

December 28, 2008/Christmastide/David L. Edwards

## The Song of Salvation

Isaiah 61:1-2

*For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest....*

Psalms 148 *Praise God, sun and moon; praise God, all you shining stars!*

Luke 2:22-40 *Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying....*

If we use Advent as a season of spiritual work, giving attention to the importance of waiting and embracing even the difficult realities of our lives, not letting ourselves be distracted by the cultural distortions of Christmas, then chances are that we come to the celebration of Christmas itself with a keener, fresher spiritual awareness. If we have been attentive to our lives as persons and as a human family, while at the same time listening prayerfully to the scripture readings from week to week, then chances are that we come to Christmas itself hearing something more clearly, seeing something more deeply. The message of Advent is: Be faithful, keep watch, pay attention to life in all its challenges and difficulties. Be inwardly quiet, and listen deeply. This is, I think, what Paul meant by unceasing prayer (1 Thess. 5:17). The promise is that as we remain faithful to the realities of our lives, with patience and watchfulness, resisting the temptation to escape into numbness or nostalgia or sentimentality, we will experience what scripture calls the salvation of God, God's saving love. We will touch a spirit of wholeness and true peace that is at the heart of the universe. We will join the song of life.

Psalms 148 is often read on this First Sunday after Christmas. Sun and stars. Animals and people. Children and adults. The elderly and the young. Everyone and everything singing the universal song of God's praise. Many psalms speak of this song of life that is going on all the time. The creation is always singing the praises of God, but somewhere along the line, we stopped listening. I think we heard it clearly as young children, as young children do today. But then our ears got tuned to other frequencies—all the distracting noises and voices that sing and speak of things that don't really matter, that have little of meaning or beauty or truth to them. But as we become faithful in the practice of faith, we begin to listen and to hear once again, and then to join in the song.

C.S. Lewis wrote a wonderful science fiction trilogy. In the first volume *OUT OF THE SILENT PLANET*, Elwin Ransom, a professor of languages, is kidnapped by two rather mad scientists and taken to the planet Malacandra. Ransom wakes up from his drugged state in what he finally realizes is a spacecraft. The light pouring into his small cubicle is unlike any he has seen before. Out of the portal windows Ransom begins to feast his eyes and his soul on the array of celestial bodies: "planets of unbelievable majesty, and constellations undreamed of," "celestial sapphires, rubies, emeralds and pin-pricks of burning gold." "The lights trembled: they seemed to grow brighter as he looked." As time goes on, Ransom becomes aware of a more spiritual dimension to all of this. He begins to call into question the very word "space," a scientific term that Ransom realizes had created in his mind a false view of what he was now seeing. Space is not a cold, black, dead world. Lewis writes: "No: Space was the wrong name. Older thinkers had been wiser when they named it simply the heavens—the heavens which declared the glory...."

There is a wordless song of the universe that we may have heard from time to time, in moments when our hearts and minds were clear of preoccupations and burdens and such. An important part of our spiritual practice is to become inwardly quiet enough to really see and really hear, to touch once again this wonderful creation and our part in it, this creation which is always singing praise to God and inviting us to join in the song. Once we begin to hear and join that song, the insane folly of our destruction of our own environment stands out clearly to us. We see that we are not just destroying the very resources we need to live; we are silencing the song of life and its singers. The spiritual consequences of the environmental crisis are at least as significant as the material, physical ones, if not more so.

The prophet Isaiah has perceived the dawning of God's liberating activity. Israel's exile in Babylon is coming to an end. The dawn is beginning to break. There will be a return home. Seeing this, the prophet exclaims: "For Zion's sake, I will not keep silent." The time of waiting, of silence is now ended. Now is the time for speaking, for telling others of the good news, of singing the song of life. Now the prophet's message changes from judgment to the announcing of good news--God is bringing a new day. The images that best speak of this new situation are of a wedding. The relationship between Israel and God is that of a bride and bridegroom. Israel's life, which had disintegrated into injustice and spiritual malaise, resulting in abandonment and exile, now becomes the object of God's delight. The people will once again be like a precious jewel in God's sight.

Isaiah, who so clearly perceived Israel's failure to live according to God's justice, mercy, and peace, now is attentive to the movement of God toward new life for Israel. The prophet knows when to speak God's word of judgment, but the prophet also knows when to speak comfort and hope. There is a time for facing honestly and lamenting our failures to live as God made us to live, and there is a time for taking up the song of life anew as we live into a new time, a time of healing and hope.

