

“Eating From the Tree of Life”

San Jose Convention Sermon – Closing Worship Service
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Scripture

Revelation 21:1-5, 10-14, 22-25; 22:1-2

Insight for Worship

Revelation Revealed n. 933 by Emanuel Swedenborg

The Tree of Life in the Midst of the City

"And on this side of the river and on that was the Tree of Life, bearing twelve [manner of] fruits, yielding its fruit every month: and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations." (Rev. xxii. 2). This signifies that in the inmost of the truths of doctrine and thence of life in the New Church is the Lord in His Divine Love, from whom flow all the goods that humanity does apparently as of ourselves. "In the midst," signifies in the inmost and thence in all things around by the street the truth of the doctrine of the church is signified; by a river is signified Divine truth in abundance. By the Tree of "Life" the Lord as to the Divine Love is signified; by fruits are signified the goods of love and charity, which are called good works; by twelve all are signified, and it is predicated of the goods and truths of the church.

I remember the first few times as a young teenager when I heard references to the *Book of Revelation*. I overheard some schoolmates of mine talking about a sermon they had heard in church over the weekend, and what I heard left me feeling chilled to the bone. They were talking about the "end times," when Jesus would suddenly appear on the literal clouds in the sky after a huge trumpet blast, and then all sorts of horrifying calamities would unfold, such as the world being destroyed by fire and earthquakes, before the righteous were taken up into heaven on some divine escalator while the evil and the unbelievers were left on Earth to suffer God's wrath.

At that point, at the age of thirteen, I wasn't sure whether or not I believed in a benevolent Super Being who had allowed thousands of years of brutality, war, bigotry and pain to happen throughout human history. I wasn't exactly sure whether or not God truly existed. I was essentially like "doubting Thomas," who said not long after Christ's crucifixion: "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe." (John 20:25) One thing I was sure about was that the kind of God my schoolmates were talking about would never be one I'd want to worship and follow. For them it somehow made sense, but for me believing in God in three Persons and that salvation centers on faith alone, leaving love, good works and compassion out of it left me feeling uninspired inside. Then I decided to read *Revelation* for myself, a bit at a time, and I discovered that on the literal level it comes across like *The Chronicles of Narnia* meets *Star Wars*! It's

loaded with fantastic imagery and plenty of serious battles. Yet even in its literal level we find some of the more poignant verses in all of Scripture. For example, we find Christ saying, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with Me. ²¹He who overcomes, I will grant to him to sit down with Me on My throne...." (Rev. 3:20-22) As I read these words over and over, I began to feel a sublime, warm, loving Voice tugging at the inner recesses of my mind. I also read that the Lord's angel said to the church at Laodicea: "I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! ¹⁶So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth." (Rev. 3:15-16) I then had this image of God spitting out lukewarm Christians from His mouth like chewing tobacco.

Further on into *Revelation* I found this eye-opening quote: "And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books." (Rev. 20:12)

As a youth I felt a deep impact by these words, because they expressed to me that the quality of my life truly matters, that God cares a lot about what we do in life. and that my eternal destiny doesn't rest on something as flimsy as whether or not I stated that Christ died for my sins, but rather on *my choices in life*. By the age of fourteen and fifteen, my spiritually oriented questions about life really began growing inside of my heart and mind. I knew that I was as mortal as anyone else, and that one day, like my Grandpa Rollo Billings, I too would at some point step through death's doorway! I also was asking the question: "What is Love? And does it have much to do with the afterlife?"

As a boy I was enamored with Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood. I enjoyed the sweet make-believe as that darling little trolley would disappear inside its tunnel and emerge on the other side in a magical world where puppet kings spoke, as well as little Daniel the striped tiger and Mr. Owl, who often had wise things to say. But what always grabbed me the most was the deep warmth, goodness and desire Mr. Rogers had to truly relate and connect with others. His lovingkindness shined forth by how he communicated with the special guests he had on his show. I also loved the way that Fred Rogers cared about wanting to help me and all of his viewers with our difficult feelings and struggles as children. He spoke about how important it is to be real about our hurts and our anger, and that even though tough times happen, there are people who care about each other, which helps us get through those tough times, and learn from them.

The warmth and goodness of Mr. Rogers left a lasting impression on me, and because both of my parents also valued being loving and useful in life, I knew that there was something very precious and real in life, which made life worth living---but I couldn't put my finger on it, just what that rare, hidden, magical gem of truth might be?

So, I began at the age of fifteen to start asking my parents and my Grandma Gwen Billings (who was living with my family for a couple of years) some big questions. I remember

having some long, in-depth conversations with each one of them---and then, curiously enough, one day I heard my dad (John Billings) refer to the *Book of Revelation* as the “Charter Book” for our denomination. And I thought to myself, “What?! *That strange, bizarre book?* You’re kidding?! What the heck is up with that?” I wondered.

