

February 21, 2010/Lent 1

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Luke 4:1-13

“When and Where ‘Church’ Happens, Part 2”

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**Deuteronomy 26:1-11**

1When you have come into the land that the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, and you possess it, and settle in it, 2you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from the land that the Lord your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the Lord your God will choose as a dwelling for his name. 3You shall go to the priest who is in office at that time, and say to him, “Today I declare to the Lord your God that I have come into the land that the Lord swore to our ancestors to give us.” 4When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the Lord your God, 5you shall make this response before the Lord your God: “A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. 6When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, 7we cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors; the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. 8The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; 9and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. 10So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O Lord, have given me.” You shall set it down before the Lord your God and bow down before the Lord your God. 11Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the Lord your God has given to you and to your house.

### **Luke 4:1-13**

1 Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, 2 where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. 3 The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." 4 Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'" 5 Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. 6 And the devil said to him, "To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. 7 If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." 8 Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" 9 Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, 10 for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,' 11 and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" 12 Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" 13 When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

### **Swedenborg:**

Nobody can know what temptation is except someone who has experienced it. [Jesus'] temptation incorporates in a summary form all temptations, namely this, that out of His love towards the whole human race He fought against self-love and love of the world, with which the hells were filled completely. All temptation is an attack against the love present in a person, the degree of temptation depending on the degree of that love.... Destroying another person's love is destroying their very life, for their love is their life. The Lord's life was love towards the whole human race; indeed it was so great and of such a nature as to be nothing other than pure love. Against this life of His, temptations were directed constantly, and this was happening ... from earliest childhood through to His last hour in the world. Constant victory is meant by the statement that after

temptation "angels came and ministered to Him." *Arcana Celestia*  
#1690

What temptations or the combats of temptations effect, scarcely any one can know. They are the means whereby evils and falsities are broken up and dispersed, and whereby also a horror for evils and falsities is induced, and conscience is given and also strengthened, and one is regenerated. These are the reasons why those who are being regenerated are led into combats and undergo temptations; and those who do not undergo them in the life of the body, undergo them in the other life if they are capable of being regenerated.

*Arcana Celestia, # 1692*

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Last week we asked the question, Where does 'church' happen? Where do we experience God, the divine Reality? Where do we get in touch with the deeper meanings of our life? Where do we get centered and grounded in a way that we are brought into communion with the true Self?

We saw that 'church' happens in many places: inside and outside of church buildings, in natural settings, in conversations as well as in silent moments, through dreams, while moving or sitting still. Speaking for myself, 'church' happens when "I am in tune with the time and place and people who are present. I say this because I have been in church buildings and other places during worship when I do not experience 'church', but rather only my own distractedness, busyness, inner turmoil, or boredom, or anxiety, or critique of what is happening. 'Church' also does not necessarily happen when I am walking, dancing, talking, studying, praying, or in silence.

"Whether or not 'church' happens for me, depends, in short, on me. If I am not awake, present, focused, paying attention, or engaged, then a lot of what could be helping me goes right on by my heart and brain, and I leave the experience basically untouched. I go out the same as when I entered."

For me, "if the institutional, organized church is about anything, it is

about encountering the divine in community in such a way that we are changed, even if just a little bit changed. “

For me, the experience of love, both human and divine - is a portal for the experience of God (and also, it occurred to me over the last week, gratitude is an entry point into that experience). Our limited ability to fully understand or live into that experience is due to the fact that our “language, theological and philosophical concepts, our architecture, music, silence, and our own bodies, are limited in their capacity to point the way to the Lord’s reality...(and yet they) are the vehicles we have available to us to point beyond what we are capable of understanding and living out. (Still,) we dare to point; for we, just like the people at the mountain with Moses, and just like Jesus’ disciples, are witnesses...We cannot deny what we have seen and heard and felt. Our ‘use’ in the world is to point toward that which we love beyond all other loves, and will never fully comprehend. This world is in need of people who are soul companions with the Lord in his ‘exodus’, and who tell the truth about what they see, and attempt to live it out, in every time and place, while they have life and breath in this world.”