The celebration of Jesus' birth is a part of that celestial, universal song of life. It is testimony that there is at work in the depths of life a Power that is always seeking to bring wholeness, healing, and balance into the creation itself and into human living. When we hear the prophets of Israel speaking of God's promise of salvation, it is about this intention at the very core of life, offering new opportunities for life and health and well being. Jesus' birth, his life, his death and resurrection--this is for us the fulfillment of that sacred intention, that promise.

There is the story of Simeon, a devout man way up in years who has devoted his whole life to God, to the temple, to waiting and watching for the signs of God's promised new life. He has hoped for God's messiah, one whom God would send to restore Israel's life and status. He is drawn to the temple the day that Jesus' parents bring their child for the prescribed rites of purification. Simeon has waited all these years, constantly trusting that even through the worst of times God was working in the depths to bring new life. And now he sees this child and knows this is it. Who knows how we KNOW these things. If we are faithful, if we are patient and watchful, not giving in to false hopes and distractions, we see it when it happens. We know the real thing when we see it. And that's what happens with Simeon.

Simeon breaks into a poetic speech, which we call the Canticle, or Song, of Simeon. It is a song to God. God, you have allowed me now to see your salvation. Now I can depart this life in peace and contentment. Here is your promise being fulfilled, a light for all peoples and a vindication of Israel. Then Simeon speaks a word to the parents, particularly to Mary. This child, he says, will be one over against people will have to choose. He will be a sign that will be opposed by some, welcomed by others. And, you his mother, a sword will pierce your soul as well. These words are not completely clear in their meaning. But as a spiritual teacher and one who proclaimed and lived God's reign over life, Jesus would certainly be either opposed or followed. He would confront people with the basic meaning and nature of life, asking them to choose. Mary would experience this in her own life as well.

Simeon joins in the song of life, the song of the universe, the song of God's praise. What I find most moving about this story is that here is this old man who has been faithful all these years, devoting himself to spiritual practice and attentiveness. Now at the end of his life, he sees the one in whom he believes God's promised salvation is embodied. Yet he does not feel sorry for himself, that here his life is nearing its end and he won't even get to see it all play out. Instead, Simeon rejoices that he has simply been allowed to see the birth of a new era for his people and for the world. It is enough just to know that it is happening. It reminds me of the story of Moses' death at the end of the Book of Deuteronomy. God leads Moses, who is now at the end of his life, up on a mountain overlooking the Land of the Promise. Moses has led the Israelites for forty years in the wilderness, through all kinds of trying experiences, moving ever so slowly toward the ancestral land that was to be the end of the journey from slavery. But Moses won't be able to enter the land himself. He will die there in the mountains. His gravesite will never be known. But it is enough for him to see the land and to know that the

people will go there. He sees his own life as part of something much greater, and in this there is contentment and peace.

Such a spiritual perspective is very rare, but much needed, these days when in our culture the ultimate goal of life is personal fulfillment, achieving our own goals, getting everything we want for ourselves. That individualistic pattern of personal gain, whether material or spiritual, is being revealed in its emptiness and shallowness by the present economic collapse. Life lived just for me, for my profit, for my success, for my company's wealth—that pattern of life is by its nature always headed for collapse. But to be persons who find our greatest fulfillment in seeing the wider scope of things, of life, who find joy not in what we attain for ourselves but in being part of a greater fabric of life and its purposes—that is true, deep, and indestructible joy.

I had an experience of this recently, at our daughter's wedding. It came to my mind as I read the story of Simeon this week. During the ceremony, as I sat with Kaye watching Shelley and Tim move through the words and gestures reminding them and all of us that our love is part of a Greater Love, a peculiar awareness opened up in me. I would not always be here to be part of their lives. Their life together would go on beyond mine. It was one of those "intimations of mortality" that we have with more frequency and clarity as we grow older. But it was not a terribly sad feeling. There was a profound joy in it. In that moment of their marriage, I was glimpsing a reality, a love that is far greater than I am, but in which I am blessed to have a part.

These days of Christmas, after the cultural observance has died down, are spiritually every rich. If we have done our spiritual work, if we have tried in our way to be faithful to our lives and the life of God's world, with all the struggles and challenges, even the suffering, then we hear that song emerge. It is the song of the universe still praising God. And we are invited once again to join in the song, with our voices and with our lives.