

# A NEW SPIRITUALITY

No. 46 December 2014

*Advent*



*“In the beginning was the Word... and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” In this issue we look at how we can experience the spiritual practice of Advent. We also look at why the Lord came at the time that He did. May you find the time in this busy season to make room for some deeper reflection on the Advent stories and may hope, love, joy and peace surround you and yours as you share this time together.*

It is to be observed that the goodness of innocence is the very soul of heaven.

EMANUEL SWEDENBORG

# Christmas Eve Meditation

*Kevin Baxter*

Have you ever received a Christmas gift that you did not want, or that was just not quite what you had asked for, and then noticed that that gift turned out to be more useful and better than the other things you were given that year? For me, in recent history, it was a little pen knife that folded into a key. I got that present and thought to myself, "Great, a key knife," but I used that knife for years and was always thankful I had it when I needed it!

These moments are not limited to Christmas. A book can look unassuming, but it can change the way you view the world.

Even college, which certainly offers information, can seem ho-hum, but the lessons learned go beyond the classroom and can shift the way you approach things that are unrelated to the subjects you studied.

As we examine the readings about the Advent, we find that this shift occurred in many different ways around the birth of Christ.

Mary is given a child at a time that was not expected. I am sure that she and Joseph would have had children soon enough, but certainly not in the order that the events occurred. And yet, she comes to terms with her gift fairly quickly.

The people of that day, however, were looking for and expecting a saviour. They looked to the prophets and saw a military and political leader who would unseat the current government. In scripture, this is what the Wise Men were looking for; why else should the Roman government and the local authorities have responded as they did, with the Slaughter of the Innocents? They were looking for the child who would grow up to overthrow the government.

What if the Wise Men had said, "A person is going to come along who, after thirty-three

years, will be easily dealt with"? Would Herod have been as worried?

But the Lord, though not fulfilling the promises that people foresaw, transformed the world.

This is true in each of our lives as well, from simple gifts to events that transform us, especially when we are not aware of what is coming.

The gift we have been given by the Lord's life is not the gift we might think we want. It is not a gift of certainty or of the comforts of life. The gift we have been given is transcendence. The gift we are given is an awareness that the physical limitations of the flesh are not the sum total of reality.

**We are given the gift of a reality that lies behind the physical things of the world, a reality in which love rules**

Helen Keller said of Emanuel Swedenborg's writings, "They gave light to my darkness." A mere book opened her mind up to a new reality.

Each of us has the opportunity to see our lives and hearts opened to a new reality, a reality where the simplest, most unexpected thing can transform us. But we must be willing to engage. I could have simply thrown that knife away, but I didn't. I said, "Why not?" We can shelve a book, but why not read it? If we are open to the gifts we receive, we are actually open to the hearts of the people who give them. That is an example of the true reality that lies behind a gift.

We are given the gift of a reality that lies behind the physical things of the world, a reality in which love rules the day. But we have to be willing to listen, and be open.

As we approach the gifts we are given at this time of year and throughout the seasons, let us see them as opportunities to glimpse the love and goodness behind them, that they might transform our hearts and our lives.

# Simeon Sees Jesus

Karin Childs



“And behold, there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon, and this man was just and devout, waiting for the Consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Christ. So he came by the Spirit into the temple. And when the parents brought in the Child Jesus, to do for Him according to the custom of the law, he took Him up in his arms...”

The name Simeon means, “He has heard.” Though the Writings say nothing about the representation of this particular Simeon, they do talk about the Simeon in Genesis, the son of Jacob. Since names are significant, I feel that the spiritual attributes of the Genesis Simeon can be applied to the Luke Simeon. Simeon is about hearing, listening, obeying, acting from faith, wanting to live from truth. In the outermost level, he is about obeying. On a deeper level, he is about wanting to act from faith, to show love toward others. In the deepest sense, he is about Divine Providence, which sees the time and place that are perfect for every event.

Simeon lived in Jerusalem. He was “just and devout,” and comfortable around the temple. I picture him as a man who deeply loved his faith, and who had learned from it all his life. I picture him as a man who worked to live from his faith.

“And the Holy Spirit was upon him.” But Simeon was not by any means a man of faith alone. His heart was rich with love for God. He longed and waited for the coming of his God, “the Consolation of Israel.” His faith told him that God would come. And the Holy Spirit had told him in his heart that he would lay eyes on this Coming before he left this earth. He would lay eyes on “the Lord’s Christ,” the Truth or Form that comes from Divine Love, the presence of Jehovah in the humanity of everyday life.

