

Joy to the World

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. Today's scripture reading is from the Psalms, chapter 98, verses 1 to 9, as printed in the liturgy.

A reading from the Psalms. 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. The Lord has made his salvation known and revealed his righteousness to the nations.

He has remembered his love and his faithfulness to Israel. All the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God. Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth. Burst into jubilant song with music.

Make music to the Lord with the harp, with the harp and the sound of singing, with trumpets and the blast of the ram's horn. Shout for joy before the Lord, the King. Let the sea resound and everything in it, the world and all who live in it.

[1 : 21] Let the rivers clap their hands, let the mountains sing together for joy. Let them sing before the Lord, for he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples with equity.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Thank you, Maddie, for that scripture reading. Good morning, everyone. My name is Andrew. I'm one of the pastors here. And will you join me in prayer as we come to listen to God's word?

Our Father, we ask that you would fill us with your joy. And not just us, but this world. And that that would be our heartbeat. That would be our song. Joy to the world.

In Christ, in his name we pray. Amen. So in case you missed the past two weeks, we've been doing this thing during Advent. We're going through some famous Christmas carols, and we're looking at the passages of scripture that have inspired them.

And a big reason that we're doing this is because, in case you've also missed the past few months, our church is in a season of transition, right? We are without our past worship director of 14 years.

[2 : 26] We're in search of a new one, and Jonathan and I wanted to use this interim season to shape our culture of worship here at Christ Church, particularly in our singing.

We want to be a singing church. And, you know, though it's been extra work for me as the interim worship director, and though it's made me feel quite vulnerable and self-conscious, having to lead all of you with my limited musical abilities, I have to say it's actually been quite a pleasure and very rewarding engaging in this role for this season.

Many of you may not know this, but if you asked me as a ninth grader or a tenth grader what my dream job was, I would have told you that I wanted to be a worship leader, like full time.

I would have told you I wanted to be the Asian American Chris Tomlin, all right? And if you don't understand that joke, that just means that you were way cooler than me in high school, all right? I had a, we had a worship band, me and my buddies.

It was called DHB, all right? And it stands for Don't Hold Back, all right? Because we wanted the people to worship freely, to express themselves, not feel self-conscious.

[3 : 34] And, you know, like, as embarrassing as it is for me to share that with you, it's also a reminder to me of the way that God was shaping me, like, 20 years ago, for ministry, to pastor here at Christ Church in this particular season.

And, you know, as your pastor leading you in worship over these past few months, to be able to look out upon all of you, like, this congregation that God has entrusted to me, and to see you lift up your hearts, to see you lift up your hands in praise, it's been a special, special season to me.

And I've often gotten, you know, choked up up here, like, even unable to sing when I'm supposed to sing, because of how moving it is to watch you, the people of God, worship Him.

I remember my first Sunday after Eric had left, my first Sunday leading worship here, and I'll never forget the joyful sights and sounds of that day. We were singing, We sang, All glory be to Christ, our King, all glory be to Christ, His rule and reign will ever sing.

All glory be to Christ. And, man, there is nothing, nothing more that a pastor could desire than to see his own flock, you. A congregation for which I will one day give an account before God, to see you give glory to Jesus Christ, right, with resolute reverence, jubilant joy.

[5 : 22] Anyway, you know, this season has actually reminded me that this is the reason why I wanted to be a pastor in the first place, actually. I mean, partly because of my limited musical abilities, but mostly, mostly because as much as I loved, you know, using music to draw people into worship, to draw out the praise of God's people, it dawned on me late in high school that, you know, it's not so much my music, more than the music, it was God's truths that elicited His praise.

Truths about who God is, what He's done, what He's doing, what He's going to do, especially for undeserving and often ungrateful people like you and me. That's what got me fired up about being a pastor and a preacher in the first place.

I wanted to lead people into worship, into deeper encounters with Christ. I wanted to preach the good news of Jesus, the greatest story ever told, the one-of-kind message of God's costly yet beautifully redemptive grace.

And that's still what gets me out of bed today. Because full disclosure, every Sunday that I come up here and get behind this pulpit, I've got an agenda. I do. I've got an agenda.

