

Sunday December 25th, 2022
Christmas Day

PRAYER: Gracious God, in Jesus you were born of flesh that we might be born of spirit. Let us not, like Esau, be faithless and forsake our birthright. Let us rather be quickened by the spirit that remakes us in the image of the One who was truly faithful.

STEWARDSHIP: The writer of the letter to the Hebrews gives us sound advice when he wrote, “Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.” (Hebrews 13:16)

PASTORAL PRAYER: Mighty God, Creator and Redeemer of all that we can behold, we marvel at the works of your hands; works that never cease to fill us with excitement and absolute wonder. O Patient lover of all people, we thrill to the ongoing displays of patience that you offer to us. Your love, grace and patience kindle a hope and confidence in us that no one else can offer us. As you work tirelessly to sustain us day in and day out, we humble ourselves in awe because of your unwavering support. Even though we constantly let you down, you have never once failed to hold us up.

For all these mighty works we praise your name, O God. But today in this special season of grace we miss most of all to thank you for all the revelation of yourself in the One whose resting places were, first, a manger, and, finally a cross. In Jesus, the very incarnation of yourself in human form you brought low the proud and raised up the humble. In Jesus you became truly and fully human in order that we, through Jesus might finally become truly human.

O God, Jesus taught us so well, yet our living has not always made the world more humane. Our sympathies, unlike his, do not strengthen the weak. Our words, unlike his, do not condemn the proud. And our deeds, unlike his, do not honour the claims of justice.

We have not become a mirror of Jesus as he became a mirror of you. We have distorted the vision of what you intended for your people to look like to the world and in the process, we have made it more difficult for people to see Jesus in our reflection. For this betrayal-of him, of you, and of ourselves-we come before you with broken and contrite hearts. Forgive us, O God, and renew us, that the humanity that was born in Jesus might be reborn in us today.

Today, even as we celebrate when you joined the human race in Jesus, multitudes continue to sit in darkness and walk in the shadow of death. Millions are starving for want of food. Others are hungry for the very bread of life. We pray, O Lord, that you will make us the channels of your blessing to the nations, whether they need the bread of earth or the bread of heaven.

Christ has come to bring peace on earth and good will to all its peoples. Let us proclaim this good news, today and tomorrow and forever, here and there and everywhere. Amen.

BENEDICTION: God has sent the Spirit of the Child dancing into our hearts. The time has come for our birth. Leap within the world’s womb! Go forth in an expectant world. Do not take with you a cry of pain, believing that you are thrust into the midst of strangers. Take with you a cry of recognition, knowing that you have entered the company of sisters and brothers. Amen.

Sunday December 25th, 2022
Christmas Day

Luke 1:46-55
"Joy to the World"

This December we've been exploring some of the carols we sing every year at Christmas. Today we'll take a look at a song Isaac Watts wrote almost 300 years ago, and really, what I usually consider my favourite Christmas carol, "Joy to the World." Surprisingly though, we may think of this as a Christmas song, but if you look at the lyrics, it only hints at Jesus' birth. It was not composed as a Christmas carol. We could easily use it as a general-purpose song of praise.

Isaac was inspired by the words of Psalm 98. Just a sample of what we find there clearly indicates where Watts got some of his phrases with words like, "Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises."

"Joy to the World" was written, as I already mentioned, by English minister and hymnist Isaac Watts. The song was first published in 1719 in Watts' collection *The Psalms of David: Imitated in the language of the New Testament, and applied to the Christian state and worship*. It is actually, in lyrical form, a paraphrase is Watts' Christological interpretation, or how he personally saw Jesus. Consequently, Watt does not emphasize with equal weight the various themes of Psalm 98.

In the first and second stanzas, Watts writes of heaven and earth rejoicing at the coming of the King. Watts also didn't write this to originally be a Christmas carol, as the lyrics do not reflect the Virgin birth of Jesus, but rather Christ's Second Coming. An interlude that depends more on Watts' interpretation than the Psalm's text, stanza three speaks of Christ's blessings extending victoriously over the realm of sin.