Simeon listened to his heart. On that day, his heart told him, “Go to the temple!” Perhaps he had no idea why. But Simeon listened, and he obeyed his heart. Providence led him there. And there in the temple, he laid eyes on an infant, and he knew right away that he was gazing at the very thing he had been waiting for for so long. He knew for two reasons. One, from his faith he KNEW what it was he was waiting for, and two, he was willing to listen to his heart, to hear the voice of God telling him that it was time, and telling him where to go to see this wonder.

So, to tell an inner, personalised story of these verses:

I believe, Lord, that you will come to me. I pay attention and learn from my faith, trying to know what I am looking for when I look for you. I look for you to bring Consolation to my life—rescue and comfort and peace. Things sometimes seem desolate around me. But I feel that your spirit has been moving inside me, softly speaking. I work to obey my faith in you. Year after year, I wait. Sometimes it is hard to keep believing, and I feel my faith growing old. I know something must change soon, but I don’t know what the new way will be. Help me to keep listening. Help me to believe that you will tell me where and when to go, to find you. Deep inside, I sense you, telling me that this will happen before my aging faith completely dies.

And then, there is a feeling in my heart. “Go into the temple.” The temple. A sacred place of worship. True worship is living a life from you. “Your present faith will not die” you have told me, “until you see my face.” I am ready to lay down this aging faith that has served me so well. But I must see the hope, that there is something more, something new. I obey my heart.

I go where my heart leads me, a heart yearning for you, looking for you. I look into the sacredness of a life lived for you and all your children. And there is this beautiful Child. You are there for me in a way that is new and tender. I take you into my arms. You are in this place to fulfil the promise—the promise that you would come. I see that you are real. Your presence is small to begin with, and in need of care. But I see in the faces of the man and woman who brought you that you will be well cared for. These two are a new understanding and affection that will now come to me. They will nurture your presence so that it will grow. In time, there will be, not just obedience, but a real relationship with you—a friendship, a partnership, a love. I am happy. My aging faith has done its job. My Simeon kept on believing. And it is this aging faith that can tell this young couple, “This Child is more than you know! I have been waiting for him, so I recognise the Hope that he is. Now I can depart in peace, and you will carry on, learning as you go. Just remember to LISTEN to what he says. Listen with your ears, and your mind, and most importantly, with your heart.”

**Listen with  
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importantly,  
with your heart.**

## Preparing for Advent: Are you Ready? *Emily Jane Lemole*

This is about getting ready for Christmas—and what ready really means. When someone asks us if we're ready, what do we think that means? How do we respond? If the first thing that comes to mind is—do we have our house decorated, gifts bought or made, cards out and parties planned—then we need the spiritual practice of Advent.

If we are frazzled, worried and don't know how we'll ever get it all done—we need Advent. If we suspect we may be missing the whole reason for Christmas—we need Advent.

The distractions grow brighter and louder every year, and we find ourselves washed up on the shore of Christmas Day like a shipwrecked sailor gasping for breath.

**The Meaning of Advent:** Advent means coming or arrival. The Christian Church long ago set aside the four weeks before Christmas to prepare for Christ's coming. This is a time of anticipation and hope, peace and love, but it begins with repentance—or metanoia, which means to turn around, to make a change. It is a time for self-examination, and an honest assessment of our intentions, thoughts, words and actions.

An awakened spirit is necessary to create the symbolic stable in our minds and hearts for the Lord's birth. How else can we truly listen and hear God's voice when it is drowned out by the constant noise of our busyness and worries, as well as our justifications and excuses?

We need the spiritual practice of Advent! By spiritual practice is meant anything that will make religion of life—bring the abstract to the real. Spiritual practice brings deeply held beliefs to life. Concrete acts are fundamental to ultimate what we love, and give form to these thoughts and affections.

Many religious traditions abound with spiritual practices. Can we learn from disciplines that have for centuries helped people gain a spiritual focus and enlightenment, and apply them to our own lives in the light of the new revelation? It seems to me that Advent can be an essential one!

By observing practices like Advent and Lent—special time periods of preparation—might we better put God in the centre of our lives, not as an add-on at the end of a long day, a longer week, tucked into an incredibly busy schedule, or forgotten altogether? Spiritual practice reminds us so that we don't forget what is

important. In Advent we are reminded to slow down—reflect—and repent.

Practising Advent means we are actually going to *do* something to make way for the Lord. We examine our lives, read, meditate, pray and work on creating a clean, quiet, safe, wholesome heart for the Lord to enter. It's not enough just to know *about* Advent; like everything else—we must move from the menu to the meal—with practice it means we are going to *do* Advent.

**The Advent Wreath** is one way to celebrate this time and remember what our part is in preparing for Christmas. The Advent Wreath is a circle of four candles—three purple and one rose or pink—dressed with evergreens. On Christmas Day a white pillar candle is lit in the centre. It is called the Christ Candle.