And it's not primarily to give you information, to make you laugh, to make you cry, or to make you even feel like you're at peace, or to have some kind of joy or happiness. No, my primary objective, every time I get behind this pulpit, is that people here would taste and see something worth responding to in worship and in song.

[6 : 51] My agenda is to preach in such a way that all of you would lift up your heads, lift up your hearts, physically lift up your hands to the Lord in worship. That's my aim.

That's my aim, to preach something, and not just anything, but to preach something so real, so incomparably good and glorious. Something so worth singing and shouting about at the top of our lungs that this place shakes.

And our earnestness reverberates throughout the Bay Area and throughout the world. Even up to the heavens. This is my heart as your pastor. This is my heart for Christ Church East Bay.

That this truly would be a sacred place that exalts Christ, filled with joy. Thank you.

Now, I understand that this is also a place where some of us aren't ready for that, aren't ready to exalt Christ, aren't ready to lift up our voices, lift up our hands.

[7 : 49] And I want you to know that this is also a safe place to examine and explore Christ at the same time. And so if, you know, you're here today and maybe singing is your least favorite part of worship here at Christ Church, maybe it makes you feel uncomfortable to see grown men and women, like, closing their eyes, lifting up their hands, making a joyful noise, singing about their feelings of adoration toward this God that you're not even sure exists.

That's you. Well, we want to personally thank you so much for stepping into such, like, an awkward place. Like, if that's you, that's totally awkward that you've come here. I can totally see how it's uncomfortable to be in a place like this.

Because, yeah, if you're not sure that God exists or if Jesus is worthy of all the glory and honor and praise that's in this world, then, yeah, totally, what we do here in church is super weird, all right?

And it makes complete sense that you'd feel that way. But you are here, right? You are here for some reason, probably because you're open-minded enough to at least entertain the possibilities that God might be real and that Jesus might be worthy.

And so the question I have for you is if God isn't real and if Jesus isn't worthy, well, is there anything that you have found to be worth singing about?

[9 : 06] Like, for the rest of your life? Again, not just once in a while, like singing your alma mater's, you know, fight song at a football game, but is there anything in your life that has so moved you that you cannot help but sing about it?

And regularly, not just because it's got some nice tune, but you put it into your calendar to every Sunday come and gather with hundreds of other people to sing the same things every single week, this great thing that's happened in your life through Jesus Christ.

And is there any particular song that you find yourself humming repeatedly or returning to frequently? Do you have a song, do you have multiple songs that can express your uncontainable joy and hope and comfort even through the hardest moments of your life?

And these questions aren't just for people who aren't Christians in this room. Whether you're a Christian or not, have we found anything worth singing joyfully about for the rest of our lives? That's the question.

And if so, do we have the songs to adequately express ourselves? Or to put it differently and tie it to, you know, our Christmas carol that we're looking at this morning, do we have a reason to sing joy into the world and unto the world?

[10 : 18] Have we found something so joyful it makes our hearts sing? Like with unabashed gratitude and earnest invitation and bold confidence, do we have a song like that worth singing anew for hundreds and hundreds of years?

This morning, as we take a magnifying glass to this famous Christmas carol, Joy to the World, and the biblical text that inspired it, Psalm 98, what I hope to show you is that to sing joy to the world, to sing Psalm 98 for all they're worth, is to sing loud and bold songs of gratitude, invitation, and hope.

Gratitude, invitation, and hope. That's what these songs place upon our lips. Gratitude, invitation, and hope. Or more specifically, commemorative gratitude for the past, a commanding invitation for the present, and confident hope for the future.

Those are our three points. So let's start with point number one. To sing joy to the world for all it's worth, we have to sing with commemorative gratitude for the past. Now, Joy to the World was written in 1719.

That's over 300 years ago, all right, by this English minister named Isaac Watts, who is regarded as the father of English hymnody. He wrote, Our God, Our Help, in Ages Past. He wrote, When I Survey the Wondrous Cross.

[11 : 37] Very, very famous hymn writer. But something you should know about him is that when he first started writing these hymns, like Joy to the World, he was actually being quite provocative and even disruptive.

