



Beverly Heights
Presbyterian
Church

scattered seeds.

THE MONTHLY NEWSLETTER

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A fairy tale retold and interpreted by
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Illustrated by Scott Westgate



PROLOGUE



**Cling about her,
Waters blue;
Part not from her,
But renew
Cold and true
Kisses round her.**

Many of you know I am a C.S. Lewis fan but you may not be aware that Lewis was a great fan of the Scottish author, pastor and poet, George MacDonald. When Lewis was an atheist, he read MacDonald's fantasy story, *Phantastes*, and encountered a quality in the writing that he described as "holy." Lewis would later credit MacDonald with baptizing his imagination.

For the Devlin family, this was the summer of George MacDonald. During our travels out of town we listened to two audiobooks of MacDonald's stories. The first was *The Princess and the Goblin*. It's a wonderful story about the faith a young princess gains in her grandmama, who magically leads

the princess by an invisible string through the mountain of the goblins.

The other was *The Light Princess*. Before Abigail was born, our family read the story. We decided to include Abby in our family's appreciation of this story by listening to a dramatic reading from Cynthia Bishop and the Full Cast Family. It is an extremely well done, theatric presentation that I highly recommend to adults and children alike.

MacDonald was initially unsure of *The Light Princess*. He described the story as both "too silly" and as "having a great deal of meaning in it." But as I listened to the story again, I could not help but hear it this time as an allegory for the modern church. I found its themes both prescient and helpful.

What follows is my retelling of the tale. In the Epilogue on page 16, I then sum up my thoughts on its meaning.

PART I

The story begins with the king and queen of Lagobel, who are without child. The king is anxious for an heir to the throne but is willing to accept a daughter if it means they will have children. The queen eventually conceives and gives birth to the princess. The baby princess is never named in the story, though we are given the name of another princess, the king's sour, spiteful sister, Princess Makemnoit. Princess Makemnoit is in fact a witch, who the king forgets to invite to the christening of their newborn daughter.

Princess Makemnoit is deeply offended, of course, and so she takes her revenge by bewitching the baby. At the christening, Princess Makemnoit deceptively makes her way to the baptismal font in order to throw something in the water. After the water is

applied to the baby, Princess Makemnoit mutters a curse,

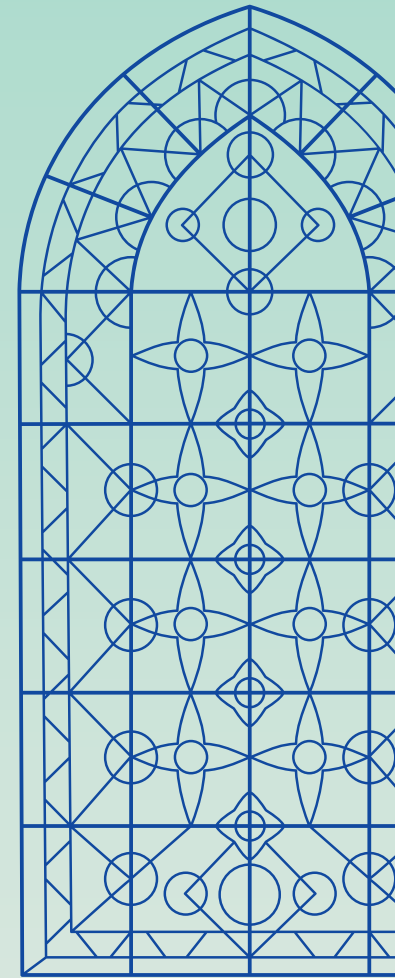
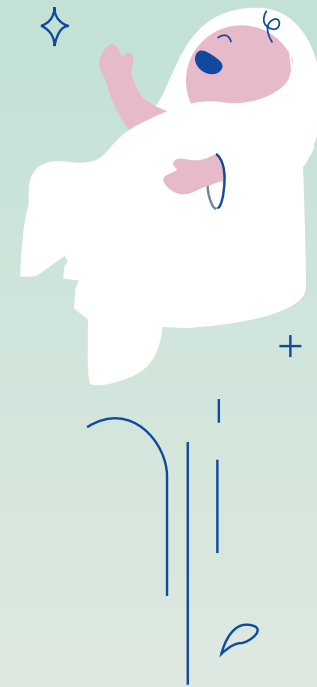
“Light of spirit, by my charms,
Light of body, every part,
Never weary human arms—
Only crush thy parents' heart!”

Immediately, two things happen. First, the baby begins to laugh and crow, and secondly, she is alleviated from all weight and gravity. The princess is now the “light princess.”