The cheerful repetition of the non-psalm phrase "far as the curse is found" has caused this stanza to be omitted from some hymnals. But the line makes joyful sense when understood from the New Testament eyes through which Watts interprets the Psalm. Stanza four celebrates Christ's rule over the nations." The nations are called to celebrate because God's faithfulness to the house of Israel has brought salvation to the world.

Watts's 1719 preface says the verses "are fitted to the tunes of the Old PSALM-BOOK" and includes the instruction "sing all entitled COMMON METER". In the late 18th century, "Joy to the World" was printed with music several times, but the tunes were unrelated to the one commonly used today.

The tune usually used today, is from an 1848 edition by Lowell Mason for *The National Psalmist* (Boston, 1848). Mason was by that time, an accomplished and well-known composer and arranger, having composed tunes such as "Bethany", which was used for the hymn "Nearer, My God, to Thee." Mason's 1848 publication of the current tune was the fourth version to have been published.

The first, published in his 1836 book *Occasional Psalm and Hymn Tunes*, featured the present-day tune (in a different arrangement) with the present-day lyrics; the first such publication to do so. The name of this tune was given as "Antioch", and was attributed as being from Handel". A very similar arrangement of the tune to today's arrangement, and also with the present-day lyrics, was published in Mason's 1839 book *The Modern Psalmist*. It was also titled "Antioch" and attributed to Handel.

Sunday December 25th, 2022
Christmas Day

Musically, the first four notes of "Joy to the World" are the same as the first four in the chorus "Lift up your heads" from Handel's *Messiah* (premiered 1742), and, in the third line, the same as found in another *Messiah* piece: the arioso, "Comfort ye". Consequently, and with Mason's attribution to Handel, there has long been speculation over how much a part Handel's *Messiah* had in "Joy to the World".

It is known Mason was a great admirer and scholar of Handel's music, and had in fact become president of the Boston Handel and Haydn Society in 1827 and was also an editor for them. However, resemblances between the *Messiah* and "Joy to the World", have been dismissed as 'chance resemblance' by Handel scholars today.

Moreover, several tunes have been found from the early 1830s closely resembling that of "Antioch", the earliest of which was published in 1832 under the title "Comfort" (possibly as a nod to Handel's "Comfort ye"). This would make it at least four years older than Mason's first publication of "Antioch". Other publications from the early 1830s further suggest the tune may have been around for some time before Mason published his arrangement.

Thomas Hawkes published the "Comfort" tune in 1833 in his *Collection of Tunes*. In it, the attribution was given simply as "Author Unknown", suggesting it may have been older. A 1986 article by John Wilson also showed "Antioch's close resemblance to an 1833 publication of "Comfort" and its associated Wesley hymn "O Joyful Sound".

A version by the Trinity Choir was very popular in 1911. As of the late 20th century, "Joy to the World" was the most-published Christmas hymn in North America , even though it really isn't a Christmas hymn..

Joy to the world! the Lord is come;
Let Earth receive her King;
Let every heart prepare him room,
And heaven and nature sing,
And heaven and nature sing,
And heaven, and heaven, and nature sing.

Joy to the world! the Saviour reigns;
Let men their songs employ;
While fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains
Repeat the sounding joy,
Repeat the sounding joy,
Repeat, repeat the sounding joy.

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,
Far as the curse is found,
Far as, far as, the curse is found.

Sunday December 25th, 2022
Christmas Day

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

Let's face it; Christmas is a stressful time for most adults. For some it is a time of intense loneliness or crushing grief, because of a loved one who is gone. Even at its best, Christmas means parties to plan, gifts to buy, elaborate meals to cook, long trips to take, or out-of-town guests to host. Instead of bringing JOY, Christmas can bring frustration.

I heard a story about a woman who was doing her last-minute Christmas shopping at a crowded mall. She was tired of fighting the crowds. She was tired of standing in lines. She was tired of fighting her way down long aisles looking for a gift that had sold out days before. Her arms were full of bulky packages when the Elevator door opened. It was full.

