

Joy to the World

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Christ Church - Moscow, ID

Sermon #1900 - A.D. December 6, 2015

INTRODUCTION:

A few years ago I preached an annotated version of *Hark, the Herald Angels Sing*, showing how saturated in Scripture that Christmas carol was. Well, it is not the only one, and so I thought to do the same thing with *Joy to the World*. While *Hark* was assembled out of many passages, *Joy to the World* is a paraphrase of our text, Ps. 98:4-8. Originally, it wasn't even composed as a Christmas carol. As we sing our songs, especially the familiar Christmas ones, we should remember that we are singing *sentences*. They mean something.

THE TEXT:

“Make a joyful noise unto the Lord, all the earth: Make a loud noise, and rejoice, and sing praise. Sing unto the Lord with the harp; With the harp, and the voice of a psalm. With trumpets and sound of cornet make a joyful noise before the Lord, the King. Let the sea roar, and the fulness thereof; The world, and they that dwell therein. Let the floods clap their hands: Let the hills be joyful together” (Psalm 98:4–8).

SUMMARY OF THE TEXT:

Praising the Lord should be loud, raucous, and compelling. All of nature is invited to join in the praise—earth, sea, mountains, floods. All the inhabitants of the earth are summoned to let the oceans roar, setting the pitch, and then to roar along with them. All the instruments that man has invented are gathered together, and they too make a joyful noise before the Lord.

Isaac Watts, the writer of this psalm/hymn, would Christianize the psalms as having been fulfilled in Jesus Christ. For example, the sentiments of Psalm 72 became “Jesus Shall Reign.” In addition, he tends to change the verbs from future to present. “The Lord is coming” becomes “the Lord *is* come,” and so it naturally lends itself to become a Christmas carol.

ECHOES ELSEWHERE:

Watts was a systematic thinker, and all that systematic theology does (when it is properly done) is remember while reading one text what you learned while reading the others. The best kind of systematic thought brings all of the Bible into every text. This is quite different from developing “a system” and then making the Bible fit into it. Systematic theology at its worst is creating a human system as a Procrustean bed, and cutting or stretching particular passages to fit. But done right, we have something like this—truth from everywhere found anywhere.

SONGS AND MORE SONGS:

*Joy to the world! The Lord is come
Let earth receive her King!
Let every heart prepare Him room
And heaven and nature sing.*

There is no tension in the biblical framework between the life of the *individual* and the life of the *world*. They are all of a piece. The message is joy to the *world*, and so the Lord who is come to the world should be welcomed into *every heart*. The end result in both places (in the world and in each heart) is music. If the Lord comes to earth, then we, who are on earth, should join the welcoming throng. Everyone will not do what no one will do.

MEN AND NATURE HARMONIZE:

*Joy to the world! the Savior reigns
Let men their songs employ
While fields and floods
Rocks, hills and plains
Repeat the sounding joy.*

We not taught a Stoic patience so that we might put up with the way the devil is ruling over the world. No, the *Savior* reigns. Because the Lord is come, and because He has begun His reign (upon His death, burial, resurrection and ascension), we should be employing songs to declare it. And as we declare it, we do it in such a way as to invite “fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains” to sing back at us. Picture creation and mankind as forming two choirs, singing antiphonally. The oceans sing, and we repeat the refrain. The treble voices of all mankind sing, and the bedrock below us, 28 octaves beneath, takes up the bass line. This idea of creation singing is a fully scriptural notion.

RELEASE FROM BONDAGE:

*No more let sins and sorrows grow
Nor thorns infest the ground
He comes to make
His blessings flow
Far as the curse is found.*

Here it seems that Watts brings in the great hope that Paul holds out for the creation (Rom. 8:18-25). When we look at that passage we see that the creation is longing for release, and that longing takes the form of looking forward to the day when the sons of God (believers) are revealed in Christ Jesus for what and who they are. Just as Adam’s fall plunged the world into its bondage to decay, so also the resurrection of the just will release the creation from that bondage. When Adam fell, the world fell. When all is put right in the second Adam, the world will then be put right. The work of the second Adam

is as extensive as the destruction of the first. “Far as the curse is found.” How extensive will the blessing of Christ be? Well, how extensive was the ruin?

We see in Scripture that the great enemy is death, and is the last enemy to be destroyed. But there are lesser enemies—thorns, thistles, cancers, wounds, storms, earthquakes, and the blessings of Jesus Christ flow *here*, and not just over our isolated sins. The blessings of Jesus Christ also flow over what our sins have done. The blessing of Christ not only forgives the vandals, *but also restores the damage*.

DISCIPLE THE NATIONS:

*He rules the world with truth and grace,
And makes the nations prove
The glories of His righteousness
And wonders of His love.*

Jesus rules the world with truth and grace (John 1:14). The nations will in fact come to the Messiah, believing in Him, and will in fact prove the glories of His righteousness. When the Lord determines to judge the world, this is regarded by the psalmist as a *deliverance*. This is a frequent emphasis in the psalms, and it sounds odd to our ears. When we hear of the “day of judgment” we think *uh oh*. But Watts is much closer to the biblical sentiment, where the judgment of God is sought and invited. Of course, this necessitates a robust understanding of justification. One of the central glories of *His* righteousness is that the Lord is *our* righteousness. And this is the only reason why we can afford lean *toward* the day of judgment.



PUBLISHED BY: CANON PRESS • P.O. BOX 8729 • 205 E. 5TH ST. • MOSCOW, ID 83843
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PHONE 800-488-2034 • FAX 208-882-1568