

Exclaiming praise! (Psalm 148)

No one and nothing escapes Psalm 148's exhortation.

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There are an aggressive number of exclamation points in Psalm 148, at least as rendered by the updated edition of the New Revised Standard Version. In the 14 verses of the psalm, there are 11 exclamation points; nearly every sentence ends with one. This observation led me down a rabbit hole of close textual study, in which I spent more time than I would like to admit counting the number of exclamation points in various English translations.

I'm sure you're curious, so here's what I found: the NRSVue is consistent with its predecessors—both the RSV and the NRSV also have 11. The New American Standard Bible only has six, as does the Contemporary English Version. The New International Version and the King James Version, perhaps too regal for such frivolity, have zero. The New King James Version lightens up a bit and adds six. The Common English Bible comes in at a whopping 18, having chopped several of the verses into multiple sentences requiring punctuation. The CEB text moves along at a frantic pace that leaves the reader somewhat breathless, what with all the exclaiming.

Punctuation in English versions of the Bible is, of course, a matter of interpretation and educated guesswork. Usually, I'm not a fan of overused exclamation points. In professional emails, use too many and you come across as overly cheery; on public signs, they just seem out of place.

But here in this psalm assigned to the Sunday after Christmas, I think the more the better. The bright stars and angels and highest heavens remind us of Christmas Eve, even if there are no shepherds or babies in mangers. But it's the exclamation points that really earn this psalm its place in the Christmas readings.

I'm reminded of Gladys Herdman in Barbara Robinson's classic *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*—the girl who plays the angel in the pageant. "Since Gladys was the only one in the pageant who had anything to say she made the most of it: 'Hey! Unto you a child is born!' she hollered, as if it was, for sure, the best news in the world." (I know you're about to look up the text in Luke, so I'll save you the time: In the NRSVue, the angel doesn't get an exclamation point, but the heavenly host does. The Common English Bible, apparently prone to bursts of excitement, follows Gladys's lead and gives the angel two.)

The exclamation point makes us stop and pay attention. It's a non-negotiable command. In the psalm, no one and nothing escapes the exhortation to praise: Fruit trees! Hills! Cattle! Birds! Young people! Old people! Princes! Sea monsters! Whoever you are and whatever you are doing right now, stop and see what God has done!

It's worth sitting here awhile with the breathless excitement of Psalm 148, because all too soon the exclamations turn to questions. The gospel reading for this week zooms ahead in time, and the baby Jesus is now almost a teenager, defying his parents and hanging out with the synagogue leaders. The text is full of question marks: "Why have you treated us like this?" his anxious parents ask after he goes missing. "Why were you searching for me?" he retorts. "Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?"

There are plenty of questions ahead. For now, though, while we can still hear the cry of the baby in the manger, while the angel song still lingers, let's join the chorus of all creation: Praise the Lord!