He was even accused by some of being a heretic. You see, in Isaac Watts' church's tradition, they only sang psalms, and they pretty much just sang word for word in a kind of very wooden and rigid way.

And so from his early years as a teenager, Watts would complain to his dad, who was also a pastor, about how dry and monotonous and dispassionate the congregational singing was in their church.

And so his dad, you know, he got tired of hearing all these complaints, and he challenged him, like, Okay, you do better then. And that's how we got Joy to the World, all right? And the result has been that while very few people can recite Psalm 98, Jonathan, do you know Psalm 98?

I don't think so, man. I knew it, all right? Many English speakers, though, can recite to you Joy to the World, right? Now, at first, this opened up Isaac Watts to a lot of criticism for supposedly playing fast and loose with Scripture.

[12 : 46] But, you know, when he penned these hymns, he was actually doing exactly what this psalm was telling him to do. Look with me at Psalm 98, verse 1. Sing to the Lord, what? A new song.

And this doesn't mean stop singing the old, timeless psalms, but it did mean to sing God's timeless truths always with freshness. Always with freshness.

For just as God's mercies are new every morning, they never go stale, especially for those of us who depend on them daily, so also must our songs be new each day, even the same songs we sing.

As we experience God's goodness and grace anew each day, Watts wanted to give fresh expression to God's fresh mercies. That's what Joy to the World and Psalm 98 calls to do, to sing with fresh, commemorative gratitude for all the kindness that God has lavished on us throughout our lives, acts of kindness and mercy and grace that should never, never grow old to any of us.

Now, look at the psalmist's reasons for worship in verses 1 to 3. Sing to the Lord a new song for, he has done marvelous things, he has worked out and he has put his salvation on display and he has remembered his chesed, his steadfast love and faithfulness.

[14 : 00] When we worship, what are we doing? We look to the past and we remember the way that God has remembered us. That's what we're doing in worship. The ways that God has been faithful to us, the ways he's kept his covenant love and saved us from ourselves and our addictions and our troubles and our oppressors in marvelous fashion.

For some of us, that's liberation from our alcohol and drug and sex addictions or the transformation of certain relationships in our lives. For others of us, it's this newfound peace we've experienced through the love, acceptance and forgiveness of God.

When we sing joy to the world, just as God's people of old sang Psalm 98, we're to let our minds wander to these various ways that he's shown up for us, that he's come into our lives.

When we sing joy to the world, the Lord is come, we're to remember the ways he's broken into our lives, the ways he's come into our lives for our good. When we sing joy to the world, the Savior reigns, we're to celebrate and meditate upon the signs of his kingdom in our lives and all around us.

We're to remember the things that formerly ruled and dominated us individually and collectively as a whole people, the systems and the structures that once oppressed us and all others in our world, whether the stronghold of pornography on you as an individual or the stronghold of slavery and supremacy on whole people groups in history.

- [15 : 25] The coming of Christ has had an undeniable, transformative influence upon countless individuals and even upon all of world history. Ever since the kingdom broke into history, it's been releasing people from strongholds.

Like, honestly, come at me if you disagree, but I don't think you can deny that apart from the coming of Jesus Christ into history, there is no abolitionist movement like we know it.

Nor is there any widespread consensus that many of us take for granted around human equality and inhuman dignity. The king has come and the world's never been the same.

And for that, we can and we must sing with commemorative gratitude. Now, secondly, to sing joy to the world for all its worth, we also have to sing it as a present commanding invitation.

All right, stick with me here. Present commanding invitation. If you look at this entire psalm, it is full of commands. All right, verse one, sing a new song. Verse four, shout for joy, all the earth.

- [16 : 33] Burst into jubilant song with music. Verses five and six, make music, and again, shout for joy. Full of commands. But you also get the sense that these aren't just, like, authoritative, domineering commands.

Like, you know, when I tell my daughters, hurry up and finish your breakfast, we gotta get to school, because I'm late. No, these aren't, like, power play commands. At the same time, what they are is they're invitational imperatives.

Like, yes, they're commanding imperatives, but there's also this sense that the psalmist isn't just trying to tell you what to do, but the psalmist is inviting you to join them in something wonderful and life-giving.