The occupants of the Elevator grudgingly tightened ranks to allow a small space for her and her load. As the doors closed, she blurted out, "Whoever is responsible for this whole Christmas thing ought to be arrested, strung up, and shot!" A few others nodded their heads or grunted in agreement. Then, from somewhere in the back of the elevator came a single voice that said, "Don't worry. They already crucified him."

We need to remember who is responsible for the whole Christmas thing. It is all about how God so loved the world that He gave his one and only Son so that who ever believes in Him might have eternal life. John 3:16

Unfortunately, many people leave Christ out of Christmas. Instead of looking to Jesus, people look for JOY anywhere and everywhere else. An interviewer once asked the entertainer, Madonna, this basic question: "Are you a happy person?" She replied, "I am a tormented person. I'm wrestling a lot of demons. But I want to be happy. I have moments of happiness. I am working towards knowing myself and I assume that will bring me happiness."

Pretty much everybody wants happiness. In fact, people do what they do, for the purpose of "finding happiness." People work hard to buy possessions that can make them happy. They look for happiness in entertainment, hobbies, sports, passions and various addictions. Or ... like Madonna ... they look deep, deep, deep within ... thinking maybe that's where that elusive happiness is hiding.

When you consider that happiness seems to be the main goal, it seems surprising that the Bible doesn't talk much about happiness. But the Bible says a lot about something that is often confused with happiness. The Bible says a lot about JOY. The kind of JOY the Bible talks about that goes much deeper than mere happiness.

You see, happiness deals with what is happening. Happiness depends on circumstance. In fact, for most people, happiness is nothing more than a temporary interruption to their boredom.

Sunday December 25th, 2022
Christmas Day

We've all heard kids complain, "I'm bored." That means, "I want some happiness, and I'm NOT finding it!"

Genuine joy, on the other hand does not depend on what's happening. Joy is an inner sense of well-being that has nothing to do with circumstance. The kind of JOY the Bible describes, can't be found in possessions, or entertainments, or even in looking deeply into your inner self. The first line of "Joy to the World" sums it up. There is one reason --- and only one --- that we can find JOY in this world. As the song says, we can have joy because The Lord has come!

If you receive Christ as King of your life, He provides Joy. In the same way that your body craves food, exercise and rest, so your Spirit craves a relationship with God. Without that relationship, your soul will become famished and restless. I believe that there is indeed a God-shaped hole in every life. If we look deeply within ourselves, we will not find happiness, but we will find that space that only God can fill.

In the Discipleship Journal Pau, along with dirty bowls and utensils, across the counters and floor Thigpen writes: "I remember coming home one afternoon to discover that the kitchen I had worked so hard to clean only a few hours before was now a terrible wreck. My young daughter had obviously been busy "cooking," and the ingredients were scattered, along with dirty bowls and utensils, across the counters and floor. I was not happy with the situation.

Then, as I looked a little more closely at the mess, I spied a tiny note on the table, clumsily written and smeared with chocolatey fingerprints. The message was short- "I'm makin sumthin 4 you, Dad"-and it was signed, "your angel."

In the midst of that disarray, and despite my irritation, joy see the Lord behind it all, or at least suddenly sprang up in my heart, sweet and pure. My attention had been redirected from the problem to the little girl I loved. As I encountered her in the brief note, I delighted in her. With her simple goodness in focus, I could take pleasure in seeing her hand at work in a situation that seemed otherwise disastrous.

The same is true of my joy in the Lord. Many times, life looks messy; I can't find much to be happy about in my circumstances. Nevertheless, if I look hard enough, I can usually see the Lord behind it all, or at least working through it all, "making something" for me. (Choice Contemporary Stories and Illustrations p. 140)

If we try to fill our lives or fix our circumstance with anything besides God, we will be forever unsatisfied. That's why the 1st stanza of JOY TO THE WORLD teaches: "Joy to the world! The Lord is come! Let earth receive her king". But more importantly maybe, is the call to prepare our hearts, and make him room.