

# Joy to the World

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, we're continuing our series on four carols in Advent, and today it is Joy to the World, as we have been singing. That carol is the most published Christmas carol in North America, but it is not actually a Christmas carol.

It's actually all about the second coming of Jesus in great glory. It's more of an Advent hymn, an excellent Advent hymn. But we sing it at Christmas because it is so full of joy and hope. It is about Jesus fulfilling the promise of Christmas, that he will be known as the Savior who is Christ the King by all of the universe when he comes in glory.

So this is why we sing it at Christmas. And the words that were written there, that you sang, were written by a man named Isaac Watts, the great English hymn writer.

And they are exuberant words because Psalm 98 is exuberant and joyful. And it's based on this psalm that's on page 500, if you can turn to that.

[ 1 : 10 ] And also if you have open page 5 as well in your bulletin. It will be very helpful because we are going to look at these two together. It talks about Jesus being God the victorious king.

And it is a joyful tune that matches the words thanks to Lowell Mason who 100 years ago wrote the music for it. And what he did was he took a couple of parts of the Messiah, notes from there, from Handel, and he cobbled them together.

He came up with a tune that became this beautiful, joyful vehicle for Isaac Watts' words that we sing today. It is heartfelt joy that we sing it.

And you sang it very well, by the way, this morning. There is something about music that helps us to express what is in our hearts, to express truth in a way that spoken words do not.

Music is able to lift our hearts in a different and wonderful way than words alone could do. So Joy to the World does this.

[ 2 : 20 ] It's easy to sing with all your heart, to sing enthusiastically. And you know, Watts believed very strongly in singing hymns of God's truth with all your heart.

Now the problem was, Watts was born in a time in England that was very dreary as far as hymn writing. All the really good hymns were written by Germans.

The Lutherans had all the good church music. I went to a Lutheran seminary for one year, and when the students there sang A Mighty Fortress, they practically blew the roof of the chapel off.

And it was all in harmony, too. It made me as an Anglican feel very, very inadequate. And so at that time, the English hymns were dreary.

Isaac Watts would have been singing psalms in settings that were not joyful, that were not heartfelt. It was not edifying. So one day as a teenager, Isaac Watts said to his dad, Now that does not describe you at all when you're singing.

[ 3 : 48 ] But his father got tired of his complaining, and he said, If you don't like the hymns we sing, then write better ones. So he did. That day, he wrote a hymn. And his dad liked it and introduced it to the church on Sunday.

The church loved it. And asked him to do it the next week, and the next week, and the next week.

And that set him off into be a very prolific hymn writer. Over 800 hymns, he had a tremendous influence on English hymn church music.

And that's because his hymns delight in the Lord. They are from the heart. And their hymns express this delight in God.

His dad wrote all of the children, he and all of the children, a letter as they were growing up. And he exhorted them in this letter.

I don't know how many of you have written letters to your children like this. But he said, Frequently read the scriptures and get your hearts to delight in them. Frequently read the scriptures and get

your hearts to delight in them.

[ 4 : 53 ] And that's what Isaac Watts did. He became known as the father of English hymnody. And his work really helped the churches in England to express heartfelt joy.

Heartfelt praise for the good news of Jesus. And you know, one of his innovations was to take psalms and write in hymns how those psalms connect to the good news of Jesus.

He would write about how Jesus fulfills the psalms that they were singing. And that's what Joy to the World does. It was Psalm 98. It's a psalm about God ruling in order to save.

And that also, of course, is the good news. The heart of the good news of Jesus. So Isaac Watts reminds us of this in this carol. Joy to the world, he writes.

Why? The Lord, Jesus, has come. Joy to the world. Why? Our Savior, Jesus, reigns.

[ 5 : 54 ] You see, that, he is saying, is the foundation of joy for us. Because when God rules your life, an incredible salvation fills your past, surrounds your present, and is the substance of your future.

And we see those three aspects of salvation in Psalm 98. Because in this psalm, you see that you have been saved. The work of the king in the past has done this.

