

# “Perceiving the Spiritual in Contrasts”

LaPorte New Church Swedenborgian

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## Scriptures

Exodus 13:17-22

2 Corinthians 4:6-12

## Hymns/Songs

“Only In God”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ctZtjEtlXw>

“Let Us Break Bread Together” 265

“Take Time to Be Holy” 656

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WblkcQYxdp8>

## **Exodus 13:17-22**

### ***Pillars of Cloud and Fire***

<sup>17</sup> When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near. For God said, “Lest the people change their minds when they see war and return to Egypt.” <sup>18</sup> But God led the people around by the way of the wilderness toward the Red Sea. And the people of Israel went up out of the land of Egypt equipped for battle. <sup>19</sup> Moses took the bones of Joseph with him, for Joseph had made the sons of Israel solemnly swear, saying, “God will surely visit you, and you shall carry up my bones with you from here.” <sup>20</sup> And they moved on from Succoth and encamped at Etham, on the edge of the wilderness. <sup>21</sup> And the LORD went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them along the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, that they might travel by day and by night. <sup>22</sup> The pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night did not depart from before the people.

## **2 Corinthians 4:6-12**

<sup>6</sup> For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

### ***Treasure In Jars of Clay***

<sup>7</sup> But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. <sup>8</sup> We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; <sup>9</sup> persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; <sup>10</sup> always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. <sup>11</sup> For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. <sup>12</sup> So death is at work in us, [but His life is working in you too.](#)

**MAY THE GOOD LORD BLESS YOUR HEARING, YOUR**

## **UNDERSTANDING AND YOUR LIVING OF HIS HOLY WORD. AMEN**

### **Insights for Worship**

*Secrets of Heaven* n. 5962.2 by Emanuel Swedenborg

“It is part of God’s divine design that things proceed from beginning to end; this is both a pattern overall and a pattern in smaller increments within the overall pattern. This design allows for the variety of all things, and this variety allows there to be qualities of all kinds. The quality of anything is more perfectly assessed through its contrast to things that are somewhat its opposite and things that are very much its opposite. Darkness allows us to appreciate what a wonderful thing light is, and coldness allows us to appreciate what a wonderful thing heat is. Likewise (as everyone surely recognizes), falsity allows us to appreciate what a wonderful thing truth is, and evil allows us to appreciate what a wonderful thing goodness is. What would color be if only white existed, and black did not? The quality of the other colors would be poorer if there were no way to darken them.”

### **SERMON: “Perceiving the Spiritual in Contrasts”**

~By Rev. Kit B. Billings

Have you ever felt stunned or in awe of the reality that inside of your own heart and mind there can be many contrasting or opposing forces at work? For example, on one morning you might wake up feeling hopeful and happy about the new day ahead of you. But then, on another morning of the week you can awaken in the opposite frame of mind, feeling forlorn about the day now before you. So many things in nature give us compelling opposites or contrasts as well. Some days are full of warm, golden light with a variety of very beautiful things happening around us. And then, as we experienced this past week, a massive storm may be brewing, with thick, dark clouds overhead, harsh winds blowing and rain coming down in sheets—indeed, the polar opposite of that other day we loved so well.

The theme of contrasts or opposites runs strong throughout God’s Word. One example in the Old Testament is found in our scripture lesson in *Exodus* this morning. Once the Hebrews were led out of slavery in Egypt, our Divine Lord chose to lead them not in just one form, but in two. At night God led them in the form of a huge pillar of fire, and during the daytime He led them as a large pillar of smoke! The Lord did so while leading them southward out of Egypt, through the desert toward Mt. Sinai. **Isn’t it interesting that God led them by means of contrasting forms?**

There was a lot of wisdom on God’s part back then, and a wisdom that is still operating in our lives today—given that we are modern day spiritual travelers, on our way often through the desert toward our own “Promised Land.”

So perhaps there is some deep-down spiritual usefulness in the fact that we are regularly being exposed to contrasts and opposites? Such as when we encounter families that are generally strong and healthy...full of love and compassion...as well as

others that are weak and dysfunctional? Does God intend for the shadows and despair to happen? No, He does not. But, maybe through it all the Lord is helping us to gain greater understanding of things like freedom, faithfulness, and the blessings of education and compassion, of choosing to fill our lives with usefulness each day. Perhaps God's infinite and Divine wisdom is providentially making serious use of humanity's errors and sin, and also of our own evils and shortsightedness, and that the existence of these contrasts are helping us to learn crucial lessons in life.