Like, when I say, hey, come to my house, let's have dinner. That's a command. That's an imperative. And what is that? It's an invitation. It's an invitation into deeper togetherness and relationship and shared experience.

And man, I just want us to look at the earnestness of this invitation. The psalmist is so earnest here, so earnest that this command and invitation is extended to all the earth, all the nations.

- [17 : 38] It's a radically inclusive invitation, even as it's an invitation into a radically exclusive worship, right, of the Lord, Yahweh, the maker of heaven and earth, the only king.

And it's not just radically inclusive to every kind of person, but to every kind of creature as well. Like, the psalmist can't contain himself and the extensiveness of his invitations.

Even inanimate creation is invited to join in praise and worship and celebration. Verse seven, let the sea resound, let it reverberate, and not just the sea, but everything in it.

That's dolphins and whales, turtles and tilapia, oysters and anemone, every coral reef, every inch of seaweed, the whole world and all who live in it, everything that has breath, and even everything that doesn't have breath, let it all praise the Lord.

Verse eight, let the rivers clap their hands, let the mountains sing together for joy. The psalmist is saying, let all that is made make much of its maker. Let all that is made make much of its maker.

- [18 : 43] And this is incredibly profound if you think about it, that all creation is created for the glory of God. Every square inch of it, even inanimate objects like rivers and mountains, that they too can glorify and exalt God and sing his praise.

In fact, I would say, they're probably better at it than we humans are, right? Do you remember what Jesus said when he arrived in Jerusalem on Palm Sunday? People were praising him.

The Pharisees said, tell your people to stop praising you. And Jesus said, you can't contain the praise of God. Creation will not be silenced. Even the stones will cry out.

The stones will cry out. The stones worship. The stones are doing what they're meant to do. Us humans, we're the ones who don't. We're the ones who often silence ourselves or each other. We're the ones who often withhold our worship.

We fail to submit to God's laws in ways that rocks and trees and mountains and oceans would never dare to disobey. It's crazy but true to think that while humans are far more glorious creatures than rocks, actually rocks have been far more faithful to God's intention for them than humans have been for God's intentions for them.

[19 : 59] And this is what the psalmist is recognizing. As he commands and invites all people and all nature to sing and shout God's praise. And this is what we do when we sing, let earth receive her king.

Let earth receive her king. Like all of it, every square inch of it, let earth receive her king and especially humanity made in the image of God, made to glorify God and enjoy him forever.

Let us not be like that little town of Bethlehem that had no room for their king. but let every heart prepare him room. And let heaven and nature sing, let all of nature join the songs of heaven in worshipping God, our king.

When we sing, let all their songs employ. Fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains, let them repeat the sounding joy. We are commanding the cosmos to do what it was made to do.

We're inviting the inanimate to join us in animated worship. And man, if you stop to think about that for a second, man, it's like, who are we to invite all the rest of creation to join us in worship?

[21 : 10] You know, like, what authority do I have to tell a mountain to worship, to tell the sea to worship, right? These massive, majestic, uncontrollable forces of nature that remind us of how small and insignificant and temporary we are.

But remember what Jesus said. He said, if we have faith, we can tell the mountain to be thrown into the sea and it will be done. So how much more will God be pleased to draw a song out of the lips of a mountain if we command them and invite them to do so in his name?

I mean, is this not what God meant for us to do when he made us in his image and he gave us dominion over the earth to exercise his authority upon it? See, Psalm 98, to sing Psalm 98, to sing Joy to the World is to step into our God-given authority and faith.

It's to unashamedly call all of creation to do what it was meant to do. And not in an oppressive way but in an invitational way. When we sing Joy to the World, we're evangelists.

We're missionaries. When we make a joyful noise in this place, we are inviting the world to come join us in our worship. And did you know that that's actually happened here? People walked in from cedar and walnut in the middle of our singing, in the middle of us declaring to the world that God is our king and that there is nothing greater than his steadfast covenant love.

[22 : 37] People have been drawn in because our singing was always meant to be an invitation to each other, to our neighborhood, to the world, to join in our celebration. Like, think about that.

