

The Breath of Praise

An Invitation to Eastertide Communion

Text: Psalm 150

Rev. Dr. Geordie Campbell

May 5, 2019

*i thank you god for most this amazing
day: for leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything
which is natural which is infinite which is yes*

*(i who have died am alive again today,
and this is the sun's birthday: this is the birth
day of life and of love and of wings: and of the gay
great happening illimitably earth)*

*how should any tasting touching hearing sensing seeing
breathing any – lifted from the no
of all nothing – human merely being
doubt unimaginable You*

*(now the ears of my ears awake
and now the eyes of my eyes are opened)*

What a burst of supreme gladness! It came into the world through the perceptive heart of ee cummings, who, you may recall, is the poet whose literary style rarely capitalized anything or saw any need for punctuation to emphasize his words.

In fact, on this one he doesn't need large letters or exclamation points of any kind! His phrases simply exude goodness and grace and life overflowing. No qualifiers or conditions or hesitations. And no "if-onlys", or "as-soon-as", or "yeah-buts" in sight.

"i thank you god for most this amazing day" – Those eight words bear a perfect fit as the ebb and flow of Eastertide is with us again. And eight more words, too: *"i who have died am alive again today"*

I wonder: Is cummings referring to Jesus being alive again or is he generalizing it to include any living breathing child of the resurrection? Is the setting only in the garden on that first day or here and now in the very place and midst of our lives?

Such exuberance quickly turns me to the awesome power of praise. Truly: it's such an energy-center for life's expression of the good the better and the best. Honestly: praise can turn darkness to light, literally, metaphorically; and transform fear to hope.

Our Psalm assigned for today puts praise front-and-center as one of the essential spiritual tasks for our very human souls now and again; to learn the art of “yes!” and to practice it lest we become lost in the all-to-common land of the luke-warm.

More: it commands praise a dozen times in only a half a dozen verses. Its cadence is full of music; it invokes the declaration of instruments and notes and volume and tempo and even of the silence between the sounds of trumpet and lute and harp.

And it’s as about breathing, too. As if to make the connection clear that, the very process of lungs drawing air, is a form of praise. For without ruach, the sacred breath of God, life can be (please take no offence) so proper and staid and utterly congregational!

Atlantic Magazine notes “praise and awe are very close cousins and have the potential of expanding our worldview and shrinking our ego. Their study reveals that awe is the second-most common reason that people get goose-bumps. (the first being cold).”¹

One more turn on this Easter side of life. Eric Anderson is a friend of mine who is a pastor in Hilo, Hawaii. He recently wrote that just as our Psalm commands “let everything that breathes praise the Lord” the earth comes to breathe praise, too.²

Living in the land of volcanoes, he observes the earth with scientific precision. “Mountains breathe. As magma fills the chambers beneath our active volcanoes, their surfaces expand. When pressures beneath the ground diminish, the slopes settle back.”

“Last summer the world watched as rifts opened in residential neighborhoods, exhaling noxious gases and then lava. For thirteen weeks, liquid rock poured out as the volcano exhaled clouds of ash that fogged the landscape.”

“Then the land caught its breath. The lava stopped, the plumes subsided, the skies cleared. The volcanoes’ breath brought destruction but also breathed creation. Hawaii is larger today by 875 acres. As the land cools, adventurous seeds will crack it into soil.”

“I have seen, over and again, the wonder of green leaves emerging from volcanic rock. Someday – not too soon – papaya groves could rise again. It is the majesty of earth’s own breath, inhaling and exhaling. What can it do, but praise the Lord?”

So that’s it for today. Nothing complex at all really, but something co-mingled and blessed with profound simplicity and enormous truth. The power of praise in our life and the goodness of life.

Especially these weeks so close to Easter’s astounding pronouncement that life is good and gracious and grand beyond all knowing, such that even the earth itself catches her breath with praise.

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My family and my friends, come now, the bread of life and the cup of love are set here for each of us, and for all who have breath to praise the Lord. Amen.

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¹ "Awesomeness" in Century Marks, Christian Century, February 15, 2017, p. 8 – as reported in Atlantic Magazine, January February 2017.

² Eric Anderson, "The Breath of Praise" April 25, 2019, Daily Devotional, the God Is Still Speaking Writers Group.