

A Prophecy and a Song of Praise by Jake Buhler

(18 slides of trees accompany this reflection)

Isaiah Text: Imagine you are in Palestine. The Jews are still captive in Babylon. Cyrus the Persian is about to conquer Babylon. It is October 29, 539 BCE. That is the actual date of the fall of Babylon.

Chapter 55 belongs to a section beginning with chapter 40. The writer devotes chapters 40-66 to a prophecy of liberation. Judah will be restored to Palestine. The writer is caught up with all creation including the stars, moon, trees, and more: all will praise God the Creator once there is liberation. The two verses are just one part of this anticipated jubilation.

If we want to look back to chapter 40, it begins with what we all know appears in Handel's Messiah: "Comfort Comfort ye my People". And it ends in chapter 66 with "From new moon to new moon, and from Sabbath to Sabbath all flesh shall come to worship me, says the Lord".

This is the big picture. There are 26 chapters devoted to prophecy about what is about to happen. Redemption is just around the corner, and the entire universe must get ready to praise the Lord.

Psalms text: This text is much older than Isaiah. We do not know when it was written. We know that the Temple of Zerubabel used the ancient texts as the Psalter. David is given credit but the origins of psalms are much older.

The psalms are a diary of emotions of despair, praise, complaints, thanksgiving, hopes, aspirations, fear and much more. Chapter 8 is an outpouring of how great the Lord is and how insignificant people are. The two verses of our text are a reflection of the heavens. It is proof that the ancient peoples knew much about the moon, the stars and more. They knew much.

Amos talks about the star constellation called Pleiades. The Pleiades are 6 stars according to the Greeks which represented the 7 daughters of Atlas. One of them had a shameful marriage and hid herself. That is why there are only 6 stars. In Thailand where I lived for many years there is another story about the Pleiades. A mother hen gave her life for her 6 little chicks. Her reward was that the 6 little chicks were placed in the sky to remind us of unselfishness.

But I am straying.

The psalmist is saying that our Lord is a great God, and his fingers can make moons and stars. And so we believe our God to be that great.

Summary of our texts: Both the prophecy and the praise present a God that is majestic. God is so great that God is able to make trees that clap their hands, and God can make stars with just fingers. This is poetry at its best. And indeed poetry is what the Psalms and Isaiah are all about.

The Trees at Osler Mennonite Church that are clapping their hands: I have walked around OMC, and everywhere I went I saw trees and I heard them clapping their hands! Poetically of course. OMC is an orchestra of trees that are clapping their hands. I will name the members of this orchestra of trees.

There is only one Zaporozhye oak tree. When I walked up to it, it clapped its hands as though to say, "I am only one tree but listen to my story: When the Mennonites arrived in Russia in 1789 my mother was already more than 250 years old. They took shelter under my mother's branches and later used my mother as a landmark. She finally died at age 500. Did you know that Hella Banman found an oak acorn in Zaporozhye and had Lakeshore Nursery sprouted me into a small tree. That tree in the picture is me! Listen to my story about the Mennonites and the Ukrainians and the Russians and the Cossacks. I know all the czars, and revolutionaries and peacemakers and cavalry officers. I guess when I clap all the historians listen up!"

There is only one Dropmore Linden tree. "Dick Braun planted me about 20 years ago. Good job he did. I was only 4 years old then and he put me next to the street. I have done well and folks say I am a fast grower compared to that oak tree. When I clap my hands, folks say I am big for my age. In Germany, they made a song about me, called "Am Brunnen vor den Tore, da steht ein Lindenbaum". People get all teary-eyed about me because I am a bit nostalgic"

The youngest tree is an amur maple in the cemetery. Listen to the amur maple tree: "When I clap, you can hardly hear me, because I am less than 5 years old. My leaves turn an awesome reddish color. I'm sort-of a redhead, and I like that. When Bill Peters mows the grass he always takes care not to hurt me. Good guy he is that uncle and grandpa"