I looked up the definition of the word, “**charter**,” which is: it is a written document that defines the vision, mission, scope of operation and the objectives of the group it relates to. And so, now my curiosity was deeply peaked! My parents then kindly shared their understanding of what makes our church so dynamically unique: they discussed how most of biblical Scripture contains within it a deeper meaning contained within the literal level, which my dad called the “inner sense.” He shared with me about the deeper meaning of the scrolls and the seven seals in *Revelation*, which were opened by the Lamb of God, our Risen-Glorified Lord Jesus Christ, during His cosmic Second Coming in the late 1700s, which shines out into our understanding this amazing inner meaning, which speaks to our personal journeys of life.

Over the next several weeks we slowly began to unpack the *Book of Revelation* in its inner meaning, and then it all began to make sense for me....it was beautiful...and glorious! Rather than being shrouded in doubts and confusion, I actually began to feel like I was understanding something powerful and good in this book. In one sense I felt more and more humbled inside, because my dad taught me that when we look at the entire Bible story from start to finish, it’s partially saying that the sometimes small and sometimes big and painful inner battles we all go through in life will likely last into our old age here on Earth. *Revelation*, as we know, is the last book in the Bible. The word “revelation” means revealing, uncovering or disclosing to us. In its inner meaning it reveals that if we freely choose to cooperate and grow throughout life, taking seriously our own need for repentance and reformation, we then allow the Lord to regenerate us in His Love, which leads us into real, personal faith inside.

And it is this **DEEP, PERSONAL, REGENERATING, MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE** of the Lord’s great Divine-Human Love for all that *is the living “Tree of Life.”* Eating its fruit is simply personally receiving God’s Love within, and then using it toward what is good and true in our daily lives.

And so, in my own personal way, God became more and more real, as those words in *Revelation 3* actually came alive---believing that Christ really is knocking on the doorway of my heart and mind and would love to come in and dine with me—that is, to personally relate and dialogue with me as meaningful truths are unveiled for my life. Eventually I began to encounter the awesome truth of the gigantic battles and struggles in this strange vision that John had fifty years after Jesus rose from His grave on Easter morning.

I began reflecting about the key antagonists (or foes) within the *Revelation* storyline, such as the “**great red dragon,**” who took position facing the beautiful woman clothed with the Sun, ready to gobble up and devour her newborn baby boy. Such dragons can symbolize those desires within us to think that our knowledge alone of spiritual ideas, looking at Scripture and life in more shallow ways, is fine and dandy---and that it’s not necessary for me to join warm compassion with genuine faith inside. Swedenborg states that this big 7-headed dragon represents anyone wanting to be saved by faith alone. In *Marriage Love 28* Swedenborg shared that the great Dragon can signify those who hear God’s Word and feel no remorse or problem with their evils and bad ways of treating others. Also, that such great, red dragons can symbolize my false rationalizations in my mind that try to fight against the truths of the Lord’s New Church. It symbolizes more shallow forms of thinking when we busy ourselves to try to extinguish the doctrines of the Lord’s New Church, which have an amazing ability to develop many new, very innocent thoughts and perceptions inside leading me into living out the truths and values I hold dear to my heart, symbolized by that baby boy being born!

Like all people, my father has his own issues, struggles and growth edges—well, God knows I have mine too. But one of his greatest strengths is being able to explain New Church ideas and theology in ways that make sense. And so, we talked a lot about how difficult and painful some of our spiritual battles are inside at times---but also, I learned that our theology teaches that when life feels things are at their worst, when we feel like we’re about to crumble and give in to inner temptations, it’s at these times when the Lord is actually closest to us and fighting for us! And also, that just as we find over and over again throughout God’s Word, that if we are willing to surrender ourselves into the Lord’s hands (and try to open up and trust that the battle is actually being fought by the Lord and His angels, symbolized by the Archangel Michael fighting the beasts), then the Divine One will always deliver us into victory!

This was the time as a teenager when I first began to grasp the meaning of the Lord’s message to us all, that “**Those who are victorious will inherit all this, and (the Lord says) I will be their God and they will be my children.**” Over and over again in *Revelation* I found that although the battles are massive and intense, still our inner foes are no match for God. I then came across another major force of opposition in the *Revelation* vision given to John, which was also a recurring enemy to the Israelites long ago---**BABYLON**. Babylon, I learned, stands for all those desires within me that long to control and dominate others, even God, if such passions are not recognized, judged for what they are and shunned, giving way to immense images of hope and promise, after one chooses to confront and overcome Babylon with God’s help.

