

You shall go out with Joy and be led forth in Peace

A sermon about the value of belief

by the Rev. Jeremy F. Simons, Bryn Athyn, July 10th, 2022

“So shall My Word be that goes forth from My mouth; it shall not return to Me void, but it shall accomplish what I please, and it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it.” Isaiah 55:11

Last week we celebrated Independence Day, a day that holds happy memories for most of us and

one that stands for important things about our lives and country, such as the concepts of freedom and equality. The Declaration of Independence, announced on that day, had real consequences

for this nation. The story of how it came to be written and what happened after it was declared, is repeated to us regularly, giving us a perspective on our country, its origins, and what we stand for.

These kinds of accounts have a greater impact on us than we may appreciate. Our whole thought process is changed by the things that we are taught and that we believe. This is what the Lord is saying to us about His Word in our text from Isaiah:

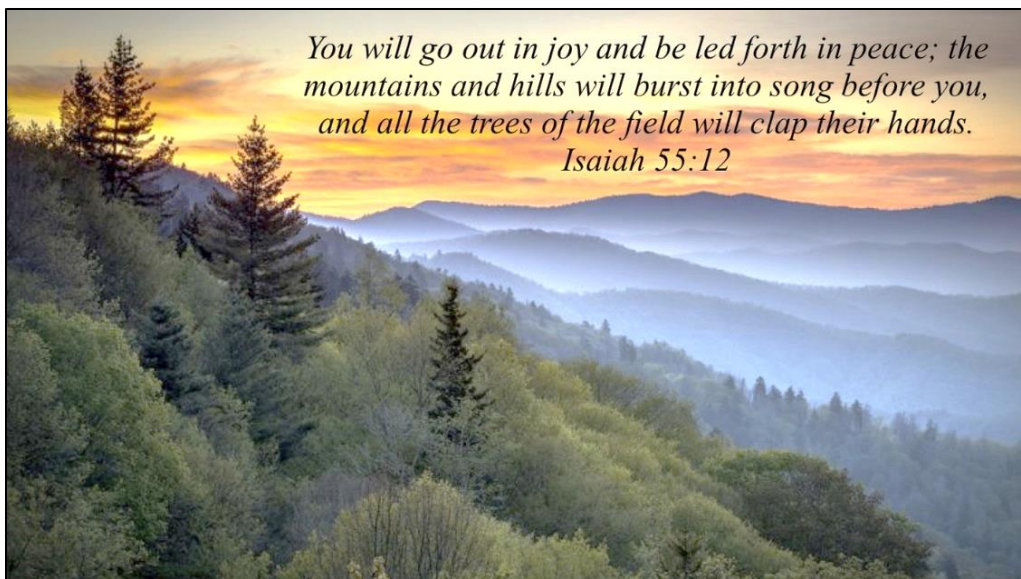
“So shall My Word be that goes forth from My mouth; it shall not return to Me void, but it shall accomplish what I please, and it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it.”

The Lord’s words have a mission and purpose, and He is saying that this mission will be accomplished and will prosper. He compares His Word to the water cycle, falling as rain or snow from the sky, watering the earth and making it bring forth and bud. We know that this water then evaporates and returns to the sky, to repeat the cycle. The Lord’s words also return to Him, but He says that they will not return to Him “void” or without doing anything. He says, they “will accomplish what I please.”

When they return to Him they will return to Him in the form of love, our love for Him and for one another.

What they accomplish is the happiness of humanity, a heaven from the human race, a kingdom of uses. Our topic this morning is how this happens.

We are told that the Word of the Lord



has unspeakable power.

“By the Word of the Lord the heavens were made, and all the host of them by the breath of His mouth.” Psalm 33:6

“Scarcely anyone has any other idea of Divine Truth than this - a word or utterance issuing from a speaker's mouth and transmitted into the air. This idea about Divine Truth leads to the notion that 'the Word' means simply a command, so that all things that have been made exist solely because a command has been delivered, not because of some reality that has come forth from the Lord's Divine. But the Divine Truth going forth from the Lord is the ultimate reality and essential being from which all things derive their existence. Every form of what is good and true owes its existence to this.” Arcana Coelestia 5272

“In short, Divine Truth holds all power within itself, so completely that it is power itself.” Arcana Coelestia 8200

This is the reality, but this is not necessarily the way that it seems to us.