Not to be outdone are the green ash, and they are saying, “listen carefully for our clapping because it is as good as any clapping here at OMC! Jim Dyck and Wilf Buhler and their friends planted quite a few in the picnic grounds. We have suffered from drought, wind and worms. But we survive and when we clap you can tell we are a bit worn but we are all God’s children so we clap on and on. Our champion was planted decades earlier, and it sits on the street near the cemetery. It is our grandfather. A shy grandfather it is for in spring it is the last tree to get its leaves. It is Jake Buhler’s favourite tree because it is reluctant and shy, characteristics he does not have, I would say. When we green ash clap our hands, all is well with the world.

The blue spruce and the black spruce trees can clap too! Listen to them: “we can clap in winter...when all the other trees are hibernating; we can clap as the blue jays and chickadees peck away at our cones. Our clapping is very special. There is a story I want to tell about the blue spruce in the cemetery. It is said that tree was planted to watch over the dead, and those guys are not going anywhere fast. There is another story, which may not be true, but apparently that tree is waiting for the Day of Resurrection, and will record the names of those who will rise to meet their Maker. And the others, well.. you know where they are going!. Well as I said, it is just a story...but these days you can never tell. ”

The cedar shrubs are not to be outdone: “we too can clap in winter as we line the lovely buildings. Our clapping is a bit softer, but we are here! We are proud to be in the Osler MC yard because our cousins in Lebanon are mentioned in the Bible a number of times.”

The oldest trees easily are the Manitoba Maples. They were planted along the south and west sides of the yard after 1928 when the church was built. The first decade was very tough because of the dirty 30s when there was little rain. Some died and were re-planted. We cannot be sure who planted them but we can almost be right to say Jacob J Boldt and Abram and Cornelius Driedger were likely involved. Jacob J’s son Jacob B, and his son Leonard planted some of our black spruce and green ash. When I went to interview the Manitoba Maples, the two oldest ones said to me: “ We have heard and seen it all:

The lilac shrubs are prominent. When Susan Braun photographed all these photos that I am showing you, the lilacs said she could only show them their photo on Sunday morning, if she promised that this message would be spoken to all gathered in the sanctuary. Here it is: "We are not tall, our branches are not thick, and our leaves do not turn a lovely red or orange. But when we blossom in early June, our flowers are the rage. Lovers pick our fragrant flowers and we can say we have seen more first kisses than any other shrub or tree."

The most reviled and disliked tree is surely the Siberian Elm, sometimes also called the Russian Elm. They grow quickly sucking all the moisture available. It is not a lovely tree, and it sheds millions of fluffy seeds. Yet in the early 1970s, someone planted them along the west side of the yard. Listen to them speak: "We Siberian Elms want all to know that we Love our Creator. We will clap for our God, no matter what people think about us".

The mountain ash stands tall up against the church building. It is not an ash tree at all, and it belongs to the rose family. But listen to it anyway: "You may regard us as a pretender tree, but which tree can produce berries that Bohemian Waxwings eat in the middle of winter when there is little food for those lovely winter birds. We clap for our God whether we be ash or rose trees!"

The flowers are listening at all this clapping. But they are not threatened. There are petunias and many more. "All we do is look pretty. We may not be able to clap but we can sure put on a show for our God!"

Not to be outdone is the long raised garden bed that wishes to make a statement: "we are not so good at clapping as are the trees, say the vegetables, but can you eat a tree?. We grow and grow, and end up in the stomachs of people. We are the reason people are healthy. Home grown veggies, we are! Please clap for us!!"

Summary: What I have just done is to describe that Osler Mennonite Church has put a strong value on trees, on shrubs, on flowers and on gardening. In so doing members here believe that beauty is important. They and you believe that if trees are good, clapping is also good. And because there are many species, there is wide variety of clapping. The trees at OMC make for an awesome orchestra.

Surely God must be pleased.

Jake Buhler, July 31, 2016