

I will forever remember this passage as the Gospel text for our baccalaureate service during graduation weekend at Wittenberg University. It was the first time I was ever formally part of planning a worship service: from what would be the over-arching theme and the bulletin cover image to the hymns and readings. And then the rest of the student planners (in their “infinite” wisdom) decided they wanted me to read this very passage from John. But that’s not the part of the service I remember the most. What happened before, in the service, still amazes me to this day.

Let’s just say we had a rather popular student serve as a lector for one of the other readings, and when he finished...truly, I tell you, the people gathered in Weaver Chapel that afternoon, broke out in thunderous applause. Now this isn’t about the age-old debate over whether or not to applaud after a choir finishes singing as a sign of appreciation. They put their hands together after a Scripture-reading, and not because it was read in a James Earl Jones-esque quality. It was, at least to me, because he was a football player, and everybody liked him.

Granted, the chapel was packed to the brim with overly excited soon-to-be graduates alongside their family and friends. And, let’s be honest, for

the four years leading up to that day, there were not too many students who showed up on Sunday mornings in that very same chapel. Who knows how many of them were there just because it was on the usual graduation weekend schedule? Who knows how many of them thought it was just another way to convince their family to be so proud of their accomplishments? Who knows how many of them were not trained whatsoever in the traditional mainline church behavior? Who knows how many of them just wanted to be college students for awhile longer and just be different, even in a worship service?

Regardless of the motivations and reasons, it happened. They applauded after a Scripture-reading. It made it seem like they were all the audience in a packed-theater, and the rest of us who had to go up and read or sing or whatever else, were nothing more than actors in some play. Now as much as we would like to rail against all twenty and thirty-somethings everywhere for such un-churchy things, there is, actually, something to be said with connecting God to a play.

You see, we all have our roles in God's worldwide theater, and we switch between them quite often in a lifetime. Sometimes we are the ushers,

who open the doors to people witnessing God come to life, and even point them to a spot where they can have a view of a moment that will stick with them the rest of their life. Sometimes, we just want to sit in the audience. We just want to watch. And some of us will react with hands raised, shouting, “Hallelujah,” and some of us will need time to process the whole thing, and our full-blown reaction won’t happen until we crawl into bed that night. Some of us will work behind the scenes to make such God moments come together and will never receive the recognition for it; but, quite honestly, we’re okay with that. This isn’t about glory for us, after all, but glory to God. And yes, there will be times when we are center stage, not just with a worship service, but in the day-to-day life when God directs us to go into the primal life stages of hospital rooms, loved ones’ homes, and even the random conversations at coffee shops and grocery stores. Yet we also recognize that there will be those times when we don’t want to be anywhere near the theater at all. We do not even want to be walking in the hallway. We want to remove ourselves as far away as possible. No worries, God is not limited to inside the walls of a sanctuary or any building whatsoever: God’s gonna be on the outside too.

So, I go back to that baccalaureate service, and one of the audience members (if we want to call them that) was my roommate for all four years of college, but we were also middle and high school classmates as well. However, Eric turned out to be our high school valedictorian, and all he did at Wittenberg was graduate summa cum laude with a 4.0 GPA, finished in the 99th percentile for the MKAT exams, got a full-ride to Vanderbilt Medical School and is nearing the end of his residency to become a pediatric surgeon.

And yet, during his time in college it would probably be best to describe Eric as an agnostic: not so sure about the whole God thing; his parents had gradually faded away from the Catholic church. But when Eric got to medical school he met his advisor, who spent years in Africa as a medical missionary: who not only brought God to life to underprivileged young people in the most horrifying of circumstances you could ever imagine, but he actually saw God in the children themselves. This man made such an impact on Eric's life that he ended up presiding at his wedding.

So, let's just say, Eric made a transition in this life-altering play of God. Eric was quite okay not coming anywhere near the theater of God's act for a while, but soon enough he was pointed in by an usher who had seen the world and back. Eric made his way into the audience and, even, to working behind the scenes in medical research that will end up impacting lives of God's very own children. And then, before you know it, he'll be center stage helping bring the Gospel to life through the work of his very own hands and compassionate heart. He'll even be the usher from time-to-time, pointing people to the hospital room, where they'll witness their child's healing and new life in abundance.

We all have our roles to play in this grand scheme of God's theater that encompasses the whole world, bearing different kinds of fruit to share with others. And we'll switch those roles from time to time, and we'll have our own unique reactions because of life circumstances that only God knows the most intimate details of, in the end. However, what makes this play different from any other, is that God says, the curtain will never come down on the Gospel, because Christ is still risen indeed! Amen!