You are being saved. You are abiding with the king now. And finally, you will be saved. The judgment of the king is in your future.

So there's a deep joy in knowing the saving king surrounds all the aspects of your life. And that's why joy to the world is such a great and true carol.

Now look at verses 1 through 3. You can see our past salvation here. It's exuberant. Oh, sing to the Lord a new song. He has done marvelous things. His right hand, his holy arm, have made worked salvation for him.

[ 7 : 01 ] The Lord has made known his salvation. He has revealed his righteousness in the sight of the nations. He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness to the house of Israel. All the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God.

And did you know that there are two very important women in the Bible who sing that same song? Both of their names start with M.

The writer of Psalm 98 borrows very heavily from Miriam. Do you remember Miriam? She wrote a song just after God rescued Israel from Egypt.

And in her song, she sings to the Lord. And she sings of the wondrous works that God has done by his right arm, which is a symbol of power and strength.

And he has become her salvation. And that he has saved his people Israel. That's what those three verses are based on.

[ 8 : 05 ] Now there is another Mary. A thousand, fifteen hundred years later, when God tells her that she will give birth to Jesus, she writes a song as well.

She sings a song that's based on Psalm 98 in these three verses. She says, My soul magnifies the Lord. There's a new song. He has done mighty things for me.

He has shown strength with his arm. And his mercy, which is salvation, is for those who fear him from generation to generation.

And then he has helped his servant Israel. See, God has shown that her son Jesus, God has shown Mary that her son Jesus would fulfill a salvation first shown way back in Exodus.

She is making that connection. She knows that God has freed the people of Israel from Egypt on Passover night, when God's judgment was on all people.

[ 9 : 11 ] Every family, whether they were Egyptian or a Hebrew, their firstborn son would die that night. The way that they were spared this judgment was because they put the blood of killed lambs onto their door frames.

And finally, this great ruler gave in to the greater ruler and let the Israelites go. Now, on the cross, Jesus' salvation is infinitely greater.

He is the Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world. As Psalm 98 says, it's for the world. His cross is God's power, the strength of his arm, because in it, Jesus doesn't release us from Egypt.

He releases us from the power of sin and death. So just like the Passover lambs died in the place of Hebrew firstborn sons, Jesus takes our deserved judgment for sins, and he dies in our place.

This is the Savior that Mary is giving birth to. This is what she sings about. Every one of us sing that song. Every one of us is under his judgment, God's judgment.

[10:27] As John Stott wrote very helpfully, he said, you know, the essence of sin is to put yourself in the place of God. But the essence of salvation, which is what Psalm 98 sings about, is God putting himself where we deserve to be.

Sin puts us in the place of God. God, in his salvation, puts himself in the place where we deserve to be, on the cross. And when you know this great salvation, that Jesus has made his great substitution for you, and you entrust yourself humbly to his mighty work and come under his rule, you will know the beginning of joy.

That king has saved you. And that's why Isaac Watt says, with joy, let earth receive her king. Let every heart prepare him room.

This is how we receive joy. This is how it comes into our lives. This is what we want the world to do. And that's why verse 2 tells us that God's salvation is not just powerful, but the very nature of it is that it is meant to be told.

It is salvation that is told by God in his word and through God's people. It actually has to be made known because it is great news of great joy that when it is received by the world humbly, will bring great joy to all people.

[12:00] It's the point of all that we do at St. John's. It's our mission. This is what every faithful church is about. Telling about a salvation that is meant by its nature to be told.

Now, if you have received your king, whom God has told you died in his place, there is a permanent change that takes place for you. It is actually an event that defines you.

It becomes your identity. It is that Jesus has taken your judgment. He has saved you. And so no matter what your background, what your interests, what you have done or not done, he is your king and you are his beloved.

That is the fact of your past salvation. He has released you from sin and pride so that you will take joy in him as your ruler. That you will take joy in humbly giving yourself in worship to him.

And that's why the work of the king, that salvation, is your sure foundation of our life today. And that brings us to the second aspect of our salvation.

