

“JOY TO THE WORLD.”
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First Christian Reformed Church
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Scripture Texts: Psalm 98

Joy to the World.

This advent we have focused on much loved carols of the season and the Scripture texts they highlight. This morning we conclude with Joy to the World, perhaps the most loved and favorite Christmas carol. As I mentioned yesterday it beats out O Holy Night on YouTube with 29 million entry results. It is a unique carol in several ways.

First, it's written by a famous hymn writer many of us know, Isaac Watts. Second, it's based on an OT passage, Psalm 98, not on the Christmas stories in the gospels like most carols. There is no mention of shepherds, angels, Mary or a baby. Third, it is more about the second coming of Christ, than the first coming of Christ. So technically it isn't a Christmas carol at all.

In the early 1700's in England all church music was based on the Psalms. Here in the CRC we can understand that, we are not that far removed from the day when we only sang from the Psalms out of the Blue Psalter hymnal.

As a young man of fifteen, Isaac Watts has disturbed by the deplorable and joyless singing in the churches. He believed, “The singing of God's praise is the part of worship closest to heaven, and its performance among us is the worst on earth.”

Watts felt the poetic texts of the Psalms were bad and the tunes even worse. After one particularly dreadful Sunday service he complained to his father and his father said what any good father would say, if you don't like it then you do something about it or be quiet. And that's exactly what he did.

That afternoon he wrote “Behold the Glories of the Lamb” his first hymn, written in a desire to raise the standard of praise and worship. His father took it to church the following Sunday and it was well received. So the next week he wrote another and then another, a new hymn each Sunday for over two years. By the end of his life he had written over 700 and revolutionized congregational singing. He bears the title, the Father of English Hymnody and wrote the first Hymnbook in the English language.

One of Watt's most ambitious projects was to make a volume of hymns based on the Psalms, but translated in a way that highlighted how they all pointed to the NT and the glory of Christ. In Psalm 98 he wrote into it the joy of the coming again of the Messiah, of the salvation that begins with the incarnation.

The tune we sing is from Lowell Mason, a well-known and prolific American hymn writer and composer. Over a century after Watts wrote his poem, Mason put together the lyrics from Watts and the tune from parts of Handel's Messiah and introduced this carol to America around 1836.

“The result is a favorite Christmas hymn based on an Old Testament psalm, set to musical fragments composed in England, and pieced together across the Atlantic in the United States!” (C. Michael Hawn).

Watts wrote three verses we don't use that cover the first three verses. The verses we know start with Psalm 98:4.

Stanza 1.

Psalm 98:1 Oh sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous things!
His right hand and his holy arm have worked salvation for him.

Psalm 98:4 Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises!

This is exactly what Watts wanted to do. His lifelong goal was to write lyrics that exalted Christ and reminded Christians of their hope. He was writing for the joy of all people.

Notice he isn't calling us to sing about the Lord, but to the Lord. When we are singing to the Lord it is a sign of spiritual life in us. Sing from your heart, not just your head. Sing the way Watts calls us to, beginning with joy and ending with love.

God so loved the world, Jesus came for the joy of all the world, so the end result should be for all the earth and for every heart to sing of Him.

Joy.

One word stands out in the Christmas story in both Luke and Matthew. In Luke the Angels sing of good news of great joy. In Matthew, the wise men were overjoyed when the star led them to Bethlehem.

Both Advents are about a greater joy coming, a joy of far greater value than every earthly joy.

When we perceive the value of what God has done for us in the indescribable gift of His Son; when we see in Jesus a treasure of hope and joy; *then* we will have a pearl-of-great-price type response. We gladly and willingly abandon every fleeting joy and with exuberant abandon run to Him. And that is the joy that *should* mark us as Christians and as a Christian church.

Joy is an emotion given us by God. It's not just intellectual, not just in the head, but out of the heart. You should feel Christmas joy, incarnational joy. In the Bible, joy was celebrated with singing, dancing, shouting, clapping of hands and feasting.

Our God is the God of joy, He is the most joyful being in the universe. God is the ever-flowing and over-flowing fountain of joy. His joy is inexhaustible. Whenever we think about God we should think adjectives like rich, generous, lavish, extravagant, over-the-top, even excessive. God is never miserly or meager, and when it comes to joy He gives a fullness.

God is supremely delighted in His Son, and He takes great joy and pleasures in sending Him to us, so that we may know His joy and share His joy. God absolutely delights in doing good to us.

Thank God for the emotion of joy, for being a God of joy, a God who cares about joy. You don't get the sense in any other religion of the beautiful emotions that fill ours, love, joy, peace, kindness, gentleness, faith, hope, grace, goodness.

Stanza 2.

Picture two great choirs, creation and mankind, singing back and forth. "Fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains" and every human voice.

All the instruments man has invented along with everything God has created join together in a grand symphony of glorious praise.

"If inanimate creation rejoices when the Lord comes ... then how much more should we who know Him long for His coming!" (Steven J. Cole).

