

Psalm 98

Joy to the World!

Singing in anticipation of Christ coming again

When our first born was still in his baby car seat, we went on a road trip, Ken, me, Michael and my mom and dad. As we were getting out of the car for a much-needed break, and for whatever reason, our little guy decided to go into a major laughing fit sitting right there in his car seat. He was only a few months old, not even crawling. We had seen him smile, heard him coo and giggle, but this was an all-out belly laugh, and we had no idea what had sparked this outburst of glee. His laughter brought us so much joy we couldn't help but laugh ourselves. There is something about a baby's laughter that is infectious and is about the best expression of joy that one might experience. It is free, unexpected, hope filled, infused with happiness and delight. It is pure joy.

In this time leading up to Christmas we see and hear the word *joy* a lot. Scripture is filled with reference to joy and happiness and, so is our singing. *Joy to the world the Lord is come!* These famous words are filled with delight, and with hope-filled wonder as we lift our voices with words about heaven and nature singing, while fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains repeat the sounding joy. The words of this hymn were penned by Isaac Watts, an English minister, not of the Anglican church, but rather a congregationalist. He has remarkably been credited with writing the lyrics for some 750 hymns, a number of which continue to be sung.

Joy to the World seems to hold a special spot for people at Christmas. Many would say that Christmas was missing something if they didn't get a chance to hum along with a recording or all out sing to their hearts content this hymn that calls on all of creation to sing about the wonder of God's love.

What is interesting is that this Christmas carol is not about the birth of Christ, it is about the 2nd coming of Christ. There is nothing about the birth of baby Jesus in these words. Watts used verses 4-9 of Psalm 98 and paraphrased them so that their focus would be the fulfillment of all things through Christ. This was the way that many theologians of the time were interpreting Old Testament scriptures. They read Christ into everything including the Psalms.

Our practice today is to appreciate the Psalms for what they are, the experience and hope of God for the Hebrew people, but in Watts time it was not unusual to take scripture and reinterpret it with what is called a Christological focus. In other words, making Christ the lens for interpretation. It is also with this in mind that it makes sense that Watts could take the story of the fall, Adam and Eve eating the forbidden apple, and God cursing the ground found in Genesis 3:17, and then use that in verse three of the

hymn. For Watts Jesus was the answer, the redemption of that curse. So he is able to take the verses of Psalm 98 and intertwine those with Genesis 3:17 to give us a reason to make known the glories of God's righteousness and wonders of God's love.

And so today we take a page out of Watts' play book, or rather hymn book, to examine Psalm 98 in terms of Jesus, without discounting the fact that this was not the intention of the Psalmist. The Psalmist was writing about the Lord God, not about our Lord Jesus Christ. Yet, as Christians, we also realize that Jesus the Son was with the Father from the beginning. As John writes in his gospel, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. (John 1:1). That Word was and is Jesus.

A little more background on this Psalm might also be helpful. Psalm 98 is part of a group called the Enthronement Psalms. They are distinctly about God's lordship over creation, not to be confused with the kingship of any person. This Psalm in particular implores the use of music, not only by people, but all the earth, all creation, in making a joyful noise as God has done marvelous things. And though the Psalmist was talking about what God was doing in his time and place, as we approach Christmas, we know that the marvellous things that God has done was to send his Son to restore us, to take our sin... the curse as Isaac Watts calls it... and make us new people. We are a people who get to experience God in a new way through Christ's work on the cross and the promised Holy Spirit that still lives and works in and among us. Christ is our victory, Christ is God's victory.

This Psalm starts with "O sing to the Lord a new song" moving from that to encompassing an even greater response to God's victory, steadfast love and faithfulness, as all are enjoined to sing a "joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth, break forth into joyous song and sing praises. Sing praises to the Lord with the lyre, with the lyre and the sound of melody. With trumpets and the sound of the horn, make a joyful noise before the King, the Lord" (vs4-6).

If you have been to any of the Christmas performances put on by various choirs, the symphony, or other bands in the city in the last few weeks you may have heard just the tip of what the writer is alluding to in these verses. This is a joyful noise worthy of the Lord, worthy of praising God. It will take voices and instruments, but not only that, it will take all creation to make the joyful noise. The last part of the Psalm says, "Let the sea roar, and all that fills it." We have people praising, instruments playing, the sea roaring and all that fills it. But let's not stop there! "Let the floods clap their hands; let the hills sing together for joy at the presence of the Lord."

It is nearly impossible to imagine what that would sound like. You may have stood by the ocean, but what would it sound like to have the sea roar and all that is in it, along with the world and those who live in it. One might find themselves thinking about natural disasters and the sounds described as a tsunami pours in on the land, or a tornado or hurricane rushes through. The sound of a forest on fire or maybe even the force of the sound of water plunging over rock such as Niagara or Kakabeka Falls. Maybe you have

heard how the ice sounds as it freezes upon Lake Superior and then comes crashing against the shore line. And still this would not be all the sound that the Psalmist is crying out for in our praise of God.

Point is, this is the all-encompassing sound of joy that we and creation are to make because God is present. The sound of joy as God has come in the one we know as Jesus Christ, and he will judge the world with righteousness and the peoples with equity.

Years ago, one might have listened to a hell fire and brimstone sermon when it came to talking about God's judgement, but that is not the intent here. Nancy deClaissé-Walford, talks about judgement with righteousness and equity in her commentary written for Working Preacher, an online outreach of Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota. She writes,

The basic meaning of the word [righteous] in Hebrew is "to do the right thing." In any situation, what would a worshiper of the creator God do? What would be right for ALL concerned -- not for some and not others, not for some right now and others later, but for all right now in this time and space?

And "Equity" ... which means, literally, "upright, straight, to the point." Judging with "equity" means judging with a clear view of equality for all and a firm sense of right and wrong -- not equality and right for those of privilege, but equality and right for all of the earth and the habitable spaces of the world.¹

And this way of being in the world is relevant for us. We are to live in a righteous manner, where all people matter. It is about the refugees crossing the border from Mexico into the United States, and others from the United States into Quebec. It is about making sure there is potable water on every reserve in Canada and access to education and health care for everyone from the child living in poverty to the single parent and Senior citizen trying to make ends meet and accessing the food bank to make it through the month. It is about every news story that shows the inequity in the world, the injustice, and trying to make a difference in whatever way small or large that we are called to in order to make this planet more like heaven on earth than it is today.

It is about recognizing our privilege and working to make sure that everyone is respected, loved, cared for. And while we work on all that of in our families, with our friends, in our church, in our community and with all nations, we remember that this is not about us, it is about God.

It is about love and unexpected, hope filled joy, infused with happiness and delight. This is the joy that comes from trusting that what we know and experience today is not the

¹ deClaissé-Walford, Nancy.

http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2449

Accessed December 14, 2018.

end of the story but just a moment in the history of God and God's people. And with the generations that have sung Watts' beloved hymn we sing in anticipation of Christ coming again...

Joy to the world! the Lord is come:
let earth receive its King;
let every heart prepare him room
and heaven and nature sing.