[13:11] Because it's not only the great event of the past, it is an ongoing reality. This passage says that you are being saved by the king's presence day by day.

Look at verse 4 through 6. It assumes that you live life in the presence of the living God. So verse 4 says, Make a joyful noise to the Lord.

Sing praises to the Lord. Make a joyful noise before the Lord the king, the living king. You see, in Jesus, God is with you.

The psalm says, Take joy in that. Take joy in him who is your salvation now. And with that call, God is actually directing you to take him more seriously and to take yourself less seriously.

That's what it means to rejoice in him. There's one great 19th century preacher who said this, and I think he was way ahead of his time. He speaks directly to our own culture.

[14:20] He says this, He says, God frees us from being occupied by ourselves so that we can be occupied with God. That's what God is doing in his salvation.

Because to be occupied by God means to more and more live a life that rejoices in Jesus, in his extravagant grace, in his glorious majesty.

In his deep love for you, in his magnificent truth, we tend to be occupied and try to find joy in all kinds of counterfeits, in collecting wealth, or in fulfilling our sexual desires, in our quest for status from other people, in our professions, in our gossips.

We try to find this joy. But Psalm 98 says, there's one ruling joy that alone rightly orders all our desires. And that is the joy of Jesus, our Lord and King.

And I need to say that this reading here says to us that you are not going to be perfect in taking joy in Jesus, your King.

[15:34] In fact, it is going to be messy. I like the fact, I want you to notice this, that the verse does not say, make a beautiful melody. Last week after I preached on the carol, somebody came to me and said, I'm very glad you didn't sing the carol for us.

And this is very, very true, I think. The verses don't say, make a beautiful melody. It says, make a joyful noise. I can do that.

You can do that. And it won't be perfect. I remember years ago, there was a concert that was given at St. John's Shaughnessy, and Terry organized it.

Beautiful concert, and it had professional musicians in it. But just before the concert, Terry took six or seven people from the audience, including me, and he gave us different instruments, like a recorder, cymbals, tambourines, bells, different things to hit.

And he said, when you come to the place in the concert called Persian Marketplace, I want you to come forward. And then you are to play your instrument as exuberantly as you can when I give you the signal in the piece.

[16:49] And so you blow as hard as you can, you hit as hard as you can, and loudly as you can, and you shake the tambourine as much as you want. So he said, well, do we follow notes or anything?

No. Any rhythm? No. Any direction at all? No. Just play it with gusto. And so when the time came up, we did just that.

It was very chaotic. There was clanging and banging and screeching. It was kind of awful, actually. But it was also very joyful.

The audience laughed. They loved it. And it actually worked because it really did sound like being in the midst of a very busy Persian market.

We did a great job of that. But it only worked because it was in the context of the whole piece that was being played and in the context of the whole concert.

[17:47] And I think this is not a bad picture of what it means to take joy in God. It's very messy. We're not good at being joyful. Sometimes we don't feel like it.

We don't feel holy. Yet we follow His call to rejoice in Him with all of our imperfections, seeking to love Him with all our heart, mind, and soul.

And you know, that always involves repenting, which I think is messy. John Stott also put it well when he said that when some jealous or proud or malicious or impure thought invades our mind, we must kick it out at once.

Well, it's easier said than done. And sometimes we don't kick very well. It's not easy. We don't feel holy doing it. But praise God that He calls us to do it in the context of this ongoing saving work in our life.

He is sovereign over our lives. He plans and works all these things for our good as we more and more take joy in Jesus. In doing that, you see, He actually remakes us.

[18:55] By the power of the Holy Spirit, He very patiently does His recreating work in us. He changes our hearts. He changes our minds as we feed on His Word, as we rejoice in who He is and His salvation.

This is the way God is working His salvation out in us. In a few months, at St. John's, we are going to be, a lot of us will be going through something called Christianity Explored.

And in preparing for that, and I think there's going to be a sermon series like that too in the spring. But in preparing for that, I've been watching some of the testimonies from Christianity Explored of people who became Christian recently.