MacDonald is clever with his double entendre; she is light in two ways. Because gravity is taken from her, the baby is no longer felt in the arms of her nurse and floats in the air, but likewise, as we will come to see, she has no gravitas, no seriousness or sobriety in her manner. In the story, the light princess laughs too much and is unstable. MacDonald describes her laughing,

“... like the very spirit of fun; only in her laugh there was something missing. What it was, I find myself unable to describe. I think it was a certain tone, depending upon the possibility of sorrow. She never smiled.”

She is alleviated from all gravity.



PART II

The king and queen are despondent over the situation and seek a remedy. In what is probably my favorite chapter title in the book, the king and queen, “Try Metaphysics.” Here the king consults the college of Metaphysicians and we are introduced to two very wise Chinese philosophers named Hum-Drum, and Kopy-Keck.

MacDonald tells us that, “Hum-Drum was a Materialist, and Kopy-Keck a Spiritualist. The former was slow and sententious; the latter was quick and flighty: the latter had generally the first word; the former the last.”

Hum-Drum and Kopy-Keck are amusing caricatures; amalgamations really of the wise-

in-their-own-eyes of this world, who confidently (arrogantly?) dispense their wisdom as to what might be done to heal the princess. Both are sure of their diagnoses and their prescriptions, but, as MacDonald writes, “their Majesties had too much tenderness for their volatile offspring to subject her to either of the schemes of the equally unscrupulous philosophers.”

Time marches on, and MacDonald wonders for his readers if, “perhaps the best thing for the princess would have been to fall in love. But how a princess who had no gravity could fall into anything is a difficulty — perhaps THE difficulty.” Though love is the theme that hovers over MacDonald’s entire short story, it is not love that the princess falls into, but back into water.

We read that the royal palace was built on the shores of the loveliest lake in the world. One summer evening, during a carnival of the country, the princess was taken on the lake by the king and queen on the royal barge. The king slips on the barge and throws the princess into the water.

The king slips & throws her into the water.



PART III

In the water, something curious happens. The princess regains her gravity and swims, like a swan. In the water, she also grows less silly and more sedate.

“After this,” MacDonald writes, “the passion of her life was to get into the water, and she was always the better behaved and the more beautiful the more she had of it.”

Everyone in the kingdom notices the change that comes over the princess, even the Metaphysicians. Her improved circumstance suggests a new theory and a new remedy from Hum-Drum and Kopy-Keck. Remarkably, the two philosophers are in agreement, telling the king that,

“If water of external origin and application could be so efficacious, water from a deeper source might work a perfect

cure; in short, that if the poor afflicted princess could by any means be made to cry, she might recover her lost gravity.”

Around this time, during the princess’ growing infatuation with the lake, an unnamed prince from a country far away sets out to look for the daughter of a queen. In his travels he eventually comes to the kingdom of Lagobel and to the lake. Here the prince sees a lady in the water, who in her swimming and silly play, may have been pretending to drown.

Immediately the prince dives into the lake to save the young lady, but as he brings her to shore, he is met, not with appreciation but scorn.

The princess is livid and proceeds to berate the brave prince. The prince, however, is more grounded in his disposition and begins to banter playfully. As they argue, the prince is falling in love. In fact, MacDonald writes,

“He had fallen in love with her almost, already; for her anger made her more charming than anyone else had ever beheld her; and, as far as he could see, which certainly was not far, she had not a single fault about her, except, of course, that she had not any gravity.”



PART IV

The prince's affection grows all through the next day as he, from a distance, watches her swim. The prince is not ready to reveal himself to the kingdom of Lagobel, and so he waits until the evening when the princess will finally be alone at the lake. As evening comes there is at last one radiant, white speck upon the water. The prince begins to sing what sounds like the words of a benediction, offering blessing upon the princess:

*“Lady fair,
Swan-white,
Lift thine eyes,
Banish night
By the might
Of thine eyes...”*

*Stream behind her
O'er the lake,
Radiant whiteness!
In her wake*

*Following, following for her sake.
Radiant whiteness!”*

The prince enters the water with the princess; they swim, they laugh and the world opens up to them. The prince has fallen in love with the princess, but the princess loves her lake.

Soon the princess makes a horrible discovery. The lake is drying up and no one knows why. Day by day the lake recedes to the point that she can no longer swim in it. Some suggest that the princess will die when the lake is finally gone. The princess is heartbroken, but she never cries.

We find that the lake is dying because it has been cursed. When the evil Princess Makemnoit learns of the joy found in the lake, she is furious. “I will soon set all right,” the witch says. “The king and the people shall die of thirst; their brains shall boil and frizzle in their skulls before I will lose my revenge.”

