

## Advent Joy

Christmas and music go together. The familiar tunes of Christmas are everywhere, serving as the soundtrack to life and commerce. We love Christmas music at Northshore... whether it is an adaptation of Christmas classics like the choir just sang, new Christmas songs like we sang together just a few minutes ago, or favorites sang in traditional ways or new arrangements like when we sang: Joy to the World! The Lord is come!



These words were penned by Isaac Watts, and published in the early 1700s. He wrote some 600 hymns; we sing many of them including “O God Our Help in Ages Past,” and “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross.”



Many of his hymns were first published in his work *Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual Songs* in 1707. When the school district in the District of Columbia was formed, then President Thomas Jefferson also chaired the school board and set the curriculum. They established two primary texts for reading lessons: the **Bible**, and Watts’ ***Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual Songs***.

*Joy to the World* appeared in Watts work published in 1719: *Psalms of David Imitated in the Language of the New Testament*. Joy to the World was one of Watts’ interpretations of a Psalm, specifically Psalm 98.

The words were later set to the tune we know today by Lowell Mason. The melody is often credited to Handel, but it appears that Mason simply plucked a few melodies from Handel’s *Messiah* and imitated Handel’s style with the melody that is now so very familiar. It isn’t particularly complicated... Do Ti La So Fa Me Rae Do.

These great carols and hymns of the church are cherished by many of us today, but they were scandalous to some of Watts’ day. Watts was among the Nonconformists movement, those who would not embrace the established Church of England. In fact, when young Isaac was born, his

father was in jail for being a Nonconformist. Isaac followed in his father's footsteps and was an influential leader among the independent churches in England, pastoring one of the most influential independent churches.

In his writings, Watts spoke of his motivation for being such a prolific hymn writer. He harshly criticized the hymn singing of his day, so metrical and lifeless and boring. He spoke of how an unbelieving observer might doubt that there was any veracity to the faith of these so called Believers; with such passionless singing, could they possibly have any real faith?

So Watts set out to shake things up in his day... and it was scandalous to some.

Does that sound at all familiar? It seems that every generation seeks to sing their songs (our songs) to (and about) the Lord, and it irritates some.

I'm not going to ask anyone to admit it... but I suspect there might have been someone even this morning who thought to themselves, "Why are we ruining this classic carol by singing *Joy to the World* this new way with different tunes and rhythms? We should be singing this with a pipe organ, not drums and guitars! Can't we just sing it the way Jesus sung it?"

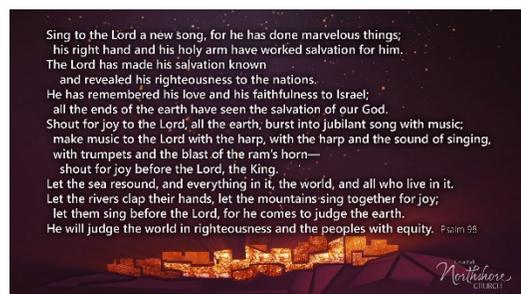
The sweet irony is that by singing Watts' work in this contemporary setting, with our sounds and styles, we are following along precisely how Watts conducted himself in his day.

When Scripture exhorts us to "sing a new song to the Lord," I don't think it means to sing our new song the same old way.

Many of Watts' day had a hard time accepting that *Joy to the World* was any kind of interpretation of Psalm 98.

Can we see it?

- <sup>1</sup> 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.
- <sup>2</sup> The LORD has made his salvation known  
and revealed his righteousness to the nations. <sup>1</sup>



<sup>1</sup> *The New International Version*. (2011). (Ps 98:1–2). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Sounds something like “He comes to make His blessings flow far as the curse is found.”

Psalm 98 goes on to say:

- <sup>4</sup> Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth,  
burst into jubilant song with music;  
<sup>5</sup> make music to the LORD with the harp,  
with the harp and the sound of singing,  
<sup>6</sup> with trumpets and the blast of the ram’s horn—  
shout for joy before the LORD, the King. <sup>2</sup>

Sounds a whole lot like “Let men their songs employ!”

- <sup>7</sup> Let the sea resound, and everything in it,  
the world, and all who live in it.  
<sup>8</sup> Let the rivers clap their hands,  
let the mountains sing together for joy; <sup>3</sup>

Joy to the World! Joy to the Earth! “While fields and floods, rocks, hills,  
and plains repeat the sounding 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. <sup>4</sup>

“He rules (judges) the world in truth (righteousness) and grace!”

Anything close to a **translation** of Psalm 98? No, not a translation at all,  
but a beautiful **interpretation** in light of New Testament truths.

The Psalmist penned the words of God’s revelation from the perspective of  
what God had done, time and again, to rescue His chosen people, and the  
Psalmist also had the perspective of what God was **promising** in terms of  
a Messiah for the future. Watts interpreted the same revelation from Psalm

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<sup>2</sup> *The New International Version*. (2011). (Ps 98:4–6). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

<sup>3</sup> *The New International Version*. (2011). (Ps 98:7–8). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

<sup>4</sup> *The New International Version*. (2011). (Ps 98:9). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

98 in light of what God performed through Jesus, the promised Christ, the Messiah.

There's something remarkable about this great carol. Here we have this most famous and recognizable carol of the Christmas season... but it lacks something, doesn't it? Have you noticed it?



This *top-of-the-charts* Christmas song doesn't say anything about mangers, or angels, or wise men, or Mary and Joseph, or even the Christ child. There really isn't an identifiable "Christmas" word in the whole carol.

It turns out that this song that we so strongly associate with Christmas wasn't necessarily intended by Isaac Watts to be a Christmas carol at all. If anything, Watts was thinking more of the Lord's final coming, His Second Advent to usher in the ultimate rule of His Eternal Kingdom.

