

“Responding to ‘Opportunities for Growth’”

By the Rev. Eric H. Carswell

January 3, 2021

And a great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that it was already filling. But Jesus was in the stern, asleep on a pillow. And they awoke Him and said to Him, “Teacher, do You not care that we are perishing?” Mark 4:37-38

A number of the disciples were experienced fishermen, with years of sailing on the Sea of Galilee. If they were afraid of the windstorm and waves there was doubtless good reason to be fearful. As they faced increasing anxiety Jesus remained asleep, apparently unaware of the life-threatening situation the disciples were facing. When they awoke Him their question was “Teacher, do You not care that we are perishing?” The Lord allowed this opportunity for the disciples to recognize their own limited perspective and understanding. This event for the disciples can provide us an opportunity to reflect. The Lord has given us this story to help us recognize the similar spiritual challenges in our lives.

The disciples were obviously outraged that the Lord hadn’t already responded to their peril. Sometimes we can think that a loving person is one who shelters others from facing hard situations. When we face hard times we too can wonder if the Lord loves us or cares about what is burdening even overwhelming us in our lives.

Consider what the teachings for the New Church tell us about the Lord. Concerning His love for us we’re taught:

The nature of the Lord's love surpasses all human understanding and is unbelievable in the extreme to people who do not know what heavenly love is in which angels abide. To save a soul from hell the angels think nothing of giving their own lives; indeed if it were possible they would suffer hell themselves in place of that soul. . . They confess however that that love does not originate one little bit in themselves but that every single aspect of it does so in the Lord alone. (*Arcana Caelestia* 2077:2)

Concerning the Lord’s knowledge of our lives we’re taught:

It may be seen how far someone errs who believes that the Lord has not foreseen and does not see the smallest individual thing with each human being, or that within the smallest individual thing He does not foresee and lead, when in fact the Lord's foresight and providence are present within the tiniest details of all the smallest individual things with a person, and in details so tiny that it is impossible to comprehend in any manner of thought one in many millions of them. (*Arcana Caelestia* 3854:3)

Concerning the Lord’s omnipotence or infinite power we’re taught:

In the universe and everything in it, God's omnipotence follows and works through the laws of His order. God is omnipotent, because He has all power from Himself. All others have power from Him. God's power and His will are one. Because He wills nothing but what is good, he cannot do anything but what is good. In the spiritual world no one can do anything against his or her will - a condition there that comes from God, from the fact

that His power and His will are one. God is in fact goodness itself. When He does something good, He is in Himself. He cannot walk away from Himself. Clearly then, His omnipotence fills, and works within, the sphere of the extension of goodness, a sphere that is infinite. (*True Christian Religion* 56)

Given that we are taught that the Lord loves each of us perfectly, has infinite wisdom, all the power that shapes events large and small and is aware of the tiniest details of lives, we still can sense that He is absent, uncaring, even apparently asleep when we face hard times. But this perception is, in part, based on our view of what is important. The Lord is infinitely aware of the sadness, hardships and challenges that each of us face. His goal however is not preventing or minimizing challenges, large and small. We're taught:

Divine love, and consequently Divine providence, has as its end a heaven consisting of people who have become or who are becoming angels, to whom it is possible for the Lord to impart all the blessings and joys connected with love and wisdom, and to impart these from Himself in them. (*Divine Providence* 27:2)

The Lord's constant goal is to move each of us forward on our path toward becoming more and more like an angel and this inevitably requires us to face temptations or spiritual battles that can be huge. We're taught:

Anyone thinking with enlightened reason can see and perceive from all this that a person cannot be regenerated without conflict, that is, without spiritual temptation, and also that a person is not regenerated by undergoing a single temptation, only by undergoing very many of them. For there are numerous kinds of evil motivations that have formed the delight of the former life, that is, have constituted the old life. All those evils cannot be subdued on one occasion and all together. They cling stubbornly to us, for they become deeply rooted in our forebears going back many centuries and are for that reason innate in us. They have also been made stronger since early childhood by the evil things we have actually done. All these evil things are diametrically opposed to the heavenly good that is to be instilled and that must constitute the new life. (*Arcana Caelestia* 8403:2)

In our path to heaven, we also have to face the spiritual battles of temptation. We face times when need to work to think true ideas when false ones are flooding in. We face times in which we need to choose something good when part of us would prefer something hellish. We have to face spiritual temptations. The storm and waves that the disciples faced on the Sea of Galilee mean these temptations (*Apocalypse Explained* 419:24). The sea and the wind mean hell and all the false ideas and corrupt motivations the evil spirits try to inspire in our lives (*Apocalypse Revealed* 343). Life in this world inevitably provides opportunities for the evil spirits associated with us to fill our minds with doubts, concerns, worries, anger, impatience, discouragement, and depression. They will take some bit of our experience and spin a whole web of emotions and thoughts whose sole purpose is to make us say or do destructive things or to be catapulted into a pattern of response that brings misery to us. Like the disciples on a boat in the midst of a raging storm, our minds are inundated with patterns of emotional response and false, distorted ideas that make us miserable – even if part of our mind feels so justified in the response and the ideas that support it. And in this state, we tend to look at what is happening and have the clear conviction the Lord is absent – asleep as it were.

The attack of the hells is always about something important to us. Listen to the following teachings from the New Church about temptation.