It was clear to me before last Sunday that there was more to say about ‘church’. Briefly, it seems true to me that ‘church’ can also happen in situations of anxiety, stuck-ness, fear and oppression, when we are somehow able to think and act out of our best self on behalf of others, even when we do not ‘feel’ like it. In other words, ‘church’ is more than feelings of peace and love and calmness - it is also truth as to my real Self, and truth as to the needs of the neighbor. ‘Church’ happens when we act redemptively for ourselves, and for one another, in difficult and even dangerous, contexts. But I must say that this has been difficult to work through. I feel as though I am a beginner in my ability to experience ‘church’ in difficult times. As the writer of Psalm 137 put it, *“1By the rivers of Babylon— there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. 2On the willows there we hung up our harps. 3For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!” 4How could we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land? 5If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither!”* How can we experience ‘church’ in very difficult places?

For example, how many of you have seen the movie *Invictus*? ([Morgan Freeman](#) and [Matt Damon](#)) It is the story of Nelson Mandela after the fall of apartheid, his release from 27 years of prison, and his election as president of South Africa. The movie is about the encouragement Mandela gave to black South Africans to get behind the previously hated Springboks (the South African national rugby team) as South Africa hosted the 1995 Rugby World Cup. After the Springboks won an epic final over New Zealand, Mandela presented the trophy to captain Francois Pienaar, an Afrikaner, as he wore a Springbok shirt with Pienaar's own number 6 on the back. This was widely seen as a major step in the reconciliation of white and black South Africans. ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nelson\\_Mandela](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nelson_Mandela))

In the movie, we see Mandela deriving great courage and strength during his long imprisonment from the words of the poem "Invictus". The word means, "unconquered", or "invincible" in Latin. The poem was written by the English poet William Ernest Henley (1849–1903). At the age of 12, Henley became a victim of tuberculosis of the bone. A few years later the disease progressed to his foot, and physicians announced that the only way to save his life was to amputate directly below the knee. In 1867 he successfully passed the Oxford local examination as a senior student. In 1875 he wrote the "Invictus" poem from a hospital bed. Despite his disability, he survived with one foot intact and led an active life until his death at the age of 53.

The poem reads thusly:

*Out of the night that covers me,  
Black as the pit from pole to pole,  
I thank whatever gods may be  
For my unconquerable soul.  
In the fell clutch of circumstance  
I have not winced nor cried aloud.  
Under the bludgeonings of chance  
My head is bloody, but unbowed.  
Beyond this place of wrath and tears  
Looms but the Horror of the shade,  
And yet the menace of the years  
Finds and shall find me unafraid.  
It matters not how strait the gate,*

*How charged with punishments the scroll,  
I am the master of my fate:  
I am the captain of my soul.*

This poem speaks more to the inner determination to endure than to the intervention of a God, or of divine power. It is a celebration of the human spirit. It is an expression of stoicism, in which one falls back on one's own resources rather than religious resources. One remains true to one's own convictions.

<http://archives.cnn.com/2001/LAW/06/11/mcveigh.poem.cnn/>

Though the poem is dismissive of God, and therefore represents a viewpoint that I personally cannot claim, it is a way of expressing what I would call 'church' - the touching of a reality that is usually beyond one's power to evoke or envision. It is assertive rather than reactive. It is the viewpoint of one who no longer sees oneself as a victim, but rather sees him/herself in touch with a power that 'saves' one, or 'redeems' one. It is reached only through much suffering and searching, to the depths of one's soul.

I think of my own life: I have trouble thinking generous, positive, and centered thoughts when driving across this city in heavy traffic; so the poem and Mandela's story has much to teach me about touching a greater reality in the midst of uncomfortable circumstances.

