.

The Lord wants each one of us to be connected to him and to have a positive relationship with him and with others. It doesn't always feel easy to have a healthy relationship with God or the other people in our lives. In hard times, I think of a quote from Marianne Williamson that says, "Whatever isn't love is actually a call for love." The Lord is calling each of us to show love, forgiveness and hope to our neighbours, both locally and globally.

Christmas is a time to celebrate the Lord's presence in our lives. It is also a time to strive to increase the experience of his presence on this earth. Choose an action you can take today to share the hopeful message of Christmas - a message of love.

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Editorial

Peace on Earth

One of the most popular Christmas songs played on the radio and in shopping malls every Christmas is “Snoopy’s Christmas.” Set in the First World War, it is about how Snoopy and his foe, the Red Baron, make peace for a day because it is Christmas. Aside from the very catchy tune, the strong appeal of this song is the story - of how two enemies put aside their conflict and extend the hand of friendship for the sake of peace on earth, the message of the Christmas bells in the village below: “Christmas bells, those Christmas bells, ring out from the land, asking peace of all the world and goodwill to man.”

Did you know that the theme of this song is based on fact? You’ll be interested to read in Leah Goodwin’s article, “When Grace Comes In” (page 4), that a similar scenario actually played out in the trenches of the First World War. What this demonstrates is that, when we put our minds to it, we human beings are capable of choosing good over evil. When we decide to turn away from negativity, God can flow into us with goodness. The power to do good comes from the Divine. Actually, it is the Divine working through us and by means of us.

The Christmas story happened long ago but it can also happen within our lives over and over. The Lord is born in the darkest night at the darkest time in the history of the world. He is born in a lowly stable because there is no room in the inn. Are our minds too crowded with the cares of the world, conflicts with our loved ones, the drive to get ahead, etc., etc. to give this babe a thought or are we making room for the Divine Child to be born in our hearts this Christmas? We can each do our bit for peace on earth if we ask God’s help to remove a negative tendency that we have so that he can flow in with what is good. But we don’t have to wait until Christmas to do this. We can cultivate peace all year round.

Jenny



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When Grace Comes In

By Leah Goodwin

December, 1914. The first Christmas of World War I. Trench warfare is the order of the day. The European countryside is slashed by thousands of miles of trenches - parallel lines of flooded, frozen, muddy pits in which German and English soldiers huddle and make a home for themselves. The no-man's-land in between is, in some places, only a few yards wide. The enemies can hear each other slosh, curse, cough. A bizarre sort of intimacy pervades the nightmare. One English soldier wrote, looking back, "We used to shout remarks to each other, sometimes rude ones, but generally with less venom than a couple of London cabbies after a minor collision." The war has come screaming to a halt; neither side can advance, and no one is about to retreat.

And, warfare or no, it is Christmas. As the holiday approaches, the Germans decorate a few scrawny bushes with candles and perch them atop their sandbag parapets. Gradually, a few bold soldiers on both sides poke their heads above their bulwarks, then stand up shakily, and show themselves to be unarmed. In various places up and down the lines, enemy soldiers begin to approach each other, and unofficial cease-fires are agreed to.

The soldiers celebrate together. They sing carols together. They exchange souvenirs and favorite foods: canned beef and ham for chocolate and sausage; rum for schnapps. They pledge to each other's health. And in one place, they bury their dead together. An English second lieutenant recalled that "the prayers were read first in English by our padre, and then in German by a boy who was studying for the ministry. The Germans formed up on one side, the English on the

other, the officers standing in front, every head bared. I think it is a sight one will never see again. There was not an atom of hate on either side that day." ("Christmastime 1914: Soldiers Paused War for a Day of No Hate," by Cynthia Crossan. *The Wall Street Journal*, December 4, 2002.)

War puts no stock in grace. It is the last place we look for God. And yet grace comes in anyway. It enters in the form of a shabby little bush lit with candles, teetering in the wind on top of a machine gun mount. And it shines forth in the foolhardiness of soldiers who make themselves vulnerable, who stand terrified, unarmed, unsure whether they will be shot . . . or met as friends.