There should be nothing passive about our worship, it should be exuberant, enthusiastic, spirited. There should be no mumbling, no hesitancy. We aren't singing to ourselves or even to each other, we are singing to our Lord and King, our Savior and Redeemer. If Jesus was standing here, would you sing different than you do?

Psalm 98:4-8 Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises! 5 Sing praises to the Lord with the lyre, with the lyre and the sound of melody!

6 With trumpets and the sound of the horn make a joyful noise before the King, the Lord!

7 Let the sea roar, and all that fills it; the world and those who dwell in it!

8 Let the rivers clap their hands; let the hills sing for joy together

Stanza 3.

Far as the curse is found.

How does a phrase like that belong in a carol about joy to the world? Actually maybe I should ask the question the other way around? How does a phrase like joy to the world find it's way into a hymn that talks about the far reaching curse?

Listening to the news for one week should be enough to kick the joy out of anyone. How out of touch do you have to be to be able to sing about joy in the world? Terrorism, natural disasters like fires and train wrecks, sex scandals, political divisions.

Was Watts' life so idyllic that he was out of touch with pain and suffering and the effects of sin?

Watts' was a pastor for ten years, but after about two years his physical and mental health declined to the point that after just ten years he could no longer serve. His infirmities plagued him the rest of his life and he spent 36 years more or less confined to the home of a friend.

He never married, but not out of a lack of desire. His one opportunity came when a woman became interested in him through his music. When she finally met him in person she was completely put off by his frail looks she rejected his proposal.

How can Watts or we sing of joy to the world? When Watts wrote this carol he was thinking about the second coming, about when Christ would come and forever

put an end to the curse and all its effects. Because of the incarnation, sin and pain and suffering never have the last word. Yes, there is sorrow, but joy runs deeper. We rejoice not because life is perfect, but because Jesus is. We rejoice not because life is all wonderful, but because the Lord is at hand.

The first coming is not the end. If all we had was the incarnation without the promise of the second coming we would not be singing the way we sing during Christmas. Jesus came the first time in order to come again.

Jesus is come. Jesus now reigns.

Jesus will restore creation to its original glory and that is cause for worship. Whatever was ruined will be repaired.

Not only are the great enemies of Satan, sin and death defeated and destroyed, but all the lesser enemies that come from them. Not just sin, but everything sin has done. Thorns, thistles, weeds, worries, wounds, sickness, storms, cancer, earthquakes, train wrecks, terrorists.

It is good and right to sing one of the most joyful carols at Christmas.

Stanza 4.

This stanza celebrates Christ's rule over all the nations, a day yet to come.

But we should take heart and hope at this verse. God holds supreme sovereignty over all the nations and all who rule in them. God rules and overrules every decision, every plan, every war, every calamity, every bad or wrong or sinfully motivated decision for His glory.

He rules the world with truth and grace, and one day He will make every nation prove the glories of His righteousness, and wonders of his love.

The coming of Jesus Christ as Savior, King, and Judge is a cause of great joy for all the earth.

Jesus is King! Jesus is Savior! Jesus reigns and He is coming again!
Receive your King! Prepare Him room! Employ your songs with joy!

Is Jesus second coming cause for great joy for you or cause for fear? Make Him your Lord and King, receive His salvation so that you can receive His coming glorification when He makes all His blessings flow.

Implications and application.

Joy to the World celebrates God's redemptive purpose through history, from the day of the curse to the day of Christ's glorious return. Christ is not just a helpless baby in a manger, but the ruling and reigning victorious warrior King and Judge.

Joy to the World is a reminder to all Christians that the central message of the gospel is joy in the perfect finished work of Christ.

Psalm 98:4, 6, 8 Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises! 6 ... make a joyful noise before the King, the Lord! 8 ... let the hills sing for joy together

This is why we gather here each Lord's day, to repeat the sounding joy of the wonders of His love.

I Peter 1:8 Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory.

Conclusion.

Now in closing let me paraphrase the words of the great preacher, Charles Spurgeon on December 24, 1854:

Now is the time to go to our houses for feasting. Go and enjoy and celebrate your Savior's birth. Feast, Christians, feast. Be glad, you have a right to be very happy. In the words of Solomon,
"Go your way, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart."

Let your faith give you great joy, for to us a child has been born, a Son has been given and He is Jesus Christ the Lord. Glory to God and Amen.

Prayer: Holy Father of all joy, thank you for this day. Open our eyes to see that in your presence is the fullness of joy inexpressible. Thank you for thinking of this day before the beginning of time. We can scarcely imagine how you stood on the threshold of heaven and said good-bye to your only Son and love came down and was born in a manger. Thank you for the indescribable gift of the incarnation of your Son. Thank you for making it possible for God and sinners to be reconciled. Thank you that by His birth we no more may die. May those who have been spectators stop holding back, and surrender to the truth and power of your redemption. All glory and praise belongs to you. Glory to God in the highest. Glory to the new born King. We love you Lord Jesus and we pray in your name. Amen.