It can seem that the Word has little power.

In Genesis 15 Abram complains to the Lord that He has no children, and the Lord reassures him that he will. The meaning is that it often seems that the truth does not bear fruit, and that genuine goodness will not come from what the Lord teaches in the Word (*Arcana Coelestia 1797-1800*). But the Lord reassures us that it will. He said to Abram:

“Look now toward heaven and count the stars if you are able to number them.” And He said to him, “So shall your descendants be.”⁶ And he believed in the LORD, and He accounted it to him for righteousness.” Genesis 15:4

That is, the truth will bear fruit in goodness so great that we can't even count it. It is important for us to believe in it. This is why Luke begins his gospel the way that he does.

As we read in our lesson, Luke begins his Gospel with the explanation that he is going to set out an “orderly account” of what happened. He says that he has had a good understanding, a “perfect understanding” of everything about it from the very first, “just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the Word delivered them to us.” He then proceeds to tell us the story “that you may know the certainty of those things in which you were instructed.”

Notice that Luke is not telling Theophilus anything that he thinks that he doesn't already know. He is reinforcing what he has been told “that you may know the certainty of those things in which you were instructed.” The truth is that the things that we believe require constant reinforcement.

Do we learn new things in church?

When we come to church, or attend doctrinal classes, or read directly from the Word or collateral literature, we often have the thought that we will learn something, or that we will hear or read something new. Yet we often don't hear or read new things. We hear the same things over and over again. This can even be irksome, and yet there is tremendous value in things that are repeated. In a recent *Wall Street Journal* podcast a political commentator named Yoram Hazony points out:

“Those things that are not discussed in public, that are not honored and endorsed in public by the leadership constantly and repeatedly, are things that come to be dishonored.”

(wsj.com/podcasts/opinion-free-expression)

He is saying that the things that are stated in public, and by extension in church and other venues, “constantly and repeatedly” are the things that are “honored and endorsed.” In church we continually remind people of the things that we see as true and valuable. By contrast, if there are significant ideas that used to be mentioned often but no longer are, we may wonder if they are still believed.

It is one thing, for example, to know that this church, the General Church of the New Jerusalem, is founded on the belief that the theological Writings of Emanuel Swedenborg are divine revelation and are authoritative in all doctrinal matters. It is another thing to hear this stated repeatedly and endorsed in times when there are doubts about it. Points of emphasis in any organization will tend to change over time. If we are not reminded of this founding principle, we may slip into the belief that other factors may be of equal value in discussing the issues of the day.

Propaganda

Propaganda is a remarkably powerful tool. The war in Ukraine has shown us all how even the most blatant falsehoods can be persuasive to millions of people if they are repeated often and widely enough. The Writings are emphatic about the value of a free press, and yet even with a free press the information that is most widely publicized can amount to one-sided propaganda. It is good for all of us to look to varying sources for information and to see things from different points of view.

What we may not realize is that we absorb whatever it is that we frequently hear and read. Even though we feel that we can tell what is true and what is not, or what leads to good and what does not, we can be deceived. Constant exposure changes our thinking.

This is part of the message of our text. Just as the rain and snow come down from heaven and water the earth, so the Lord's Word is continually coming down from Him and having its effect. If we willingly expose ourselves to it we will be affected by it. That is, we will be affected in a good way, not like propaganda, but as something that frees us from the effects of propaganda.

While the mechanism may seem similar, the effect of the Word on our thinking is completely different. The thing that makes it different is that the Word is directly from the Lord, and its truths hold His love within them. In our minds they are what the Writings call “vessels receptive of the good of love

from the Divine” (Arcana Coelestia 10099). This means that when we are exposed to them, and especially when we believe, love and do them, the angels associated with them affect everything about our lives in positive ways. It improves our judgment, it softens our heart, it inclines us to love and help other people, it makes us free.

This is how formal religion works, attempting to create an environment that leads people to hear, accept and love what the Word teaches in the belief that this will change our lives. This is also why we have New Church schools, summer camps, and similar things, where children and adults can learn these things in an environment that is loving, and that encourages moral, kind and useful behavior.

The importance of belief

The point of Luke’s introduction to his Gospel is to reassure people about the truth of what they have heard. Similarly, Swedenborg frequently asserts that what he is writing is the truth. One of the key assertions of the Heavenly Doctrine is that it is composed of “*spiritual truths rationally understood that are advanced by the Michaels of whom the New Church is formed*” (Apocalypse Revealed 564). By “*rationally understood*” it means that it can be fully explained so that it can be understood and believed.

