

Living in the Mindfulness of Praise
Psalm 150:1-6

In the Hebrew language of the Old Testament, there is a wonderful word, *ruach*, that can be translated as breath, spirit, or wind. In Genesis 1:1, God's Spirit moves over the face of the watery chaos and brings forth life. In Ezekiel 37, God's Spirit is breathed into the valley of dry bones, and there is life.

In the New Testament, the Greek word is *pneuma*. Jesus says to Nicodemus, "the wind blows where it chooses" (St. John 3:8). In St. John 20, after the Resurrection, Jesus comes to the disciples and breathes on them, and says, "Receive the Holy Spirit . . ." And in Acts 2, on the day of Pentecost, there is a sound like the rush of a mighty wind, and everyone is filled with the Holy Spirit.

God's Spirit dwells within us, as close to us as our next breath. To live is to breathe. The psalmist says, to breathe is to praise God. It is an imperative. We are created for the praise of God. The Westminster Shorter Catechism asks: "What is the chief end of humanity?" The answer: "To glorify God and to enjoy him forever." This leads to the climactic Psalm 150: "Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!"

To breathe in is to receive the grace of God. To breathe out is to offer praise to God with our words and with our lives. We inhale, and we exhale. There is a natural rhythm. In the same way that music has beats and measures, our lives are measured. There is evening and morning, each day measured. There are six days of work and one day of rest, each week measured. God has ordered our lives in such a way that we give and receive, work and rest, inhale and exhale.

This is God's intention. But our human temptation is to live outside God's will for us. We do not live measured lives. We do not live ordered lives. We sometimes live hurried and chaotic lives. Yet this is not God's purpose for us. We were created to receive grace and to offer praise. But at times we forget to praise.

When Israel violated the Sabbath, the people sinned in two ways. They neglected their essential need to rest— Exodus 31:17 has been translated, "On the seventh day God rested and caught his breath" (Herman Gunkel and

Mark E. Biddle, eds., *Genesis: Mercer Library of Biblical Studies* [Macon, a.: Mercer University Press, 1997, 116]. They forgot that God had liberated them from slavery. Many of us, even the most sophisticated among us, can become enslaved to destructive patterns of living.

I read about the experience of a group of world-class climbers who had died on Mount Everest. An interesting comment was made by one of the expert guides in that field. “Most of the people who die climbing Mount Everest,” he said, “make it to the top. They die on the way down. They discover, after they have made it, that they do not have enough oxygen to get down the mountain. Or they make bad decisions, critical errors, because of the lack of oxygen.”

This is a parable of us. The spiritual life is our oxygen. We may get everything we want in this life and die in the process. Lack of spiritual insight may lead us to choose things that are not really important in place of what is nearest and life giving to us. What is God’s order and design for you? Listen to the way 2 Timothy 3:16 is translated by Eugene Peterson: “Every part of scripture is God-breathed and useful in one way or another—showing us truth, exposing our rebellion, correcting our mistakes, training us to live God’s way” (THE MESSAGE).

In worship that is shaped by the Scriptures, we begin to understand that praise is an essential experience for God’s people. This has a number of practical implications for us. In worship we discover an order and a design for our lives that we ignore at our peril. If our lives are cluttered or over-whelmed, we need to reorient ourselves toward God, who grants each day to us as a gift.

God wants us to have times of rest, renewal, catching our breath. In the wholeness of creation there is the rest of God. We were created to praise God. When our hearts and minds and spirits are oriented toward God, we are not so critical of others, not so weighed down by everyday life.

In our New Testament, our primary manual for worship is the book of Revelation. It is a like a doxology that gathers together all that came before it. Many misunderstand Revelation, or avoid it, but it is really the experience of St. John of Patmos, who is “caught up in the spirit on the Lord’s day” (1:10).

There St. John is given insight in the midst of great suffering. There is resonance between Psalm 23 and Revelation 7: “He leads me beside still waters, he restores my soul” (Psalm 23:2-3), and Revelation 7:17: “the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

Because the reading of Scripture has shaped St. John, he sees the glory of God that is finally the one and only purpose of worship. This also happens as we read the Psalms, intended to teach us that a life of praise occurs in the midst of very difficult experiences.

The Psalms can be read as a long roadmap that passes through illness, loss of possessions, physical danger, depression, isolation, pain, fear, grief, and anger, on the way to this conclusion, this doxology, Psalm 150: “Let everything that breathes praise the Lord” (v. 6)! Alleluia. Amen.