

Joy to the World

Psalm 98

**First Presbyterian Church
Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

**Advent 3, December 20, AD 2015
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Last week we talked about the Christmas carol, “O Little Town of Bethlehem.” This little lullaby was written by a huge man for his time. Phillips Brooks carried about 300 pounds on his 6 and a half foot frame. This week’s carol is “Joy to the World.” It was written by Isaac Watts, who was as small as Brooks was big. Isaac Watts just cleared five feet in height. His body was so slight and his head so large that biographers note how some portraits bulk him up with robes to make him look more proportional. The enormous Phillips Brooks lived robustly, being noted for his great strength and vigor. Isaac Watts, by contrast, was sickly most of his life, suffering from long fevers and even depressions. Yet, the virile Brooks died suddenly in his prime at 58 (at least I think 58 is certainly a youthful prime!), Watts lived to be 74 (1674-1748).

From the earliest age, Watts had a great gift for language. As a child he was always making rhymes. One story says that his father noticed that young Isaac had his eyes open during the prayers before dinner. He asked little Isaac why he hadn’t been paying attention. Isaac told his father he had seen a mouse running up a cord. And his thoughts got distracted as a rhyme came to him, “A little mouse for want of stairs/Ran up a rope to say his prayers!” During the spanking that followed, Isaac couldn’t help himself as he said, “Father, father, mercy take/And I will no more verses make.” I imagine that kind of cuteness worked about as well then as it would now.

Throughout England in those days, congregational singing was limited to the psalms. People sang rhymed versions of the psalms in English. But there were no other hymns sung in England. Can you imagine our worship never tapping into the well-spring of songs that have flowed from Charles Wesley to Ralph Vaughn Williams to Graham Kendrick to Chris Tomlin? It all started with Isaac Watts. Watts found the words of these metrical psalms to be poor, uninspiring poetry and the singing to be quite dreary. One Sunday morning after worship, he complained of this to his father. His dad said rather dismissively, “Why don’t you write something better?” So he cranked one out that afternoon. Over the course of his life, a river of hymn words flowed from Isaac Watts. His 750 hymns include

“When I Survey the Wondrous Cross,” “Jesus Shall Reign,” “Our God, our Help in Ages Past,” and, of course, “Joy to the World.”

This beloved Christmas carol actually never mentions Jesus’ birth. It has nothing to say about the shepherds, the star or the manger. “Joy to the World” was not written to be a Christmas song. Rather, it was part of a collection of 133 paraphrases of the psalms that Watts had written. Watts had undertaken this massive project with two goals in mind:

- 1) He wanted to reset the psalms in the *key of Jesus*. He knew that the psalms, like all of Scripture, found their fulfillment only in the person and work of Christ Jesus. He wanted to make explicit the connections between the psalms and Jesus.
- 2) He wanted to highlight our *response to Christ* through the psalms. Watts wanted to make explicit our reply of love and devotion to the Jesus we discover in the psalms. Of course Watts did not want to replace the psalms. But for the worship of the church, he wanted to make hidden things come to light. He wanted to make clear the connections between the psalms, Jesus, and us.

“Joy to the World,” then, is Isaac Watts’s interpretation of the second part of Psalm 98, which we read earlier. Psalm 98 calls the people into a joyful worship that gathers up the whole creation in praise. First, the psalm calls the worshippers to consider what the LORD *already had done* for his people in the past. Over and over he delivered them from their enemies. And year by year, he graciously dwelt in their midst through the tabernacle and the temple. Then the psalm ends by calling the worshippers to consider what the LORD *will* do in the future. He will come as righteous judge to set everything right. God will put everything back in order. This future was guaranteed to his people by what he had already done in the past. And the power of this future entered the worshippers who praised God in the present moment. So the middle part of the psalm calls the whole creation to join in the praises of a God who made us, who saved us and who will come to set all things right. “Make a joyful noise to the LORD all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises!” The psalm calls us to grab our instruments and to strike up the band in praise. The psalm calls the sea to roar and the hills to sing. We are summoned to present joy in thanks for what God has done and in faith for what God will do. We will shortly see that it’s really important to see that Psalm 98 works in the past, the present and the future.

In under a hundred words, Isaac Watts brilliantly ushers us into this joy. He declares the mighty work of the LORD in coming us. He declares the results of the work of Jesus Christ. And he declares what response we are called to make to this news. Now here’s the key to why this song creates the very joy it describes. This is

the simple brilliance of what this highly trained scholar has done in rendering Psalm 98 for our worship of Jesus. Watts sets the whole song in *the present tense*. I'll tell you why this matters. Notice the first line doesn't say "Joy to the world, the Lord *has* come," like something that's all done. Something relegated to the past, something that happened to professional Biblical characters long ago. Nor does he say, "Joy to the world, the Lord *will* come," like something that is just a future hope, like pie in the sky by and by for those who have enough faith.

The raw truth is, if all we have is some stories from the past, that's not helping me in the present moment. Great for Abraham and Sarah and King David, but what does that have to do with life now? The raw truth is, if all we have is a future hope that never touches us now, that's not helping me much either. I know I should believe, but there's no proof this is going to work out. What if it doesn't? How can I be sure if all this God stuff is just about one day yet to come?

But Watts doesn't take us back to the past or tell us to look forward to the future. He takes us right into the present moment. He tells us about a reality that is going on this instant, though it can only be seen through the eyes of worship. Watts takes us into heaven, where all the past, present and future is set before the eyes of God. C.S. Lewis called this "the eternal Now," of God. When we step into this present truth of our God, everything changes for us on earth. Hearts get lifted. Spirits light up. Watts was a theologian and a logician whose trained, keen mind could understand these mysteries far better than I can. But he was also a pastor who could express deep mystery in simple language. You don't have to understand *how* it works to experience that it *does* work.