And it's very encouraging to do. But one of the women I thought was very helpful in this messiness, she said this. She had just become a follower of Jesus and she was interviewed and she said this. She said, you know, before I became a Christian, I wondered, was I the kind of person, having gone through Christianity Explored, that God would want as a Christian?

[20:02] My life is very messy and she talked about some of the things in her life. And she said, one day, I fractured my knee and I was off work for weeks. And I was anxious. I was wondering how they would do without me and how I would do without working.

And there was lots of times of solitude. She said, I started listening to Bible tapes and reflect on the things that I learned and Christianity Explored. And she said this. She said, I came to understand that I didn't have to be good enough for God because Jesus had died for me and that the Christian life is a journey.

She's right, a journey of salvation. I would have the Holy Spirit in me working with me every step of the way. That, she said, was a fantastically liberating experience to learn that truth.

And that is when she began to trust in the Lord Jesus. This is very profound, even though it sounds simple. Because what she was doing is taking joy in Jesus who is truly with us.

He is the living King. It is in the power of His Holy Spirit that He is working in us that which is well-pleasing in His sight. Every day, He is freeing us to worship Him with joy.

[ 21 : 19 ] That is the present saving work. We leave this passage, though, with a future salvation. It is not complete yet.

And this is what verses 7 and 9 say. That King will save us. Listen to what it says. There's this huge crescendo of praise that happens in these verses. It is a joy that absolutely fills the earth, people along with all of creation, including the rock that Jeremy had.

And it says this. It says, Let the sea roar and all that fills it, the world and all those who dwell in it.

Let the rivers clap their hands and the hills sing for joy together before the Lord.

All heaven and nature sings is the way that Isaac Watt puts it. They repeat the sounding joy. But why is this? Well, it's a huge surprise.

For He comes to judge the earth with righteousness and the peoples with equity. What a strange reason for joy, it seems at first. Because there will be a day, it is saying here, when Jesus the King comes again and history is completed.

[ 22 : 26 ] All people of all ages will be raised for judgment. They will stand before Jesus, their judge. All is going to be revealed.

There is a fearsome thing about this when you think about it. Because His perfect justice is going to be made known. He will decisively come against and address all sin, all sin and evil that has ever happened.

All people who rebel against God will be punished. That's what judgment is. They will be banished. It's a universal judgment in which all evil is forever and finally overruled.

Where is the joy? Where is the joy in this? Well, there's two reasons. And it's why there is such exuberant joy. The first is that when we see Jesus, we will know that judgment day that was our judgment day has already happened.

It has already happened on the cross for those who have trusted Jesus. On that cross, perfect justice and perfect love have met in Him. And through that judgment that has already happened for us, we will receive a completed salvation as a gift.

[ 23 : 44 ] And with that, this gift of the glorious resurrection body that Jesus gave when He rose from the dead. You see, we will see Jesus in our judgment and we will be like Him because of Him, because of His gift on the cross.

And creation, this psalm says, will applaud. They will actually cheer when it sees that people are absolutely transformed, brought from darkness into light, utterly changed for good forever.

creation says, finally, you were made for this. You are freed to enjoy Jesus' rule forever and we can enjoy it with you. Now, there's a second reason for joy in this judgment.

And this really affects us in our nitty-gritty of life now too. And that is this, that His judgment shows us what is truly important.

That is what's going to be revealed in judgment. And what is truly important is the righteousness of God in your life. He will judge with righteousness.

[ 24 : 54 ] It will be revealed that your purity, your obedience, your sacrificial love for God and your service to other people in your name, in His name, your suffering for Jesus, which is so often ridiculed in this world, will be honored.

It will be praised. It will be vindicated. You will know that all of it is worthwhile. It was the treasure worth living for. That is our strength as we see our future salvation.

It is secure in Jesus. It is a salvation that is the joy of Jesus ruling heaven and earth and all people forever and ever. It is about constantly being filled with the wonder of His love, the wonder of His love over and over again.

May we be shaped by this hope and take joy in our King Jesus to whom belongs all honor, all praise, all thanksgiving forever and ever.

Amen. Amen.