

December 28, 2014 / Christmastide / David L. Edwards

The Song of Creation, the Song of Salvation

Isaiah 61:10-62:5 *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 used Advent as a season of spiritual work—which historically it has been--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 came to the celebration of Christmas itself with some real spiritual awareness. We may even have touched some real joy. The promise is that as we remain faithful to the realities of our lives, with patience and watchfulness, we will experience what scripture calls the salvation of God. 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 perfect for this First Sunday after Christmas. Sun and stars. All the animals--even sea monsters! All humans--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 at some point, we stopped listening. We heard it clearly as young children, as young children do today. Yet, 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 meaning or beauty or truth to them. Yet, as we become faithful in the practice of faith, we relearn how to listen for and hear, and then join in the song.

Ana Ekstrom loaned me an article, which I finally got around to reading. And how glad I am that I did. ["The Call of the Wild: Bernie Krause on the Disappearing Music of the Natural World," *The Sun*, September 2014] It is an interview with Bernie Krause, a long-time musician, now in his seventies, who ended up in the field of bioacoustics, the study of the sounds of nature. His work and findings confirm something I have for a long time sensed, especially as I read psalms like today's. All creatures make sounds, sounds that serve many

purposes. Yes, there are even the voices of non-animal creatures—water, wind, trees, and so forth. Krause records and listens to what we might call the choruses of sounds in certain places, not individual sounds, like one bird or one insect. All creation does, in fact, sing together. Many voices are being, and have already been, silenced by human presence and destructive activity. The creation blends its voices, its songs. Only humanity insists that its voice be dominant, even the ONLY one. Our work is to blend our living into the world around us, to harmonize our ways of life with the rest of creation. Otherwise, we spell our own destruction.

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 drugged and kidnapped by two rather mad scientists and taken to the planet Malacandra. Ransom wakes up 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.* Ransom calls into question the very word *space*, a term that 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....*

Psalm 19 puts it this way: *The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament (an old word that means literally the “dome” of heaven) declares God’s handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard; yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.* There is a wordless song of the universe that is heard in sounds and silence. We may have heard it in moments when our hearts and minds were quiet enough. 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.

The prophet Isaiah perceives that Israel’s exile in Babylon is coming to an end. 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. The prophet’s message changes from judgment and confrontation to announcing good news--God is bringing a new day. Isaiah uses the images of a wedding. God is

marrying, or remarrying, Israel. Israel's life, which had *disharmonized* in violence and injustice, now is *being loved* back into its true, authentic life. The prophet knows when to speak God's word of judgment, and when to speak comfort, hope, and encouragement. Now is the time for taking up the song of life, of healing and hope, justice and peace.

The celebration of Jesus' birth is a part of that universal song of life. It is testimony that there is at work in the depths of life a Power that is always bringing wholeness, healing, and balance into the creation and into human living. Jesus' birth, his life, his death and resurrection—this is the embodiment, or incarnation, if you will, of that sacred intention, the Word of God, in a human being like us. In him and in following him we see and reclaim our true humanity.

Simeon is a devout man, way up in years, who has given 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 to bring new life. And now he sees this child and knows this is it. If we are faithful, patient, and watchful, we see IT when it happens. We know the real thing when we see it, just like 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 peaceful and content. Here is your promise fulfilled, a light for all peoples. Then Simeon speaks a word to the parents, particularly to Mary. This child, he says, will be one who 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. Yet, 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. And there is Anna, also in her sunset years, who also has devoted herself to God. She sees this child and wants to tell everyone that their hopes have been fulfilled. What I find so powerful in this story is that here are these old people who have been faithful all these years, devoting themselves to spiritual practice and attentiveness. Now toward the end of their lives, they see the one in whom they believe God's promised salvation is embodied. Yet they do not feel sorry for themselves, that their lives are nearing an end and they won't see it all play out.

Instead, they rejoice that they have simply been allowed to see the birth of a new era. 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 at the end of his work and 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, yet he won't be able to enter the land himself. He will die there in the mountains, his burial place forever unknown.

However, 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 deep contentment and peace. That is hearing and joining the song of life, the song of the creation, the universe.

Such a spiritual perspective is so needed these days. 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 empty and shallow, what the writer of Ecclesiastes called *vanity*. It is spiritually and physically killing us. Life lived just for me, my profit, my success, my company's wealth, yes, even *my church* or *my religion*—that pattern of life is by its nature always headed for collapse. However, to be persons who find 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 and its well-being--that is true, deep, and indestructible joy. That is singing the song of the universe. And it is a song of salvation, of wholeness and health for everyone and everything.

I have experienced this many times, especially in recent years. Once was at our daughter Shelley's wedding. As I watched 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 deeper and wider 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. It is a kind of sharp pain, yet one that opens to something else, a profound joy. In that moment of their marriage, I was glimpsing a reality, a love far greater than I am, but in which I am blessed to have a part. I heard and joined, even for a moment, the song of creation.

These days after Christmas are one of my favorite times of the year. The cultural superficialities are over. The merchants are putting away the tinsel and lights, already reaching for the Valentines and the Easter bunnies. Many people have gone through the holidays on the surface of it all—the shopping, the decorations, the parties, the presents, the celebrations--and are now looking for the next bit of excitement or preparing for the next

thing. Yet others have been doing their spiritual work, have tried to be faithful to their lives and the life of God's world, with all the struggles and challenges, even the suffering. In these days of Christmastide, there is a certain quietness, around us and within us. And in that quietness we can hear, even faintly, the song emerge. It is the song of the universe still praising God. And we are finding the way of joining the song, with our voices, our spirits, and our lives.

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May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts, be pleasing to You, O God, our rock, our redeemer, and our refuge. Amen.