When we worship, we step into the stream of praise that flows all around us. When we do the simple act of joining mind, heart, breath and voice in focusing Godward, we get taken up into this mystic reality. We enter the very present power of God's mighty redemption in Christ.

Listen to the way Watts makes present, bold declarations:

- Joy to the world, the Lord is come.
- Joy to the world, the savior reigns.
- He comes to make his blessings flow far as the curse is found.
- He rules the world with truth and grace.
- He makes the nations prove the glories of his righteousness and the wonders of his love.

Now, right now, Jesus is here. The work Jesus did in living a life of faithfulness on our behalf is present here with us. The work of Jesus Christ to take our sins upon himself on the cross is a present reality available to us. Jesus exercises his sovereignty over the nations right now. John declares in Revelation that Jesus is the one “who was and is and is to come.” Jesus Christ is “the firstborn from the dead and the ruler of the kings of earth.”

Right now he is *risen* from the dead; he reigns and rules the world.

And right now he is *at work*. He comes to us in this moment with blessings that undo the curse of our sin and its consequences.

Right now, he brings *present power*.

Right now, he causes previously *unbelieving people* to admit the wonders of his love.

Right now, he makes sinners like me *sound forth the glories* of such a righteous redemption. This is the truest truth about your life and about the world, and it's true *right now*.

Is your mind screaming objections yet? You're not alone. My mind has been shouting against this truth all week. My tense and exhausted body declares that “Joy to the World” is just not the way reality is. One look at the prayer cards we receive indicates the load of care we are under. We are praying desperately for an eight month old whose family participates in Mother's Day Out. Charles Barham has inoperable brain cancer. We are praying for strained relationships. For fracturing marriages. For break ups and blow ups. Praying for lost children and despairing parents. Praying for people who need work and those who need direction.

Loneliness abounds in this season of parties.

Depression sits heavily in this season of lights.

Financial need sinks us in this season of abundance.

Doubt about the future strangles us in this season where a new year will dawn.

This week, a vibrant, active 65 year old Bob Munson was suddenly taken from us by a mysterious illness. His wife Tracy sings on our worship team. He is a friend to many, active in ministries, a needed father and grandfather. How is it that so much death strikes at this time of year, seemingly more than any other time? “Joy to the World” can seem like the stupidest thing that ever came out of anyone's mouth. Preacher, get real.

I hear you. And my doubts and yours would rule the day if joy was tied to my circumstances. If joy was bound up with who wins the race, who hoists the cup, who wears the crown, who gets the toys, who plays the system, who rules the

roost and who plays his cards right, then joy would be only as certain as a candle in the wind. As fleeting as a wisp of smoke.

Isaac Watts never once mentions Jesus explicitly in his hymn. But Jesus flows mightily out of every word. I put my hands in a lot of death. I sink my heart into a lot of heartache. I listen to tangled tails of the ravaging effects of sin. I see the grip of evil that is made of tentacles entwined in every aspect of people's lives. Walk a week with one of our pastors and you will see that there is no possibility of joy that is coordinated with life working out just the way we want. Joy is only in the person and work of Jesus. Joy must be coordinated to the story of Jesus. That's the only answer to the world of evil and pain and suffering and dying that is all around us.

I never tire of quoting to you from John 16 as Jesus gives his final words to his disciples. He knows that in a few moments he will be arrested and taken to his death. He knows his crucifixion will devastate his friends. "So also you have sorrow now. But I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you." He does not say, "You will end up writing the gospels and making millions and your hearts will rejoice." They all died dead broke. He does not say, "Your life will turn out easy and you will rejoice." They all died a martyr's death, except the one who lived as an exile or a rock in the middle of the sea. There is one source of joy and one only. Jesus said, "I will see you again." The only reliable source of joy is the resurrection of Jesus. That's the foundation for a joy that cannot be taken away. I have to be taken up into the story of Jesus, his life, his words, his dying and rising. Only Jesus can take on the powers of the world and prevail. Only Jesus can take on sin and turn it into forgiveness. Only Jesus can encounter evil and conquer it with love. Only Jesus can take on death and win. You will sorrow. Then you will see me again, and you will rejoice. And no one can take your joy from you. That is the backbone of singing Joy to the World.

Finally, let us look at the response we are to make. Watts calls us to receive our king. To prepare room in our hearts for him. To set loose our songs in praise. To choke off the sins that entangle us. To dig up the thorns that pierce people in our society and relationships. To speak sharply to the sorrow that wants to swallow us as we bid our hearts rejoice in the one who alone is the source of abiding joy.

We do all these things as we lift up our voices and sing with our hearts "Joy to the World." Worship is a kind of defiance. We defy the way things are in the world by singing the praises of our present and active savior. We look at the world

that could make us despair and nevertheless sing a joyful song. We mock the evil one as we extol the excellencies of our reigning king. Taking up our instruments and raising our voices, we herald Christ's arrival in the present moment. Worship alone sweeps us up into the one great story of Jesus, of all he has done to save us and all he will do to set the world right.

Joined by praise to the one great story, we may say at the dark of the year, staring right into the teeth of the evil one, one of the most wonderfully defiant thing ever said. In Jesus alone, Julian of Norwich could so famously declare, "And all shall be well. And all shall be well. And all manner of thing shall be well." Indeed, in Jesus, all *is* well. In worship we can say right now, "Joy to the World, the Lord is come."

Internet sources for Isaac Watts bio include:

The Hymns and Carols of Christmas.

Hymnary.org

Christian History

First Presbyterian Church, Jackson, MS.

With gratitude to Walter Wink who defined intercession as "the spiritual defiance of what is in the name of what God has promised."