

your single clap reverberated throughout the concert hall like a boom of thunder. But you were the only one who clapped, and clearly, you chose the wrong moment to do so. Perhaps someone snickered. People around you turned to see what goofball had spoiled the moment with an inappropriate clap. You sank down into your seat and put your program over your face.

We applaud things that move us. It's what we do. Experts have long pondered the origins of this peculiar human behavior of banging our hands together when excited, pleased or instructed to do so by a flashing APPLAUSE sign. Babies seem to clap their hands instinctively when they are happy, which leads us to believe that clapping for joy is a reflex that's inherent in being human.

Some speculate that human applause is actually a way of trying to re-create some of the louder sounds in nature like thunder. It's a natural way of making ourselves be heard by others, whether it's expressing our appreciation to that distant person on the stage or cheering for our favorite team.

Whatever the reason, on Christmas Day, we celebrate Jesus. We praise Jesus. We thank God. And it is totally appropriate to do so. The Incarnation, the Divine becoming human, is perhaps the greatest drama in the story of humanity. It deserves our applause. It requires our loud and boisterous adulation.

And our psalm text helps us to understand this. Being one of the world's most ancient books, the Bible refers to clapping and even refers to the "applause" of the natural world. "The trees of the field clap their hands in praise to God" (Isaiah 55:12). The psalmist proclaims that "the floods clap their hands...at the presence of the Lord" (Psalm 98:8). The people of God echo nature's praise as the writer of Psalm 47 instructs: "Clap your hands, all you peoples, shout to God with loud songs of joy" (v. 1).

Sometimes, applause in the Bible is used to express contempt, as in Nahum's prediction that when Israel's enemy, the Assyrian empire and its capital Nineveh, would eventually fall, "all who hear the news...clap their hands" (3:19). A modern day equivalent might be when the opposing team suffers a defeat, or audience members throw rotten tomatoes at the singers on stage, or fans booing at the bad call by a referee.

While rulers and actors are often looking for applause, the Bible reminds us that the one who really deserves it first is God. "The LORD is king! Let the earth rejoice," thunders the psalmist at the beginning of our text, Psalm 97. There's no doubt who should get the cheers here! Actors and rulers come and go from the stage, but God remains the greatest ruler of all time, the greatest player in history: God has acted on behalf of all creation in Jesus Christ.

That this text is one of the readings for Christmas Day is thus no coincidence. It reminds us that God is worthy of all the clapping, foot stomping, noise and shouting we can muster. In Christ, God is revealed as being the greatest, most amazing and awesome God.

Unlike earthly despots who tend to rule with force, fear and intimidation, "righteousness and justice" are the foundations of God's throne (v. 2). God is not only praised by the forces of nature; God *controls* them because they were created by God.

What else does God do? God...consumes adversaries with a cleansing fire (v. 3), "light[s] up the world and the earth sees and trembles" (v. 4), causes the mountains to "melt like wax" (v. 5), brings justice and order to the whole creation.

How does God bring order and how are righteousness and justice revealed on the stage of history? Unlike those autocrats, tyrants and kings who seat themselves on a throne to be applauded, praised and worshiped, our God prefers to perform more behind the scenes. "The heavens proclaim his righteousness," says the psalmist (v. 6). But when the heavens opened to announce that God had arrived on the world stage in person, the performance was only visible in a field near the dusty, little town of Bethlehem (Luke 2:13). "All the peoples behold his glory," writes the psalmist; but before they do, the first people to see that glory were a few poor shepherds sleepily guarding their flocks by night in the middle of nowhere (Luke 2:8).

Reading this psalm is like listening to cheerleaders at a pep rally.

- "The LORD loves those who hate evil," says the psalmist. *Wild applause and cheers!*
- "He guards the lives of his faithful; he rescues them from the hand of the wicked" (v. 10). *Shouting and air horns!*
- We praise God because God is "most high over all the earth" (v. 9) and yet humble enough to become one of us. *Foot-stomping and synchronized clapping!*

- We can exalt God "far above all gods" (v. 9) because those other gods are fake imitations that will not satisfy. *Whistling and waving red and green hand towels!*

And so the psalm continues. In coming in the person of Christ, and through his own defense of us through his death and resurrection, God has saved us from the evil of sin and death and offered us the promise of new life.

All of this is spotlighted in Jesus, whose birth we celebrate and applaud today. "Light dawns for the righteous," says the psalmist, echoing John's words of praise for Jesus, the Word of God made flesh. "The light shines in the darkness," wrote John, "and the darkness did not overcome it" (John 1:5). The coming of Jesus was like the lights coming up at the end of a long, dramatic story, revealing not only the great performer, but also the audience for whom it was all done in love.

It's a performance worthy of an eternal standing ovation. "Rejoice in the LORD, O you righteous; and give thanks to his holy name!" (v. 12). We can give up our applause to God for Jesus.

Better yet, we should give up our lives to him! Christmas deserves a standing ovation of thunderous applause that makes the whole earth shake. On this Christmas Day, let's give it up for Jesus!

Prayer: It may seem naive, in a world of grief, to choose to live in joy; it may seem foolish, in a world where solemnity is power, to sing and dance to a different tune; it may seem cruel, in a world of suffering and injustice, to speak of light and celebration; but you have come, Jesus, to bring joy into our grief, light into our darkness, singing into our mourning; and it is an act of healing and proclamation to believe and embrace the joy you offer. Joy to the world! The Lord is come! Hallelujah! Amen.

Sources:

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Give It Up for Jesus!

Christmas Day, December 25, 2016

The Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Psalm 97 and John 1:1-14

It's Christmas Day and we're here to give it up for Jesus! Chances are that at some point over the last several weeks of the Advent season you've attended some kind of artistic performance at the end of which the audience was inspired, or felt obligated, to applaud.

- Perhaps the artists were first-graders at the elementary school participating in a holiday program. Applause.
- Maybe they were members of the middle school band trying to play in tune. Applause.
- Or, the performance might have been your own church's Christmas program which featured kids dressed as shepherds and angels wearing bathrobes and towels and a miniature Mary and Joseph who were 8 and 10 years old. Mary was holding a baby doll which was standing in for baby Jesus. You applauded.
- Perhaps the artists were accomplished musicians and singers. You heard a choir with orchestra render Handel's *Messiah*. At the end, you applauded.

Applauding is usually the appropriate thing to do. Not to applaud would be horribly hurtful and insufferably insulting to the first-graders, middle-schoolers, and kids in the Christmas program or the singers in the choir.

Yet, some argue that there are times when it's inappropriate to applaud. Sunday morning worship, for example. Do you applaud when the soloist comes to the end of her rendition of "Sweet Little Jesus Boy"? Some people say, yes; some say, no. In many churches with a lively worship atmosphere, people are applauding all the time. They applaud the singing; they give God a hand; they applaud the choir, the drummer, and the ushers, and each other. They might even applaud something the preacher says!

There's no social faux pas worse than applauding at an inappropriate time. At classical concerts, some hapless fools will applaud at the end of a movement, when the proper time to applaud is at the end of the selection itself. Ever done that? You were so inspired and excited by the performance that, in a lull which you interpreted as the end of the song or movement, you brought your hands enthusiastically together, and the sound produced by