The first candle is lit on the first Sunday of Advent and each Sunday thereafter an additional candle is lit. When the wreath is a part of a family or home practice, the youngest at the dinner table lights the first one and then the next oldest on up. When each candle is lit, Scripture or prayers are said.

The circle stands for the Lord's eternal love for us and all of His creation—as well as the circle of life. The evergreens symbolise life. The lit candles bring light into our darkness—the darkness of our world with its loneliness, violence and suffering, as well as our own dark night of the soul. The candlelight reflects Jesus Christ—our Light of the World, come to save us. The flickering candles remind us that we are called to be reflective lights for each other and the world. Let's burn brightly for one another!

**The First Candle: Hope** - *"My hope is in Thee."* (Psalm 39:7) The first candle represents our waiting with expectation and anticipation—our longing for the birth of Jesus in our lives. As former Czech President Vaclav Havel put it: "Hope is definitely not the same thing as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out". Advent calls us to hope in the promise that God is calling us to greater things and will be with us as we live them.

**The Second Candle: Love**—*"I have loved you with an everlasting love."* (Jeremiah 31:3) The second candle symbolises love—the love that the Lord has for us that He came to us as a human being so that we could have a God with a face, a God who lived on earth and experienced all that we experience, and left a map for us to follow.



And He loves us so much that He came to beat back overpowering evil so that we could make the most important choice in our lives—the one for life and what is good—or choosing death and what is evil. The second candle also represents the love that we are commanded —*not suggested*—to develop in our hearts: to love each other. This doesn't come naturally, and only with a change of *mind* do we make this change of heart, and then change of life.

**The Third Candle: Joy**—“*You have made known to me the path of life; in Your presence is fullness of joy.*” (Psalm 16:11) The third candle, which is pink, is for joy. Joy weaves throughout the Christmas story: the joy of the unborn John who leapt for joy in Elizabeth’s womb when Mary came near; the shepherds witnessing the angels singing and praising God; the joy of the wise men finding the star that would lead them to the newborn King; the joy of Mary and Joseph when the Lord was born. And our joy for the good news—for the First

Advent of our Lord in Bethlehem, and also our joy in being blessed with the knowledge of the Lord’s Second Advent.

**The Fourth Candle: Peace**—“*Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men.*” (Matthew 2:14) The fourth candle symbolises peace: “My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Do not let your heart be troubled, nor let it be fearful.” (John 14:27)

Swedenborg wrote: “Peace holds within itself trust in the Lord, the trust that God governs all things and provides all things, and that He leads us toward an end that is good.” (*Arcana Coelestia* 8455) When we believe these things about the Lord we are at peace, since we fear nothing, and no anxiety about the future disturbs us. How far we gain this state depends on how much we grow in love to the Lord.

**Mary and Martha** The story of Mary and Martha may seem an odd choice for Christmastime. But it speaks to me of the balance so desperately needed, especially as we approach our Holy Day. What do these sisters have to teach us, to guide and deepen our Advent?

Martha represents that part of all of us that lives in the demanding daily, practical, external world of doing what needs to be done, and like Martha, is probably anxious and troubled about many things. This is the Martha-life that is filled with the stress of not enough time and too much to do. We can easily label someone as a Martha or a Mary; a practical person of action versus a reflective, listening, receptive one. But each one of us carries both within. Conflict comes when the worries, real and imagined, run wild without the spiritual guidance of Mary’s heart.

Let’s see what Jesus pointed out to Martha, the anxious and troubled one. He didn’t criticize her work, only her priorities, and her attitude. We can hear Him say with love, “Martha, Martha” - as if to coax her gently back to see that “the only necessary thing” must not be put off, must not be disregarded or seen as extraneous in the practical world of getting things done.

Here is a lesson for Advent. We must recognise the need for the Mary in us, longing to experience God, longing to sit and listen and learn and love Him; to stop the busyness, the noise, the activity, long enough to hear His voice, to feel His presence; long enough to know His peace. There is no worry in Mary’s heart. She has chosen the better part: she is listening, she is still, the clamour of daily life has been selectively silenced by her choice to sit quietly. She is *doing*, but not what Martha is doing. She is doing what is necessary for the life of the spirit.

It’s not that our Martha won’t still have much to do. The work never goes away. But now the work has been given meaning, purpose and perspective. There’s much to do to be useful and serve each other with love, but Martha’s worry and resentment can be transformed to full gratitude and peacefulness.

How do we develop the Mary part? How do we sit at the feet of Jesus? Advent gives us a golden opportunity to begin a practice and create a plan for our Mary. We will never *find* time—we must *make* time—to be with God, to meet with Him. First things first! “Seek ye first the kingdom of Heaven...”