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Joy leaps forth, I believe, because those soldiers have made themselves vulnerable to grace. All this talk of grace! What, you may ask, is grace? Swedenborg

doesn't talk much about it - at least not in so many words. What he does talk about quite frequently is "divine influx," and a part of the self that he calls "the inmost." Swedenborg tells us that each person is formed of layers, moving from our most inward, heavenly part to our most outward, natural, earthly part. He says: Each individual has a central or highest plane of life into which God's Divine flows first and directly. From this point of entry, the Divine organises all the other inner processes of both the spiritual and the physical person. . . . This central or highest level is God's gateway to us, and his true home within us. This is what makes us human. This is why we can rise up inwardly, can be lifted in mind and spirit by God to himself. It is why we can believe in him, be moved by love for him, receive intelligence and wisdom.

When we let the Creator arrange the surrounding things in ourselves so that they are responsive to the inmost ones, then we are in a state in which we can be accepted into heaven; and then the inmost, the relatively outward, and the outward aspects of our being act as one.

The Writings of Swedenborg point out that the inmost is the deepest, most eternal part of our soul. No matter what we may confront or how we may behave, this inmost remains intact, undisturbed, undefiled. It is a precious inner world: God's palace within us. God's essence can flow forth from this jewelled center, and nothing - not even the powers of hell - can destroy it.

It is when we allow God to flow forth from this inmost, perfect core of being, when we allow him to arrange every layer of our self as its reflection and make heaven within ourselves . . . it is then that we know grace.

Such a beautiful image. I confess that I am still surprised when I find such obvious tenderness in the writings of a scientist. But this idea challenges us. And the stakes are very, very high. In order to let God come forth from the center of our soul by unlocking the gates to this inner palace and letting his divine love rule us, we have to step back. We must be willing to question the worthiness in all that we know and love of ourselves. To be heavenly, to know grace, we have to give up the reins to God.

We do not live in a world that values vulnerability. To most of us, vulnerability has come to mean weakness. Every one of us, I would guess, has been in a situation in which someone had to back down - and no one ever wants it to be himself. Corporately and individually, we hunger for power, for money, for attention - anything to keep us on top. We want to determine the course

of life's events for good or for ill - just as long as we can be the one who calls the shots. We have all, at some point, conducted "trench warfare" of a sort during a disagreement with another person. Lines are drawn, our mental forces are hunkered down, and no one is willing to stand on the bulwark, in the line of fire, unarmed. No individual wants to be vulnerable, because in doing so, we might lose ourselves.

God, being divine love and wisdom, has only our best interests at heart, and desires only to strip away what is false from our souls, and arrange the truest and best parts in heavenly order. But we, as humans, are firmly convinced that we are our own best creators. To believe that surrendering ourselves to anyone could strengthen us

rather than undermine us, that it could make us *more* ourselves rather than less, looks like a ridiculous leap of faith. And yet, it is a leap of faith that the Creator calls us to make. If only we let God make a home in us, if only we

let him radiate his light from the center of our souls, heaven will always prevail. After all, if soldiers can stand unarmed amidst the trenches and receive grace, if heaven can surface in the hell that is war, then we can welcome the Creator within ourselves.

Only when we have courage to surrender to grace, to welcome the Divine within us, only then can we be reborn for heaven as our true selves. Only then do we truly live the Incarnation. If we allow ourselves to live from our inmost, if we walk the terrain of our own inner heaven, we will find that, as Joan Sauro puts it in her book *Whole Earth Meditation*, "God has been there before us. God's name is written on every layer. Go to the place called barren. Stand in the place called empty. And you will find God there."

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What Child is This?

By Lee Woofenden

What child is this? asks the beautiful old Christmas carol. "What child is this, who, laid to rest, on Mary's lap is sleeping?" A simple, tender domestic scene - one that has been repeated by the billions in thousands of cultures throughout the world, and throughout human history. A newborn baby lies sleeping in a mother's lap.

That is a miracle in itself. No matter how much we study it, we still don't know just how it happens. And no matter how many times it happens, the fact that this incredibly complex biological, psychological, and spiritual being has come into existence is so mind-boggling that the safest thing for us to do is just not to think about it too much. Every new birth, every new human being, is a work of science and art far, far more advanced than the human mind has even been able to conceive, let alone create. If we think about it too much, our minds may be in danger of expanding beyond any reasonable boundaries, and coming face to face with the infinite Creator, whose work of science, art, and spirit each one of us is.