As we reflect together this morning about how contrasts and opposites help us to clarify how immensely wonderful the heavenly road is in life, perhaps you've heard the one about the pastor who boarded an airplane to take the first flight he had ever flown. As they were about to take off, the flight attendant noticed his clerical garb and also his panicky look and his white knuckles as he gripped his seat in terror. She walked over to the pastor and said, "Sir, I'm surprised at you. You are obviously a man of faith—you shouldn't be so nervous about flying. Don't you have any faith in God? The cleric looked at her and said, "Look, young lady, the promise of Scripture is, 'Lo, I am with you always.' It doesn't say anything about 'High, I am with you too.'"

Highs and lows, we all encounter them often, don't we?

Paul in his second letter to the early Christian Church at Corinth draws heavily upon the usage of contrasts and opposites to help his friends understand the Lord's saving work within us. He wrote that God's Light is shining out through darkness, and that the Lord's saving Light is beaming into and through your heart every day. He used the contrast of the Divine's infinite Spirit living within earthen jars of clay, an apt symbol Paul employed to describe our finite human bodies and spirit in contrast to God's. Using this powerful, stark contrast, he then raises their attention to the truth that the sole power of our salvation, which energizes our wills to love and serve God's purposes in life is flowing into us from God. And then Paul explained how the opposites of the Lord's natural death and His Divine spiritual power of resurrection are both present in us too—magnifying the enormity of our powers to choose.

For there is a pathway that leads us into spiritual deadness, which we call Hell and cruel self-centeredness, and another pathway leading us into spiritual aliveness, which we call Heaven. Isn't that an amazing usage of contrasting realities—talking about both death and life in the same sentences?

Emanuel Swedenborg learned that normal human spiritual growth patterns **will bring us into contact** with inner states called **desolation** and **despair**. In his work titled *Heavenly Secrets* we read in paragraph 6144:

"...the famine overwhelmed them' means because the desolation reached the point of despair. When it is said to 'overwhelm' them, it is despair ... for the final stage of desolation is despair. Through despair people are led in an effective and perceptible way to acknowledge that nothing true or good comes

from themselves, and to acknowledge that what is their own has caused them to feel as though they were damned, but that with the Lord's aid they are delivered from damnation, with salvation entering in through what is true and good.

“Despair also exists to the end that life's bliss which the Lord imparts may be felt and felt more keenly deep within; for when people come out of that state of despair they are like those who have been condemned to death but then are freed from prison. Periods of desolation and temptation also serve as the means by which people gain an insight into states of being contrary to heavenly life, and from them are given a perception and insight into the bliss and happiness of heavenly life. For a perception into bliss and happiness comes in no other way than from a **contrast with their opposites.**”

It is important for us to understand and appreciate how the Lord is wisely at work in our lives, and to be reminded of how God makes tremendous use of contrasting states of being to help us make clearer choices toward what is good and true.

Martin Luther King, Jr., at the beginning of his career was arrested for no reason except his civil rights demonstrations were causing friction. He was released from jail but then received a bomb threat. He tried to think of a way out of his situation. He then wrote the following: “I got to the point that I couldn't take it anymore. I was weak.... And I discovered then that religion had to become real to me, and I had to know God for myself. I bowed down over a cup of coffee. I will never forget it. I prayed a prayer, and I prayed out loud that night. I said, ‘Lord, I'm down here trying to do what's right. I think I'm right. I think the cause that we represent is right. But Lord, I must confess that I'm weak now. I'm faltering. I'm losing my courage.’”

Martin Luther King, Jr. was in a pit of despair. And it seemed at that moment that he could hear an inner voice saying to him, “Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And lo I will be with you, even until the end of the age.” Martin Luther heard the voice of Christ saying still to fight on. Rather than laying down in fearful motionlessness, instead he heard the opposite or contrasting message of, “**Walk on, Martin, walk on! Always I will lead you forward into the Promised Land!**” He felt the Lord's promise never to leave him, never to leave him alone. Three days later a bomb shattered his front porch, but King took it calmly, saying: “**My religious experience a few nights before had given me the strength to face it,**” he wrote. And the great social reformer marched onward.

I want to close my message with you, by sharing an important spiritual message I received from God within my own heart and mind this past summer, while I was driving along the beautiful highways of western Michigan. It flowed gently into my mind while I looked upon the contrasting forces of light and darkness, as sunlight danced upon the shadowed leaves of the trees and upon the many ferns growing beneath them in the canopy of the forest-wild. And the message was: “**Kit, there will continue to be a mixture of light and dark filled days, of spiritual mornings and night times—of feelings of spiritual death and despair followed by resurrection and new life, of contrasting good and bad times for all. It is through the many contrasting ebbs and flows of life that will**

allow Me, your Lord, to deepen your appreciation for My Holy Presence and work in your life. And remember, after deep darkness will always come the glory of a new dawn!”

It is through our ongoing journeys of repentance, reformation and regeneration that we remain deeply rooted in our Savior. Amen.