Then there is the story of Miep Gies (Meep Ghis) (February 15, 1909 – January 11, 2010, at the age of 100), who, with her husband Jan, helped hide Anne Frank and her family from the Nazis for 25 months during World War II. She brought them food, books, birthday presents and companionship over the long months, and one night slept in Anne's bed. Miep wrote that she could feel the fear in the place that night, "so thick I could feel it pressing down on me", and it kept her awake. She discovered and preserved Anne Frank's diary after her family was arrested on August 4, 1944. Much later in life, she wrote the book, *Anne Frank Remembered*.

I do not know if Miep ever experienced the presence of the divine during that terrible time. She did not claim anything extraordinary for herself. But we can say that in protecting that family from the Nazis she showed a courage deeper than most could claim, then or now.

She derived her conviction from her own experience of being a refugee, sent away in 1920 at age 11 by her parents from a starving Austria to be taken in by a Dutch family. The care and love she experienced in Amsterdam was the same that she showed to others in the midst of extreme danger.

(The Economist 1/30/10, p 95, and [http://www.miepgies.dk/new\\_page\\_3.htm](http://www.miepgies.dk/new_page_3.htm))

Both of these historically recent events are reminiscent of the texts from Deuteronomy and Luke for today. The first retells the story of the Exodus in story form, and is a command to celebrate the Lord's saving activity on behalf of an enslaved people: *5b "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. 6When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, 7we cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors; the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. 8The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; 9and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey."*

It includes the times of trouble within a larger framework of experience, allowing writer and reader to look back with the benefit of perspective. Perhaps that is when we can truly experience the presence of God, when we have the luxury of memory about hard times, as contrasted with our attempts to merely survive when we are the midst of them.

And the story of Jesus' temptation: As Swedenborg wrote, *Nobody can know what temptation is except someone who has experienced it. [Jesus'] temptation incorporates in a summary form all temptations, namely this, that out of His love towards the whole human race He fought against self-love and love of the world, with which the hells were filled completely. All temptation is an attack against the love present in a person, the degree of temptation depending on the degree of that love.... Destroying another person's love is destroying their very life, for their love is their life*

To live through this, the Lord had to create 'church' for himself within its midst, by remembering Scripture, by retaining his ability to think rationally in the midst of fearful thoughts. His love for humanity, and his determination to worship only what is worth worshiping, expressed not in feelings but in rational argument, saved the day. Well, my hope is that some of your own struggles to stay centered, to remember and maintain your deepest values, to resist the temptation to give into anxiety, are in your mind at this time. Lent is the season when we face into those things, as we travel with the Lord toward Jerusalem, toward the cross and the resurrection. We acknowledge our need for regeneration, our need for a new Exodus away from where we have been, toward a more whole existence.

We are beginners, students of the Lord's way, in our awareness of 'church' in the everyday, whether that is a pleasant time, or a very difficult time. The process of spiritual maturation takes time, and our intention, and dependence upon a greater Source. We take on that process for ourselves, of course, but more deeply because of our growing love for God, and our awareness that how we are in the world affects that world - our loved ones, those estranged from us, the stranger, the environment.

We can become 'church' for others who cannot get there on their own. We can have 'church' within us.

(<http://www.christiancentury.org/article.lasso?id=8191>) An article called "Travelers' blessings, An interview with Rick Steves, by Amy Frykholm. This captures a moment of 'church':

*"What motivates you to teach people about traveling?"*

*"To me, travel is a spiritual thing, and I try to create an environment in which people will feel free to consider the effects that travel has on their spirituality. It is a challenge to do that while working in a secular environment....."*

*"What traveling experiences would you especially recommend for American Christians?"*

*"I love to take American Christians to Muslim countries, especially Turkey. One of my favorite moments as a tour guide took place in a village in Turkey. Our group was in the mayor's living room. He showed me a place on his wall where he hung his Qur'an bag—the*

*most holy place in a Muslim home. He said to me, "In my Qur'an bag I keep a Bible, a Torah and the Qur'an, because Christians, Jews and Muslims are all people of the Word, children of the Book and of God."*

May our traveling experiences be marked by awareness of God's love and truth.

May it be so. Amen.