

## Advent Joy

I have a great appreciation for silly Christmas songs. This one, by Bob Dylan, is among my favorites. For me... part of what makes a silly Christmas song one of the best is the source. Who doesn't immediately associate Christmas with Bob Dylan?



Another of my favorite unlikely Christmas song artists is Neil Diamond... would it surprise you to know that this famous Jew has a Christmas album? Well he doesn't have **a** Christmas album, he has at least **six**.

Some of the songs on his Christmas albums fall squarely into the silly-song category (such as *Jingle Bell Rock* and *Cherry Cherry Christmas*)... but Diamond doesn't shy away from the ones that honor Jesus. Some are pretty sure that Neil Diamond has become a Christian along the way, just as Dylan has indicated, from time to time, that he too is a Christian. I hope they both are... seems they'd fit well into Heaven's worship team; I'd go to that church.

I'm not sure what you think of all the Christmas songs that leave out Baby Jesus and the Angels and the Nativity and all... but I'm happy to have them in the mix of the celebration. There should certainly be **joy** at Christmastime... and these sorts of things add to the joy.

Admit it, some of you were concerned with that bit of a strange Christmas song that I played with Bob Dylan and all of the revelers seemingly well-lubricated with Christmastime cheer. But on this day when we consider the **joy** of the season, perhaps we might learn a lesson from those filled with such joy.

A song about Santa and his reindeer, even sung with Dylan's unusual voice, can brighten our day.

But, of course, I'm most happy for the songs that so profoundly proclaim and teach the true meaning of Christmas.

The choir just sang Joy! ***Joy to the World!***  
The Lord is come! We sang a different, contemporary, arrangement at the beginning of the service. Seems fitting on this third Sunday of Advent, this day when we light the 3<sup>rd</sup> of 4 candles, this candle representing the Advent theme of joy.



These words were penned by Isaac Watts, and published in the early 1700s. He wrote some 600 hymns; many have endured through the years, 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 sing 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. It is simply a major scale.

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. 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. It seems that the Spirit moves in every generation, inspiring songs that express our love for and to the Lord. New songs in new ways are an important sign that the Spirit is indeed moving... that there is veracity to our faith, true belief in and passion for Jesus.

I wonder what Watts would think of how his song is typically used in our days. *Joy to the World* is sung today around the world in the most churchy ways... perhaps with a choir like ours, or a pipe organ with an orchestra, or just sung *a cappella*. *Joy to the World* is **conformist** today... funny how the stuff we cling to as **traditional** today always, of course, started as something non-traditional.

We may sing a song like *Joy to the World* in really churchy, perhaps even inward-focused ways, but Watts wrote it as an outward-focused pastor with a heart to reach the world... to bring true joy to the world.

Like I said, the words were an interpretation of Scripture. Many in 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>3</sup> He has remembered his love  
and his faithfulness to Israel;  
all the ends of the earth have seen  
the salvation of our God. <sup>1</sup>



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 earth receive her King” and “Let men their songs employ!”

<sup>1</sup> [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Ps 98:1–3). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

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

<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;

Joy to the World! Joy to the Earth! “While fields  
and floods, rocks, hills, and plains repeat the  
sounding joy!”

<sup>9</sup> 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>3</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.

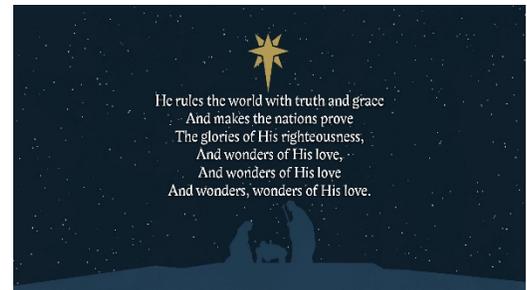
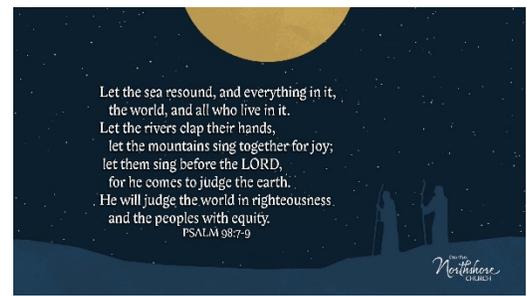
Not like what Handel did with his magnificent work, *The Messiah*, in which all of  
the words of the songs are straight from the Biblical text... but rich in meaning  
and theology.

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

There’s something remarkable about this great carol. Here we one of the 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 a manger, 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.



<sup>3</sup> [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Ps 98:7–9). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

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 at the end of the age.

Joy to the World... it is **not** just 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?

<sup>8</sup> And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. <sup>9</sup> An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. <sup>10</sup> But the angel said to them, "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>4</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* that ties to how German impacted English. But I think we would do better to embrace the **is** there.

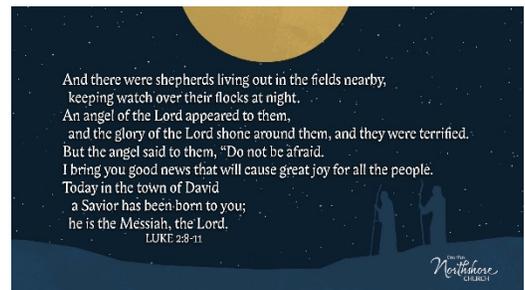
The song is an Advent song... an Advent song in its most pure meaning. This is a song about God showing up. The Lord **is** come. God shows up. This is what Advent is all about.