Belief, however, is not an easy thing, and the lack of it was said in our lessons to be the “*single evil*” that has afflicted every church from the beginning. We read:

“It is the evil of not believing the Lord or the Word but trusting oneself and one’s senses. The result is an absence of faith, and when faith is absent, so is love for others--a situation that leads to all falsity and evil.” Arcana Coelestia 231

Love is always the most important thing, but the lack of belief takes love away, and prevents it from being implanted. What’s more the passage continues, saying:

“Conditions are much worse today than they once

were. People can now employ knowledge unavailable to our ancestors in justifying the skepticism bred by their senses. In doing so, they produce so great a darkness that it could never be described.” Arcana Coelestia 232

That is, our confidence in science has become so great that we want to employ it in answering moral and ethical questions, where it sheds no light. It leads us to be skeptical of the teachings of the Word, and to ignore spiritual questions altogether.

“People’s desire to rely on sensory evidence or secular knowledge when investigating religious mysteries caused the fall of the earliest church. But more than that, it causes the fall of every church, because it breeds not only falsities but also wickedness in life.” Arcana Coelestia 127

It breeds wickedness in our lives because science doesn’t concern itself with moral issues, especially when their harm is not easy to demonstrate. So it is important to believe in what the Word teaches:

“The Word is the one and only teacher of how a person should live in the world in order to be happy for evermore.” Arcana Coelestia 8939

You shall go out with joy

When the Lord promises that His Word will not return to Him “*void, but it shall accomplish what I please*” it is this happiness that He is referring to. That is, people will understand and believe, they will do as He teaches, and they will find happiness. While there are many obstacles to belief, and while it sometimes seems as though few people actually do believe, the future is in the Lord’s hands. His sheep hear His voice, and He knows them and they follow Him. Abram worried about having an heir, but the Lord showed him the stars in the heavens, and he was reassured, and he believed Him.

“For you shall go out with joy and be led out with peace; the mountains and the hills shall break forth into singing before you, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.” AMEN



Readings from the Word

Genesis 15

After these things the Word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, saying, “*Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your exceedingly great reward.*”

² But Abram said, “*Lord GOD, what will You give me, seeing I go childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?*” ³ Then Abram said, “*Look, You have given me no offspring; indeed one born in my house is my heir!*”

⁴ And behold, the Word of the LORD came to him, saying, “*This one shall not be your heir, but one who will come from your own body shall be your heir.*” ⁵ Then He brought him outside and said, “*Look now toward heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them.*” And He said to him, “*So shall your descendants be.*”

⁶ And he believed in the LORD, and He accounted it to him for righteousness.



Isaiah 55

For My thoughts *are* not your thoughts, nor *are* your ways My ways,” says the LORD.

⁹ “For *as* the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, And My thoughts than your thoughts.

¹⁰ “For as the rain comes down, and the snow from heaven, and do not return there, But water the earth, and make it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower and bread to the eater,

¹¹ So shall My Word be that goes forth from My mouth; it shall not return to Me void, But it shall accomplish what I please, and it shall prosper *in the thing* for which I sent it.

¹² “For you shall go out with joy and be led out with peace; the mountains and the hills Shall break forth into singing before you, and all the trees of the field shall clap *their* hands.”

Luke 1

Inasmuch as many have taken in hand to set in order a narrative of those things which have been fulfilled among us, ² just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the Word delivered them to us, ³ it seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write to you an orderly account, most excellent Theophilus, ⁴ that you may know the certainty of those things in which you were instructed.

Arcana Coelestia 231

A single evil afflicted not only the earliest church, before the Flood, but also the ancient church, after the Flood, and the Jewish church, and then the (Christian) church or the church among non-Jews that came after the Lord's arrival into the world, just as it afflicts the modern church. It is the evil of not believing the Lord or the Word but trusting oneself and one's senses. The result is an absence of faith, and when faith is absent, so is love for others--a situation that leads to all falsity and evil.

232. Conditions are much worse today than they once were. People can now employ knowledge unavailable to our ancestors in justifying the skepticism bred by their senses. In doing so, they produce so great a darkness that it could never be described. If people knew how great a darkness results, they would be astounded.