All temptation is an attack upon the love a person has for someone or something; and the temptation is in the same degree as the love. If the love is not attacked, there is no temptation. To destroy anyone's love is to destroy his very life.... (*Arcana Caelestia* 1690:3)

In temptation evil spirits bring to mind a person's false ideas and evil loves. From his memory they bring forth things that he has thought and done from his infancy, which they do so skillfully and maliciously that it cannot be described; but the angels who are with him bring to mind his good loves and true thoughts and thus defend him. (*Arcana Caelestia* 751)

In all temptation there is a state of doubt concerning the Lord's presence and mercy and concerning salvation and other similar things; for those undergoing temptation are in interior distress, even to despair...." (*Arcana Caelestia* 2334)

When a person is in temptation, he is attacked on all sides by false ideas and evil loves, which hinder the spiritual light flowing in from the Lord, that is the good motivations and true thoughts flowing from Him, and then the person is at it were in darkness...But when a person emerges from the temptation, light appears with its spiritual heat, that is true thoughts with their good affections. From this the individual has gladness after this troubled time. This is the morning which follows the night (*Arcana Caelestia* 6829)

The disciples in desperation turned to the Lord, awakening Him, but in panic and despair. They said, "Teacher, do You not care that we are perishing?" You might think these words would evoke a condemning response by the Lord. Instead "He arose and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace, be still!" And the wind ceased and there was a great calm." Then He did question the disciples saying, "Why are you so fearful? How is it that you have no faith?"

This past calendar year has provided us more than one huge spiritual storm, sometimes striking many of us similarly and also swamping our lives in different ways. Concerns about the pandemic and resulting consequences have kept us apart from people we would want to be near to. People have unexpectedly lost loved ones and others have faced mild to very serious sickness. People have had their jobs or businesses cease to exist. People have also been very concerned for the health of United States. Across the political perspective people in this country were deeply apprehensive about the outcome of the November election. But every year people face spiritual storms in their lives. Events happen every year that trouble people. The Lord allows opportunities for the hells to attack us with their evil motivations and false ideas. In part they want us to desire, think and do evil things. At times their goal is more universal. They want us to think that the Lord doesn't care about us and maybe doesn't even exist. The Lord allows opportunities for us to face spiritual storms that have us question His loving concern. These happen in everyone's lives. Many of us know the teaching for the New Church that states: "Peace holds within itself trust in the Lord, the trust that He governs all things and provides all things, and that He leads towards an ultimate conclusion that is good (*Arcana Caelestia* 8455:1). This passage goes on to say "Peace is at the center of all delight, even of the undelightful states of a person governed by good." Bad things happen in our lives, sometimes hugely horrendous.

The Lord doesn't want these troubles for us. He allows them and uses them as an opportunity for us to grow spiritually.

As you think back on this past calendar year and as we look toward a new one stretching out in front of us may we work to hold onto a deep belief that the Lord loves us and knows what is happening in our lives. When each of us face our own spiritual storms may we fight with the prayer that the Lord help us. May we lead the active life we can to help make this a better world and wisely take care of our loved ones and ourselves. May we trust that the Lord is always with us to help calm the inner storms of doubt, despair or anger. It doesn't mean He will stop the external problem. He instead with work with whatever opportunities arise in our lives to help us grow as human beings. May we, with confidence and trust in the Lord, face our own opportunities and allow the Lord to use them to bring us ever closer to a heavenly state of mind. AMEN.

Lessons: Psalm 65:4-7 Mark 4:35-41, *Apocalypse Explained* 419:24

Psalm 65:4-7

⁴ Blessed are the people You choose, And cause to approach You, That they may dwell in Your courts. We shall be satisfied with the goodness of Your house, Of Your holy temple. ⁵ By awesome deeds in righteousness You will answer us, O God of our salvation, You who are the confidence of all the ends of the earth, And of the far-off seas; ⁶ Who established the mountains by His strength, Being clothed with power; ⁷ You who still the noise of the seas, The noise of their waves, And the tumult of the peoples.

Mark 4:35-41

³⁵ On the same day, when evening had come, Jesus said to them, "Let us cross over to the other side." ³⁶ Now when they had left the multitude, they took Him along in the boat as He was. And other little boats were also with Him. ³⁷ And a great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that it was already filling. ³⁸ But He was in the stern, asleep on a pillow. And they awoke Him and said to Him, "Teacher, do You not care that we are perishing?" ³⁹ Then He arose and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace, be still!" And the wind ceased and there was a great calm. ⁴⁰ But He said to them, "Why are you so fearful? How is it that you have no faith?" ⁴¹ And they feared exceedingly, and said to one another, "Who can this be, that even the wind and the sea obey Him!"

***Apocalypse Explained* 419:24**

This miracle [of calming the storm] involves spiritual temptations; "a great storm of wind, so that the waves beat into the boat, and it was filling," mean such temptations; and that when they were in extreme fear, "Jesus awoke, and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, Be still, be dumb; and the wind ceased, and there was a great calm," signifies deliverance from temptations. Moreover, every single word here contains a spiritual sense; but this is not the place to unfold it particularly, but only to note that the "storm" and "tempest of wind" signify temptations, for these are irruptions of falsities, or inundations of the mind by falsities. This, too, is plain from the rebuke of the wind and the waves, and from the words of the Lord to the sea, "Be still, be dumb," as if He were speaking to those things or those persons that induce temptations.