Joy to the World... it is **not** merely for Christmas.

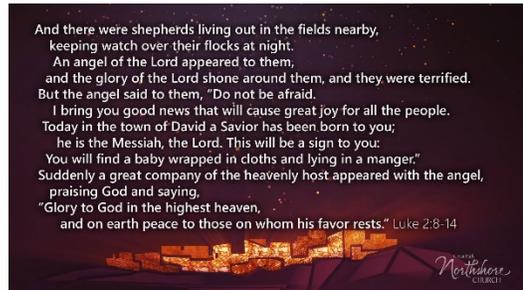
There's some wonderful ambiguity in the song that we ought to embrace.

I suppose when some sing these first lines, they think it is just bad grammar (you know, you can get away with all sorts of grammatical things in song lyrics).

Joy to the world, the Lord is come. **Is** come? Don't we mean **has** come?

Aren't we signing about what the angels announced as it is recorded in Luke 2?

"Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. <sup>11</sup> Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.<sup>5</sup>



But we don't sing that the Lord, the Messiah and Christ child, **has** come. We sing *is* come. We could attribute that to a quirky *Old English* thing. But I think we would do better to embrace the **is** there.

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<sup>5</sup> *The New International Version*. (2011). (Lk 2:10–11). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

The song is an Advent song... an Advent song in its most pure meaning. This is a song about God showing up. The Lord is come. God shows up.

The Lord has come. Is here. And is coming.

It is right that we sing this carol celebrating, with joy, that the Lord has come. Heaven and nature sings that He has come, revealing the glories of His righteousness, and the wonders of His love.

The Lord has come, and is come; He is among us, and in us by His Spirit.

It is time, now and always, for “every heart to prepare Him room.”

The Lord has come. Is come. And is coming.

The Savior reigns. He will rule the world with truth and grace. His coming as the Babe of Bethlehem, His presence now by His Spirit, is a deposit of His reign for all eternity.

Joy to the world, the Lord is come!

What of this word joy? When we say Advent joy, what is that?

Is it **happiness**? Maybe some sort of special happiness or really intense happiness?

Is joy simply happiness?

Or is joy more than that? We could go through passages of Scripture, take out the word joy and substitute the word happy or happiness... and I think that in most cases it would be pretty good.

But I think joy is more than that. Joy seems to be more than just the satisfying feeling of happiness. Joy seems more deliberate. Joy seems more purposeful.



Rather than mere happiness, I think joy is more like celebration. Joy is more than merely an internal sense of contentment or happiness; it is response to an event or truth.

Behold... I bring you good news of great celebration.

Advent joy is a response to God showing up;

Advent joy is celebrating that the Lord is come.

So celebrate... make room to celebrate that the Lord is come. This is the point of this Advent season, these weeks leading up to Christmas Day.

It could be that you wound up here this morning looking for something **Christmassy**; I hope you found it. I hope you are enjoying our celebration, and I'm happy to invite you to really join the celebration. Make room for Advent; make room for God to show up. Celebrate that Jesus has come. And when you sense that He is working now, celebrate that too. Even if it is just a spark, celebrate that spark and fan it into a flicker, and celebrate that flicker and fan it into flame. Don't miss any chance to celebrate Advent joy, that Jesus is come.

Here's one final thought about joy. When we think about Christmas Joy during this wonderful season, and routinely focus on **joy** on this third Sunday of Advent, it seems we almost exclusively think in terms of the joy we enjoy and receive from God. But is the joy of Christmas only experienced by those who receive the gift? We experience true joy when we celebrate the gift God sent us in Jesus... unspeakable joy that overwhelms our souls! But is that the extent of the joy, the joy we experience as receivers of the gift?

Think about the gift giving and receiving that lies ahead for us this season. Will the joy experienced around the tree, exchanging gifts, only be experienced by the getters? Of course not! The givers participate in that joy.



This seems especially true when we are giving gifts to our children. When I was a kid, I couldn't think of anything better than **getting** gifts at Christmas, especially from my parents because they were the ones that gave the biggest and best gifts. But now, as a parent, I know that there is something even better: giving gifts to my kids (I suspect giving kids to my grandkids will be pretty awesome someday too). What an incredible joy!

Does Our Heavenly Father experience that sort of joy when His children receive His gift? We know that He does!

Hear what the Prophet Zephaniah proclaimed 600 years before the birth of Jesus:

<sup>17</sup> The LORD your God is with you,  
the Mighty Warrior who saves.  
He will take great delight in you;  
in his love he will no longer rebuke you,  
but will rejoice over you with singing.” <sup>6</sup>



God, joyfully singing over His children, as He provides and saves.

I don't know how you picture God in your mind.

- Disinterested deity, hardly noticing the likes of us
- Disapproving divine, displeased with his annoying children

Could we think of God as a doting dad? One who longs for the best for His children... one who delights in giving good gifts, and truly rejoices when we receive the gifts.

We have a special treat this morning as our kids come to sing. I know they will bring us joy as they lift their song to God. We'll be proud of them, delighted that they are so wonderful in every way. We should certainly revel in that joy.

But as they sing, take just a moment and realize that God has a similar perspective as He looks at us. He sees us, His children, receiving and enjoying the gift of His love, hope, and peace and He too is filled with joy.

What an awesome thought. What an awesome God.

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<sup>6</sup> The New International Version. (2011). (Zep 3:17). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Let's enter into this wonderful joy, the joy of receiving God's gift through faith in Jesus, and the joy of knowing that our God rejoices, delightfully experiencing joy, as He enjoys His children... like we enjoy our children this morning.