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."



<sup>4</sup> [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Lk 2:8–11). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

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, and His presence now by His Spirit, are irrevocable deposits and guarantees of His reign for all eternity.

Joy to the world, the Lord is come!

Well, so what? Is there something practical to take away today?

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**.

It seems that in the Bible, **joy** is just as much something we **do** as something we **have**. I counted it up and found the word joy 242 times in the Bible, and the word rejoice or rejoicing (verb-forms of joy) 178 times (242 to 178; more joy than rejoice)... but then I saw that in 57 cases where we find the word **joy** it is specifically *shouts of joy* or *songs of joy*, so those get moved over to the verb column... making the score 185 for the joy we have, and 235 for the joy we do. The metrics prove it; joy is more something we **do** than something we **have**.

It is, of course, **both**... so let's not forget **either**. Do you *have* joy... be sure to *do* joy. Do you want to have more joy? Try doing more joy. The economy of joy is such that the more joy we do, the more joy we have; the more joy we give, the more joy we get.



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.

Don't give in or give up either. I know that some of us are feeling crushed by our circumstances today, and throughout this Advent season. For whatever reason today, it may be really hard to cobble together any happiness. But you *can* celebrate the joy of God showing up. I'm not so sure that we can decide to be *happy*, but I believe we can decide to *celebrate*.

It may not be an easy decision when we consider the suffering around the world, the suffering close to us... and our own suffering. How can we celebrate when evil prevails?

Isn't joy an absence of sorrow? An absence of sin? An absence of suffering?

What does the carol have to say? It does acknowledge sin, and the consequences of sin: sorrow, thorns, and curse. Yet not even the carol promises the absence, or eradication, of sin and sorrow. It only promises His blessings... His pervasive and overwhelming blessings... as far as sin destroys, His blessings flow too.



The curse is found everywhere... but so, too, are His blessings found everywhere.

Here is how we find it in Romans 5:

where sin increased, grace increased all the more,<sup>21</sup> so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.<sup>5</sup>

Where “the curse is found” so to do “His blessings flow.”

I understand the questions folk have about the reality of God when they ask questions like, “how could He allow such things?” Maybe it is just because I am an old, professional Christian that these sorts of questions no longer plague me.

Suffering doesn’t shake my understanding of the reality of God, but it does remind me of the reality of evil. I don’t look at suffering and ask “is God real?” I look and remember “evil is real!”

There is suffering, terrible suffering, in the midst of our Christmas season.

It turns out that this is precisely the Christmas Story; this is the Gospel. Blessing flowing where the curse is found... thorns and suffering mixed in joy and blessing.

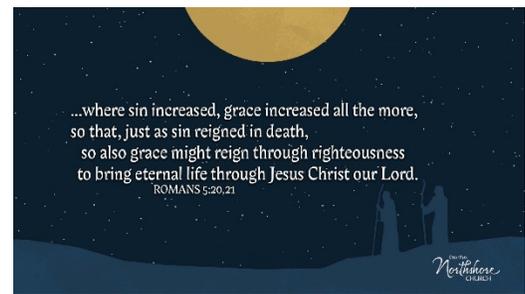
Jesus showed up in our suffering. Jesus inhabited, took on, our suffering. Jesus endured suffering. In the midst of poor and suffering people, even grieving people, Jesus was born.

Born to erase our suffering, or even explain our suffering? No... but born to overwhelm our suffering with His blessing.

So, in the face of sorrow, and grieving, and suffering... we acknowledge that evil is real and sin abounds... but grace abounds all the more. We look to God, who makes His blessings flow.

This Christmas is not different than any other, a mix of happiness and sadness, prosperity and poverty, good times and bad. That very first Christmas was that way. It wasn’t only “glory to God” and “peace on earth;” there was also danger, and uncertainty, and treachery, and poverty. There was no denying it on that first Christmas, and there is no use denying it today. But there is still every reason to choose to **celebrate** Advent joy today. The Lord is come!

We who believe are the ones who must lead the celebration of Advent joy.



<sup>5</sup> [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Ro 5:20–21). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Even the most secular, even those who are outspoken and boldly profess their disbelief, *even these* show signs of *cracking* at this most wonderful time of the year. Maybe especially when faith is shaken and hearts are broken... this is the time when our testimony of joy (even in the midst of suffering) will mean the most.

Show them the love of God, the peace of Christ, the hope of the Messiah... show them what real, deep celebration of joy is. The Lord is come!

Advent joy. This is ours to enjoy and celebrate and live and proclaim today and throughout these days.

In this Advent season here at Northshore, we have been praying the prayer found in another Advent Hymn: *Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus*.

During this season of longing, this season of anticipating that Jesus is coming, we can pray this song and invite Jesus to come.

We celebrate that He has come.

- Born to deliver
- Born a King
- Born to reign, not merely over us, but in us.

When He is in us we not only follow His example as teacher; we rely on His merit to be our merit, and we rely on His Spirit to work in us and through us.

Notice that last line in the first verse:  
Joy of every longing heart.

What a juxtaposition: longing and joy... waiting and celebrating... already and not-yet.

It implies a celebration of joy even before it is fully realized. A step of faith. Perhaps a first step of faith, or a step back to faith after a long time away, or simply another step of faith. We long for God, His presence, and deliverance... yet we celebrate now. We rejoice.

Father, help us to celebrate that the Lord is come.

