

WALKING ON WATER
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“But seeing the wind strong, he was afraid, and beginning to sink, he cried out, saying, Lord, save me. And straightway Jesus stretching out the hand, took hold of him, and saith unto him, O thou of little faith, Why didst thou doubt?”(Matthew 14:30-31)

Our lessons today set before us three different stories from different parts of the Word, which all yet have to do with the spiritual testing called temptation. Temptation can take many different forms and so, therefore, it is represented by many different images in the Word. These can be as varied as flood and famine or war and wandering.

In the events referred to in the text, temptation takes the form of a tempest at sea. As to the natural circumstances, we read that the wind was strong and the boat of the disciples was tossed by the waves. As to the mental condition of the disciples, we hear, even in the letter, of fear and lack of faith.

Temptation is often thought of as an inclination or enticement to do something wrong. However, the temptation in this story tests trust in the Lord. The disciples as a group are tested as to their faith that the Lord, who has sent them out on the sea, will continue to look after them. Peter, in particular, is tested as to his confidence that the Lord can make him walk on the water. Spiritually, these tests reflect trials of our confidence that the Lord will be with us and care for us as we set out on new ventures or, because we believe that the Lord requires it of us, try taking certain risks in life.

The faith that the very hairs of our heads are numbered, the confidence that the Lord’s providence reaches down to the very least details of our lives, is represented in the story by the sea and the Lord’s power over the sea. Seas stand for the ultimate,

last, or lowest particularities of our lives. The Lord's presence and influx even into these, we are told, is the meaning of the Lord walking upon the sea. Obscure and wavering faith is represented by Peter walking upon the sea and beginning to sink, but being saved when the Lord took hold of him.

As we see from our lesson from the *Arcana*, a temptation is not a true temptation unless it is, in some sense, more than we of ourselves can bear. For it to do its work, it has to stretch us beyond the limits of our own power and reveal to us, at least for the time, our complete dependence upon the Lord. When we reach this state, when we realize that we do not have to depend on our own power, there can be a great state of relief. We come through the night and begin to experience the morning. This is why the event recorded took place "in the fourth watch...when it is daybreak and morning is at hand." It is a state when good begins to act through truth, and into this, the Lord comes. At His presence, the sea, which has been tumultuous, is now at peace. Our minds, which have been full of anxieties, are put at rest.

The story of the capture of Lot by the four kings of Mesopotamia, which we read from the 14th chapter of Genesis, may not seem to have a lot in common with the story about walking on water. However, both are stories of temptation – one the testing reflected in an outright conflict or battle, the other the testing that takes the form of an anxious or unsettled mind. Moreover, if we look at the *Arcana* explanation of the Genesis story, we find that again there are two stages: the first stage is the victory of the four kings over the five, and it represents a conquering of the evils signified by Sodom, Gomorrah and the other cities of the plain. Then secondly, the fact that they are conquered by the kings of Mesopotamia and that Abram's nephew Lot is carried away captive, represents our immediate tendency to be carried away by the conceit that somehow we have conquered evil from our own power. Lot must then be

rescued by Abram, which symbolizes the Lord rescuing us from this conceit.

As Abram rescues Lot and brings him back into the land of Canaan, they are met by Melchizedek, the King of Salem, a city whose name means peace. True peace comes not with the satisfaction of a victory won from oneself, but rather from the full confidence of resting in the power of the Lord.

The Lord does it all. We are saved by the grace of God, and not through any efforts of our own. The Protestant reformers insisted on the doctrine that we could do nothing to earn or merit salvation. But where this doctrine goes awry is in insisting that therefore we have no say or choice about whether we are saved or not. What the doctrine of the New Church makes clear is that although salvation is an unearned gift from the Lord, we nevertheless have the choice as to whether we will accept the gift or not. The choice to accept the gift of salvation is simply the choice to put ourselves entirely in the hands of the Lord.

Sometimes truly acknowledging the omnipotence of the Lord means being willing to go forward into what may look like a dangerous or frightening course of action, because we believe that that is what the Lord has bidden us to do. This can feel like stepping out and trying to walk across a stormy sea. At other points, having full confidence in the Lord means somehow coming to the full and genuine recognition that of ourselves we are powerless over some specific evil that besets our lives, and that the Lord and only the Lord can rescue us. We see this recognition in Peter crying out to the Lord “Save me,” as he begins to sink into the waves.

When the Lord says to Peter, as He stretches out his hand to lift him up, “O thou of little faith,” it is not an accusation or an admonition. It is the Lord, in His boundless mercy, expressing His recognition that this is the inevitable human condition, that we are born and continue to be “of little faith” until the hard

experiences of life bring us to a full confession of our utter need for the Lord. Amen.

Lessons: Genesis 14:1-2, 11-16; Matthew 14:22-34; *Arcana Coelestia* 8165.

Arcana Coelestia 8165[2] 'Were there no graves in Egypt, [since] you have taken us away to die in the wilderness?' These words, it is self-evident, are words of despair. They are also the kinds that are thought by people in a state of despair, which is the final phase of a temptation. At that time, they are on a slope so to speak or slipping down to hell. Yet thinking in that way at such times does no harm, and the angels take no notice of it; for each person's power is limited, and when temptation stretches him to the absolute limit of his power he cannot stand up to anything further and starts to slip. At that point, however, that is, when he is on the slope and starts to slip, he is raised by the Lord and thereby delivered from despair. More often than not, he is then brought into a bright state of hope and the comfort this brings, and into a state of bliss. The words 'damnation through a state of temptations in which they would go under' are used because people who go under in temptations pass into a state of damnation. For the end in view with temptations is that truths and forms of good, and therefore faith and charity, may be strengthened and bonded together. That end however is achieved only when a person is victorious in temptation. If instead he goes under, truths and forms of good are set aside and falsities and evils are strengthened. Hence those people's state of damnation.