It was you that I was thinking about, Chris. You're the one who came in, right? Amen! We're glad you're here. But think about that. If Psalm 98 and joy to the world place on our lips a commanding invitation to the mountains and to the sea, imploring them, begging them to worship our God with us, how much more should we extend this commanding invitation to the people in our lives who have yet to join our song?

People who are living apart from God and pursuing other lesser joys than Jesus. People who can't find a good reason to sing something so ridiculous as joy to the world.

Do we realize what a unique gift we have to offer the world in the name of Jesus? So when we sing joy to the world, we aren't just singing as grateful worshipers, but we're singing with God-given authority as missionaries and as evangelists.

We're singing as emcees to the world crying out, make some noise for Jesus. That's what we're doing when we sing joy to the world. And not only that, but we're singing as prophets.

[24 : 08] Not just with commemorative gratitude, not just as a commanding invitation, but with a confident hope for the future. Now if you've been paying attention to Psalm 98, if you've been paying attention to the song Joy to the World, maybe it's raised some question marks because Psalm 98 is a little bit, it's pretty vague, right?

Like what is the psalmist actually singing about in the history of ancient Israel? What marvelous things had God done? What was he referring to? What salvation had been accomplished and seen by the nations and did the divine king really come and if so, in what way?

Did Israel ever really see so great a salvation to match the triumph and the victory and the tone of this psalm? You know, even for those of us who believe that this salvation was fulfilled not in the nation state of ethnic Israel but in the coming of Christ and in his wider kingdom, I think a lot of us still struggle to sing Joy to the World in a deeply authentic way because how are we supposed to sing Joy to the World to our neighbors seeking asylum and refuge from violence in their home countries?

How are we supposed to sing Joy to Gaza and to Ukraine and to North Korea and to Sudan? I mean, many of us probably feel like we can't even sing Joy into our own hearts, into the darkness of our own depression or the despair we feel about our jobs, our relationships, or the whole of our lives.

And you know, this time of year, this is a super important question for us with all the commercialization of Christmas and all the manufactured merriment around us. We have to be asking, how can I sing Joy to the World with authenticity rather than superficiality?

[25 : 49] And is there really such a thing as Joy to the World? This world is so broken, right? It just seems so broken. Joy can seem like such a far-off dream.

So who do we think we are to command this broken world into joy? How could Isaac Watts be so bold, so brash to write a verse like verse 3? No more let sin and sorrows grow, nor thorns infest the ground.

How can he expect us to sing such a thing? I mean, sure, Jesus has come, but man, I still got plenty of thorns in my yard, plenty of sin in my life, plenty of sorrow in my family, let alone the rest of this world.

How can we sing this song without being superficial and sentimental? How can we sing Joy to the World with depth and authenticity? Well, if you notice in verse 9, verse 9 of Psalm 98, it says, let them sing before the Lord for he comes, or it can be translated for he is coming to judge the earth.

He will judge, or that word can also be reign. He will reign in righteousness and the peoples with equity. Did you notice the tense change, the change in the tense?

[27 : 09] Verses 1 to 3 had us looking backwards to the marvelous things that God had done. Verses 4 to 8 have us looking to the present, calling upon creation to join us in our present worship.

But verse 9 at the end, it ends in the future tense. He is coming. He will judge. He will reign as king over the world.

You see, ancient Israel could have sang this song in reference to any number of salvation events. Deliverance from Egypt, the establishment of David's throne, return from exile in Babylon, but no matter when they sang this, no matter what salvation they'd experienced, there was always a greater future salvation to come.

When God would finally come as their king. Which means that Psalm 98 was always intended to be sung prophetically. Prophetically, with eyes toward a future hope.

And you know what? So was joy to the world. Fun fact, did you know that Joy to the World actually is a part of a collection of hymns that Isaac Watts wrote? And the collection is not entitled, you know, Best Christmas Hits by Isaac Watts.

[28 : 19] No. It's entitled, simply, The Psalms of David. It wasn't intended to be a Christmas song. It's actually a perfect Advent song if you think about it, longing for the coming of the Messiah, the king.