Ever since my amazing and very poignant teenage years, I have continued returning to the *Book of Revelation*. And more and more I've come to perceive that like any other part of God's Holy Word, [it is a story for us and about us](#). And with the awesome gift of the "scrolls of Scripture" opened up revealing illuminating Light, I've come to perceive that *Revelation* is very much like a mirror reflecting what's happening throughout my life in my spiritual development. As my mother shared with me recently in one of many phone calls we've enjoyed lately, she said, "Every day is a spiritual battle for me. It's a tussle between my will and God's will." To which I shared with her, "It's a struggle between my unregenerate proprium (or sense of self) and the newly forming angelic proprium trying to grow up and stand up inside."

Most interestingly, *Revelation* is a mirror revealing the Lord's judgment upon the actual spiritual disorders within me, that is, the condition of the church inside of *me!* This is God at her best, not holding back about the weaknesses that get in the way of much deeper, more internal spiritual strengths coming alive----which is the New Jerusalem descending inside of my heart and mind and life *TODAY!* What means so much to me, now that I am at the midpoint of my life, is that *Revelation* shows me that it is "par for the course" for all of us "fighting the good fight" inside to experience many very difficult battles inside. And for all of us willing "to suffer ourselves through regeneration," we're going to be blown away by how glorious, beautiful and deep God's Kingdom is, which continues to descend gradually inside of us, revealed to us by the inner meaning of our charter book.

I can say for myself that one of my enduring spiritual challenges is that it's easy for me to diminish how gloriously good and present God's Kingdom truly is, which is being built day by day when I choose to shun evils as sins before God and live according to Divine Commandments. For when we choose to cooperate with the Lord and His great promise to build His New (and genuine) Church within us, the absolutely gorgeous Holy City pictured in this vision is what the Lord is making come alive inside! And when even a very small part of us starts to believe in the promise of the New Jerusalem descending gradually within, when we value **GOD'S LOVE BECOMING CENTRAL** inside our hearts and minds, becoming vulnerable to God's Love cherishing me and everyone else too, the Lamb of God starts to shine inside, giving its Light both day and night!

Then "the inmost of the truths of doctrine and thence of life in the New Church is the Lord in His Divine Love, from whom flow all the goods that humanity does apparently as of ourselves." And so, the Lord in His saving Love becomes personal, and as we live according to the ways love-and-faith joined in charity and growing here and now, we are eating from the Tree of Life! For me, it's sort of like the quality of Mr. Rogers coming alive in my life---and the simple yet immense value of every human being becomes more important to me than eating

my favorite foods or being sure to have time for playing my favorite video game. So, too, does wanting to serve the Lord's New Church and her great mission, revealed by the Holy City (the beautiful doctrines) of genuine Christianity, given to us in the literal and inner meaning of the Ten Commandments, as well as the joining of love, faith and justice for all.

And when I engage personally and vulnerably with the unveiling of the descending New Jerusalem happening spiritually for all striving to live according to the best they know, this healing vision and promise of the Lord's New Jerusalem descending cosmically for all feeds me with one of my most cherished gifts from God: **HOPE**. Yes, never-ending and lyrical hope inside! When I was a young teenager plagued with cynicism, doubt and despair, believe me when I say that as interior feelings of HOPE began hatching like baby birds bobbing up and down in a Robin's nest, I began feeling passionately driven inside to want to *sing out with joy* about simply being alive. Indeed, my friends, the Lord had begun saving my life from the pit, and His work within me continues to this day. Perhaps Emily Dickenson said it best by her poem, "'Hope' Is The Thing With Feathers"...

"Hope" is the thing with feathers -
That perches in the soul -
And sings the tune without the words -
And never stops - at all.

May your own journey of God's unveiling, saving Love deep within your own life-experience bring you lasting healing too!

Amen

Revelation 21:1-5, 10-14, 22-25; 22:1-2

A New Heaven and a New Earth

21 Then I saw “a new heaven and a new earth,” for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. ² I saw the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and He will dwell with them. They will be His people, and God Himself will be with them and be their God. ⁴ ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”

⁵ He who was seated on the throne said, “Behold, I am making everything new!” Then he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.”

¹⁰ And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of Heaven from God. ¹¹ It shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal. ¹² It had a great, high wall with twelve gates, and with twelve angels at the gates. On the gates were written the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. ¹³ There were three gates on the east, three on the north, three on the south and three on the west. ¹⁴ The wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.

²² I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. ²³ The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. ²⁴ The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it. ²⁵ On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there.

22 Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb ² down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the Tree of Life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.