

Joy to the World Now and Forever

Psalm 98 (NIV)

A psalm.¹ 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.² The LORD has made his salvation known and revealed his righteousness to the nations.³ He has remembered his love and his faithfulness to Israel; all the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God.⁴ Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth, burst into jubilant song with music;⁵ make music to the LORD with the harp, with the harp and the sound of singing,⁶ with trumpets and the blast of the ram's horn— shout for joy before the LORD, the King.⁷ Let the sea resound, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it.⁸ Let the rivers clap their hands, let the mountains sing together for joy;⁹ 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.

What are the essential songs for Christmas? There are so many that I love picking out to use in our Christmas Eve and Christmas Day worship because these are the hymns everyone knows by heart, the ones they've grown up with, ones that they have used to celebrate so many Christmases past. That's also what makes it hard to pick some and not others because I can realistically only use so many songs in a service. It pains me to think, "Whose favorites will get left out?"

In 2014, Time magazine researched and identified the most recorded Christmas songs of all time as a way to help determine the most beloved Christmas songs. *Joy to the World*, which we sang this morning, is the second most recorded Christmas song of all time, beaten only by *Silent Night*, which we sang last night. In case you were wondering, #3 was *O Holy Night*, #4 was *What Child is This?*, & #5 was *Away in a Manger*. This list did include non-Christian songs, and the highest ranked was *White Christmas* at #7.

Christmas Day is probably the best morning to belt out *Joy to the World*, even if we are off key or don't consider ourselves singers. We celebrate today that God the Father gave us his Son. "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth." (John 1:14) Only God with his powerful right hand and his holy arm could have accomplished this. We could never do something like make God become human while at the same time continuing to be God. Honestly, this whole God taking on human flesh, confining himself, humbling himself defies our logic, let alone our ability.

This historical event of Christmas, this God made man, conceived in the virgin Mary by the Holy Spirit, born in Bethlehem, has changed our lives forever. This Jesus, came as the Light to give life to all mankind. He came to live under the law, to be tempted in every way that we are in the flesh and yet remain perfect, completely righteous. He did this to provide purification for our sins, to have his righteousness cover over everything that we had done wrong, to remove from us everything that would ever bar us from God and from heaven.

This Christmas gift is what God had promised all along. This is the culmination of the one-sided covenant that God made of his own will and volition. He took it on himself to give a gift to all humanity which would forgive the wickedness of all people and remember their sins no more. He made this new covenant, this gift, known throughout the Old Testament. He preserved that Word and made sure it passed on from generation to generation. He made it known to Mary and Joseph exactly who this child in the manger was. He sent angels to announce it to the shepherds in the fields nearby Bethlehem telling them that today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you, he is Christ the Lord! Then God had Luke record this story and preserve it for all people for the last 2000 years so that all of us know that "[the LORD] has remembered his love and his faithfulness to Israel; all the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God." (verse 3)

This event of Christmas, this gift of the Christ Child, of God made flesh to save us from our sins and purify us before him, this is cause for celebration! Burst into jubilant song with music (verse 4). "Joy to the world, the Lord is come! Let earth receive her King; Let ev'ry heart prepare him room And heav'n and nature sing, And heav'n and nature sing, And heav'n, and heav'n and nature sing." (CW 64:1)

Would it even be Christmas If we didn't sing *Joy to the World*? Do we need those classic Christmas hymns in order to truly have Christmas? Does the tie of classics and tradition go deeper into whether or not we truly experience Christmas? Is it not Christmas if we don't go to Grandma's house, if we don't stroll through the park looking at lights sipping hot chocolate or drive through a Christmas light display? Is it not Christmas if there isn't a tree up in your living room and lights hung on the house? Is it not Christmas if there's no snow or no presents?

We all have Christmas traditions. Many of us have lived those traditions for the majority of our lives, for decades, maybe even for every Christmas we've ever celebrated. Those Christmas traditions have become cherished memories. They give us warm feelings and we link them to experiencing Christmas. But what if December 25 came and there was no tree? No Christmas lights? No hot chocolate? No snow? No trip to Grandma's house? No presents? No singing of *Joy to the World*? Would there then be no joy in this world? Would there be no joy in Christmas?

There was a time, in a way of speaking, that there was no *Joy to the World*. Isaac Watts didn't write that hymn until 1719 A.D. We've had it as part of our Christmas celebrations for almost 300 years! But was there no joy to the world in 1718 A.D., the year before that hymn existed? Of course there was still joy in the world because Christ had still been born. And there was joy in the world long before that hymn was written because Isaac Watts based *Joy to the World* on Psalm 98.

Psalm 98 is a psalm attributed to King David, dating it to around 1000 B.C. That means there has been a musical version of *Joy to the World* for not just 300 years, but 3000 years – even before there was a Christmas proper. Jesus was born of Mary some 2000 years ago, but 1000 years before that already in David's life he knew the Lord's salvation. He knew God's forgiveness. He knew the new covenant, the one promised to Adam and Eve in the Garden after they sinned that God would forgive our sins and remember our wickedness no more through the gift of the offspring of the woman who would crush the head of the serpent. The promise had been maintained and proclaimed since God first gave it. Every generation of humanity has joy in the world because God has done the marvelous thing of working salvation for all of us, salvation coming through the life of the Word made flesh. Christmas has always given joy to the world, even in the past before the very first Christmas.

As much as we love our Christmas traditions, of singing Christmas hymns like *Joy to the World*, Christmas is not just about the past. Christmas certainly has provided joy to the world throughout the entirety of human history, but *Joy to the World* on Christmas is also about the future. It's about a new song, a song about the future, a future that *Joy to the World* rallies us to sing.

Psalm 98 points us to sing a new song not just because the Lord has done marvelous things in the past and made his salvation known to the ends of the earth in the past, but also because he promises to come again and judge the earth. "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." (verse 9) We sang this new song in verse 3 of *Joy to the World*. It was a verse about the return of Jesus, not his first coming at Christmas but his second coming on the Last Day. We sang about the future, what we can expect when Jesus returns: "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." (CW 62:3)

Jesus has come once. Christmas is an accomplished fact that is recorded in history and that we celebrate today. God became man, lived for us, died for us, and has provided for all people purification from all of their sins. This Jesus, this Savior from sin, will come again. When he does, all creation will be released from all effects of sin. None of us will ever feel any sorrow ever again. After that day we will never shed another tear. The effects of sin will be completely destroyed on the Last Day as far as the curse is found. When our Jesus, our Prince of Peace, the Word made flesh, comes, he will bring with him total peace for all the earth.

Joy to the World indeed! We look forward to the future that God's gift of Christmas past will bring in the future. We look forward to singing a new song, a song about how the effects of sin are removed as far as the curse is found, that thorns no longer infest the ground, that sorrow will never grow again, that death is vanquished forever. When Christ returns on the Last day, joy in the world will never end! This is the new song we sing today.

2017, like the years before it, produced covers of Christmas classics as well as completely new Christmas singles. I'm not asking you to ditch a past classic like *Joy to the World* so that you can sing one of those new songs. No, that's not the point of Psalm 98. Instead, let's sing the old song that also gives us a new song to sing. *Joy to the World*, the Lord is come! He has done marvelous things. "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth." (John 1:14) His right hand and his holy arm have worked salvation and made it known to the ends of the earth. Our King has purified us from every sin. "Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth, burst into jubilant song with music; make music to the LORD" (verses 4-5) because he comes to judge the world in righteousness and the peoples with equity. Our Prince of Peace provides a future of peace, a future that removes the effects of sin as far as the curse is found. Sing *Joy to the World* because "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." (CW 62:4) Amen.