See, Isaac Watts, he saw the prophetic nature of Psalm 98 as ancient Israel awaited their Messiah. And then he looked at our own present age and saw that though Christ has come, thorns still infest the ground.

Right? And so like the prophets of old, we wait for the return of our king. And so just like Psalm 98, Joy to the World is a song that was meant to be sung prophetically, in faith, and with confidence in our future hope, hope that our king will come.

So you see, when we sing Joy to the World, we are confessing our faith. We are prophetically declaring our great hope and what we know God will do in the future for our good, for the good of the world.

With the eyes of faith, we declare this vision of the king that we have who comes to make his blessings flow as far as the curse is found, and that's super far. With the eye of faith, we look upon a world with no more sin, no more sorrow, no more thorns infesting the ground, and we live as prophets and priests, princes and princesses, as signposts and witnesses to this vision of the king.

[29 : 46] As prophets, we sing Joy to the World, declaring and inviting the world into a better, more glorious future. As priests, we sing Joy to the World, offering up our sacrifice of praise unto God, and as a tender reminder to one another of our greatest and only comfort in life and in death.

We remind each other that our sorrows and our sufferings are not forever, and that in Christ we have a deep joy that can never, never be taken away from us. You know, there are some of us here in this room who have experienced very recent, incredibly tragic loss.

I'm thinking particularly of losses of sons, losses of daughters. I think of Elizabeth Poore. She would have been five years old this week. I think of Isaac Lee.

He'd be on his way home shortly from his first semester at college. And we groan, don't we? We groan. As the Apostle Paul says, we groan with all creation, awaiting the final redemption of Elizabeth's body, of Isaac's body, of our bodies, of this broken world that we inhabit.

But you know, when Lori and Peter Poore, and when Brian and Sam Lee come faithfully here to this place, this sacred place, to worship every week, and when they sing from their hearts, Christ our hope in life and death, when they sing joy to the world, when they sing he is worthy, along with us, into our ears, let it come into our hearts as well.

[31 : 37] This is powerful. That is a powerful, prophetic, priestly testimony to the hope and the joy that we all share in Christ, and in Christ alone.

Like royal children, we sing joy to the world with confidence in our triumphant Father, who is the King. One Old Testament scholar, Derek Kidner, he said that the psalms, the psalms we sing now are a rehearsal, and God's presence among his worshipers is a prelude to his appearing to the world.

You see, we rehearse what we believe to really be coming, even when it hasn't happened yet, even when we haven't seen it yet. And honestly, it's more than a rehearsal because God is here.

Christ is here in our midst by his Spirit even as we await his final consummate return in the flesh. So my only concluding exhortation this morning, Christ Church, is to sing.

And to sing with all our hearts joy to the world. Sing as a kingdom of priests with our eyes fixed on Jesus with commemorative gratitude to God.

[33 : 02] Let us sing as a commanding invitation to one another and to the world to join in our song and let us sing with confident hope in God's good new creation promises to us in Christ.

Sing to the Lord a new song, even if it's 300 years old. Sing to the Lord a new song for our King has come. He's come wearing a crown of thorns and he has done truly marvelous things and in marvelous ways too.

Look upon his right hand, the hand that accomplished salvation for us and see that it is pierced straight through. Look upon his holy arms spread wide upon a cross in our place.

This is the kind of king that we worship. It's a king who rules the world in truth and grace at the same time.

Uncompromising truth and costly yet abundant grace. A God who made a way for us through the cross.

[34 : 10] A God who's come to us to go to a cross that we might both glory in his righteousness and at the same time wonder at his love.

It's my prayer for us that we would sing as a people glorying in the high standard of righteousness that Christ has set before us and at the same time who has loved us unto death on a cross and met us there.

Let us wonder in this season. So let's do that now as we sing joy to the world. Will you pray with me? Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Lord God two wonders now that we confess our worth and our unworthiness.

Christ has paid it all. Our ransom has been paid. He's come to give us joy. Father many of us feel like we cannot taste that joy.

What do we taste in our encounter with Christ here in this sacred place even as we long for the fullness of that feast at the last day. Make us a prophetically singing people of God inviting the nations to join in our joy.

[35 : 36] In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.