We all need a quiet place—a sacred space to sit at God’s feet with a quiet mind and open heart. This God time must be created with purpose—an act of will; really God’s urging in us It’s a standing appointment which fully-evolved spiritual people have found to be essential.

Schedule time for prayer, meditation, reading the Word and other spiritual books. Music as well can play an important part—whatever feeds and nourishes our soul and connects us to the Divine. We need to slow down and schedule an appointment with God, then show up! Examine our hearts—clean out the stable! And then ...Carry the Mary part out to Martha, into the world of use and compassion.

I wonder if you have seen on the Internet a song and story about the long line of children in a mall waiting to see Santa. A puzzled little boy asks: “Where’s the line for Jesus?” Maybe this Christmas—with the help of Advent—we can all join in the line to Jesus.

(from *New Church Life* November/December 2013)



# The Massacre of the Innocents

John Sutton



## The Massacre of Innocence

Towards the end of the account of the birth of Jesus is a description of one of the most horrific events in the whole of the Bible. It is known as the massacre of the innocents. Herod in fear of a new born king orders all children under two in Bethlehem to be killed. At Christmas it is easy to focus on the feel good birth of Jesus and overlook this dark story. However this infanticide puts the reason for the birth in its true spiritual context. It represents the reality that at that time all traces of innocence in the human race were in danger of being destroyed.

Innocence is life free of all self-centredness and worldliness. Swedenborg writes that the Lord God is innocence itself. From his Divine love He wants the happiness of human beings. His greatest delight is to share His joy with them. Our innocence includes a willingness to be led by the Lord. The Lord who is innocence itself came on earth to redeem mankind from destroying every vestige of innocence. Through his coming He preserved our opportunity to choose the way of innocence despite our tendencies to love self-centredness and worldliness.

## Innocence still being destroyed

The second half of Swedenborg's book on True Marriage Love teaches about the opposite of marriage love, such as the Love of Adultery, Rape etc. Amongst that list is, 'The Lust for Seducing the Innocent'. When I read this as a text in my training I assumed that there were few people who behaved in this way. How naïve I was. Over the last 50 years it has become apparent that this lust is all too common. The growing list of instances of the historical abuse of children shows that the tragic destruction of innocence in children appears to have been endemic in our society.

Appallingly sections of Society have colluded to keep this hidden to protect the reputations of the perpetrators, their families, or organisations. As a consequence the victims have not only had their innocence destroyed but have also been locked in a spiritual and emotional prison lasting a lifetime.

Judging by external incidents it might appear that despite the Lord's coming the massacre continues unabated. But Swedenborg's Writings invite us to see life beyond the external acts. The Christmas story is more than an historical event. It is also a mirror of the spiritual situation we are all born into. It is just as

relevant now as it was then. On the one hand we have self-centred tendency to destroy the innocence of others by using and manipulating them. On the other hand we have a desire for a life that is innocent of all self-centredness and filled with compassion and respect. Through the Lord's coming He is now able to give us the freedom to choose between these two opposing attitudes in our life.

## The Life of those whose innocence has been abused

Life at one level does not seem fair for abused children may through no fault of their own develop behaviour which is destructive and antisocial. Such behaviour might be seen as evil but they have not **spiritually** freely chosen to behave like that. In war people are in similar traumatic circumstances and may do things they abhor to protect themselves or others.

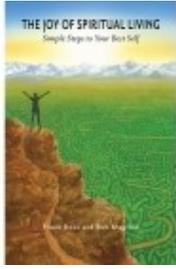
In the traumatic circumstances of abusive childhoods and war we are taught that the Lord hides the innocence deep within the person where it cannot be destroyed, mirrored in His escape to Egypt, and Moses preservation as a baby. Later in life He will bring the delight of innocence back when and where He can. For some, it may be possible in this world, but for others, healing may only be possible in the next life.

It is wonderful to hear the life stories of people who have confronted what has happened in the past. Their struggles and courage have created an amazing human being. Despite the effects of the abuse of innocence, they have found spiritual resources from within to become an inspiration to others.

## The destroyers of innocence

It is an amazing teaching that the Lord still loves such people and is always seeking to lead them away from such cruel and manipulative desires. For them to discover the joy of innocence they have to be willing to see what they have done, acknowledge it, seek forgiveness and above all reject their old desires.

The joy of Christmas comes from a life innocent of all self-centredness and worldliness. Because the Lord is present with everyone we can all find it if we choose to. "Peace on earth and good will toward all people."



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Christmas Festival of readings and carols Sunday 21 December 10 a.m.

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