

**“THE PECULIARITY OF PRAISE”**

A sermon by Dale Rosenberger, Minister  
First Congregational Church, UCC, Darien, Connecticut

Many of us grew up with the sense Psalm 96 inspires in us. By that I mean lifting up praising God as the unifying impulse in responding to the gift of life. Here all creation joins our human gladness in turning back to God. I love v. 12 where the trees of the forest sing for joy. Do you ever hear the trees speak, the winter whistle through the bare limbs, the hush of breezes through leaves? Here all of life looks back to God thankful for existence, bowing reverently to God for our being.

Psalm 96 exclaims praise. Its tone glows, inviting us in, gathering every flicker of life in this primal impulse. We were created to glorify God and to experience the joy it brings. It is the most natural and right thing we could ever do. This impulse makes for the unity of creation, and our seamless and secure place in the greater scheme of things. It takes us to the place “just right” the hymn “Simple Gifts” lifts up. It is living where we belong, in the valley of God’s love and delight. It is our song. We were made to sing it, blessing God’s name, reveling in our deliverance.

Notice the Psalm culminates in judgment. And even our judgment is happy. No fire and brimstone. No river of fire. No wailing and gnashing of teeth. No outer darkness where some wretches are out but we are in. It embraces all peoples. Judgment is good because when we live accountable lives, we live our best lives.

It isn’t a sweaty moment of truth, wondering where our lives hang in the balance. “God will judge the world with righteousness and the peoples with his truth,” says the last verse. God will put everything right. God alone is trustworthy in this; we flounder as judges, as bringers of final justice. But in this loving accountability, God has it all covered. God sorts out everything that makes us scratch our head. God is in control to solve haunting contradiction and serve up equity from above. Affirmation resounds from all sides, the slapping of waves and the quiet serenity of meadows, with all of the curious animals God placed there scampering across.

Time was we took all of this for granted. Today if you attend worship—in a church, in a synagogue, or in a mosque—you might get asked why you feel the need to praise God. Does your God have low self-esteem that needs to be boosted? Some have asked me. It is an ironic comment. For in that moment we enter into and celebrate the truth that we are God’s and bear the stamp of God’s image, we get asked questions about our worshipping God that reinvents God in our image. Does God have low self-esteem? Not him who commands seas and mountains.

I love how this psalm evokes serenity and joy at belonging to God. It provokes wonder at the magnificence of God’s world. It comforts and assures us that we’re in good hands. It insists these gentle hands of comfort and vindication finally rule the world. So if praise has become peculiar in a painfully modern secular world, I call it a peculiar joy. I plan to enjoy it. I invite you to do the same as our praise in

music brings it all home. "O sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth. Sing to the Lord, bless his name; tell of his salvation from day to day." Amen.