Princess Makemnoit places a curse on the lake and upon all water in the land. The next day there was no sound of falling water to be heard along the borders of the lake; the world is dying of thirst.



PART V

The waters recede and the bottom of the lake is revealed. One day a child sees something shining in the mud. It is a plate of gold, inscribed on one side with the following,

*“Death alone from death can save.
Love is death, and so is brave —
Love can fill the deepest grave.
Love loves on beneath the wave.”*

The other side explained the verse, saying,

*“If the lake should disappear,
they must find the hole through
which the water ran. But it would
be useless to try to stop it by any
ordinary means. There was but
one effectual mode — the body of
a living man could alone stanch
the flow. The man must give*

*himself of his own will; and the lake must take his
life as it filled. Otherwise the offering would be of no
avail. If the nation could not provide one hero, it was
time it should perish.”*

The prince, out of love for the princess, volunteers to give his life for her and as a ransom of many. He will plug up the hole, under one condition: that the princess accompany and comfort him as he dies.

She agrees and the next day they go to the lake and find the hole. The prince places his legs into the hole and uses his hands to cover the remaining corner. It is a painful position and he must endure it for hours as the waters rise, but he is resolved to his fate. The prince sings again, this time a melancholy song, but his desire and affection remain with the princess. Again, he blesses the princess as he sings, praying for her gravity,

*“Let, I pray, one thought of me
Spring, a little well, in thee;
Lest thy loveless soul be found
Like a dry and thirsty ground.”*

The prince places his legs in the hole.



PART VI

The hours pass and the prince grows weary from thirst and hunger. He asks the princess to feed him. She offers him bits of bread and wine to renew his strength. More time passes as the waters rise. Soon the princess realizes she can float and is ecstatic, but the prince is weary. At night the moon shines on the prince's pained face as the water reaches his neck. The prince, knowing his fate, asks the princess for a kiss. She grants his request and offers him one long, sweet but cold kiss. The prince can now die happy.

The waters cover his head, but as the prince drowns, something comes over the princess. She shrieks and has the look of terror in her eyes. She dives out of her boat and into the water to rescue the prince. Somehow, she pries the prince out of the hole and summons help to take him to into the palace. They try what they can to revive the prince, but without success. But just when all hope is lost, the sun rises and the prince opens his eyes.

Just then the princess bursts into tears as rains cover the land of Lagobel. On the ground she weeps as she regains her gravity. Unaccustomed as she is to the weight of it, she must now struggle to stand and learn to walk, but she also learns to love. The story ends as every good fairy tale should: the prince and princess marry and live happily ever after.

She regains her gravity.





EPILOGUE



Why am I sharing this story with you? It may be a bit fanciful, but there is a great deal of meaning in this story. I see the story as an allegory for the church in our time, which has lost its gravity and is struggling to make an impression upon the world.

There has always been a jealous power in the world that seeks to overcome the church by taking away her gravity. From the very beginning, words were whispered in her ears, suggesting she turn from the weightier commandment of obedience. As a cause of our disobedience, we find the church bewitched, and her obedience and stability always challenged.

The church has become too light. We recognize this as a problem but too often we seek solutions that are far too material or far too informed by the spirit of this age. Remedies are sought as the church seeks counsel with today's metaphysicians. Too often we place our trust in techniques or technology. We listen to words of statisticians, marketers, and other vain but fashionable philosophies in the hopes of finding relevance so that we the church might somehow grow more solid and make an impact on the world around us.

But there is no cure to be found here. The church must receive her gravity by grace, for "death alone from death can save." Instead, gravity must be found where it is given; in the ordinary but powerful means of grace — in the word and in sacrament. And so, the church must love and be loved by the one who gave his life for her.

The church must hear and heed the words of blessing sung over her. The church must be renewed by the waters of baptism and nourished with the bread and the wine that sustains if she is to be firmly rooted and established on the earth. The church must weep, not for pain, not for sorrow, but for the love of the one who gave his all, in order that we might live. Only then will the church enjoy an eternal weight of glory.

MacDonald brings his story near its end by writing,

"It was a long time before she got reconciled to walking. But the pain of learning it was quite counterbalanced by two things, either of which would have been sufficient consolation. The first was, that the prince himself was her teacher; and the second, that she could tumble into the lake as often as she pleased. Still, she preferred to have the prince jump in with her; and the splash they made before was nothing to the splash they made now."

It is not easy for the church to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which we have been called; that is to say, in the ordinary means of grace. It is not easy to bear the weight of glory, but that is our purpose and our calling. By ourselves, we are not capable of such a destiny, but by our side we have a teacher and savior who is more than capable, who loves us and is ready to jump in the water with us.