What child is this? Is this truly a child who brings us face to face with our Creator? Is this truly a child in whom the Infinite One has come to meet us and dwell among us?

If it is dangerous to our mental complacency to think too much about the birth of a human child, what about allowing ourselves to consider the possibility of a *divine* birth? How risky might that be? Our culture has made Christmas its biggest holiday, and gives lip service to Jesus Christ, for whom the holiday is named. But to teach that the birth of Jesus Christ was a *spiritual* event, a divine entrance into our world - that is forbidden in our schools, in our government, and for the most part, in the commercial and corporate world as well, where Santa wins out over Jesus hands down.

Why? Of course, one reason is that not everyone in our culture is Christian. But there is a deeper reason: it is *dangerous* to the values of our culture, our government, our corporate world to contemplate too deeply the birth that took place two thousand years ago. In a society and a world that values power and money above all, it is dangerous to consider that there may be something far more powerful than any human power, and far more valuable than all human wealth. It is dangerous because it calls into question the very foundations of this world's values.

And it is dangerous to each one of us because recognizing - truly letting it sink into our hearts, our minds, our souls - that our Creator may have visited us two thousand years ago calls into question our own fundamental values. It makes us evaluate our beliefs, our loves, our goals, our lives.

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It is far safer to treat Christmas as a secular holiday; to put out of our mind any possibility of a miraculous divine entrance into

our world. Then we can have our holiday celebrations, and continue on afterwards as if nothing more has happened than a big festival, a big family gathering, a big exchange of gifts and good will among our family and friends. And all of these are *good* for us to enjoy. Even the shadow of Christmas that is our society's secular celebration of the event brings its own blessings and renewals to a tired world.

Yet through it all, the Gospels continue to pull us back to that dangerous question, "What child is this?"

"What child is this, who, laid to rest, on Mary's lap is sleeping? Whom angels greet with anthems sweet, while shepherds watch are keeping?" What child is this that the angels heralded, prompting those shepherds to come visit a newborn in a stable? What child is this whose birth prompted wise men to travel from a distant land to offer him costly gifts symbolic of a great king's birth?

What child is this whose birth was originally celebrated by both the simple and the wise, and is still celebrated two thousand years later by people of all types and all races? What child is this whose birth is now celebrated by millions, even billions, compared to the few dozen people who were even aware of it long ago when it actually happened?

A human birth is miracle enough. Yet this was no ordinary human birth. This was a birth that so changed the course of human history - especially human *spiritual* history - that it became the turning point of the calendar that is now used almost universally throughout the world. This is a birth that instead of fading into the mists of time, has become more and more powerful as the centuries have gone by. This is a birth that no human being could have achieved. This is a *divine* birth.

What child is this? Even Christians have debated this question ever since Jesus Christ came among us. Complex doctrinal systems and vast ecclesiastical bodies have been built around particular answers to the question, "What child is this?" The religious debates have raged for centuries: Was he divine or human? Was he the son of Mary or the Son of God? And was he the Son of God, or was he God himself?

The answer given in the Writings of Swedenborg is "All of the above." Jesus Christ was divine *and* human. He was the son of Mary *and* the Son of God. And he was and is God himself. Jesus Christ was and is God himself, Jehovah from eternity, come to earth in human form, as "the Babe, the son of Mary." He was

God himself, who loved us so much that he came from his place of pure divine love and wisdom, of infinite warmth and light at the centre of the universe, and travelled all the way down through the spheres of heaven and earth to visit us here at the cold, dark fringes of Creation.


He was the Divine Being, the Creator of the Universe, who had such yearning compassion for his creatures that he could not leave us to suffer in our human darkness and cold. From his infinite mercy, he came among us, became as human as one of us, was born from a simple, humble human mother into a life of poverty at the lowest, darkest, and most violent point in human history.

This is the Child whose birth we celebrate. This is the Child whose message - whose very presence - challenges everything this world stands for, down to its very foundations. This is the Child who, if we allow him into our mind, into our heart, into our soul, will completely transform us, turning all our old values on their head, and making us a new person inside and out.

This is the *dangerous* child whom the world and its governments must eliminate, but who triumphed and continues to triumph over all of them, and who is still fighting the battle for each one of us, and for all the nations and peoples of the world. This is the Wonderful Counsellor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.

'And they will name him Emmanuel, which means "God with us."'



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