

JOY TO THE WORLD**Psalm 98; Luke 1:46-55****(Read Luke 1:46-55)**

Intro: There are several things in our family that have reached legend status and one of these is about my first date with Kathy. Now you know the background, I've been smitten for upwards of 48 years now with this girl. The first time I met her, I used the worst pickup line ever uttered, so she didn't like me at first. By the next summer somehow she had forgotten about that. I was still smitten and trying to figure out a way to marry her. She had no idea about this, because in fact, Kathy's very naive. If you want to get her attention when she is driving past you, the only way for you to do that properly is to step into traffic and get run over by her, and then she might notice that you're there. So, at first, she didn't notice that I was interested. And being as arrogant and egotistical as she was naive, I thought I was making progress when she asked me to go along with her youth group to Hershey Park in the summer of 1978. There was quite a crew of us, at least a dozen, so it wasn't like it was a candle-lit dinner in some intimate setting somewhere, but I was extremely pleased to have been invited by this beautiful girl.

Now, you have to know, that I hate amusement parks. I look at a roller coaster and see that it's made out of 2x4s and immediately come up with the worst possible scenario that could happen. But I rode every ride that girl rode that day. And she liked everything! There was the Rotor, which was the first ride we came to, which spins around and the bottom falls out and you're clinging to the wall while little 10-year-old kids are moving around and laughing and having a great time and I was terrified. But my brother made faces at me, and made me laugh and I couldn't unlaugh because the centrifugal force of the ride made my smile permanent . . . well, at least until the end of the ride. The next ride after the Rotor was the Comet Roller Coaster and I hated rollercoasters even though I had never been on one. But I wasn't going to miss it, I was going to stay by this girl's side. By the middle of the afternoon. We are holding hands. By sunset we went up the Kissing Tower which is 300 feet above the Hershey skyline and it was beautiful, and I asked this beautiful girl if she ever kissed on first dates, and she said not yet, so I kissed her and it was official, she kissed me on our first date, at least.

The problem was, **SHE WAS NOT THINKING IT WAS OUR FIRST DATE.** You see, in her mind she had asked me along on the outing so that her older sister Gladys would have someone closer to her age! Fortunately, she didn't tell me this until several years later, because if I had known it then, with the level of interest I had in her sister, **which was a number far less than zero**, I may not have gone to Hershey Park on July 19, 1978. I would have stayed home and I would have missed a wonderful opportunity. Instead I was blissfully (or maybe the word should be arrogantly) ignorant. I had no idea that Kathy was thinking that it was anything less than a date. Fortunately for me, now almost 48 years later, I'm glad that I was blind as a bat. Down through the years, that day at Hershey Park, has been dubbed by my family as Mom and Dad's first non-date.

Our Christmas song today is JOY TO THE WORLD. And like the argument that goes on over whether or not the movie, Die Hard, is a Christmas movie, it is apparently somewhat controversial as to whether or not JOY TO THE WORLD is truly a Christmas carol. But it is. We sing it every year at Christmas. It has a Christmas theme but it also has a return of Christ theme, which was what the initial author intended for it to be.

That author was Isaac Watts and he was a theologian, author, and, even more so, a prolific poet. He grew up in a deeply religious family that was part of the Nonconformist movement in England. Nonconformists who were also known as Dissenters, were anyone who was not part of the Church of England, which was just about anyone who was Protestant (not Catholic) but not part of the Church of England. These groups would include Baptists, Methodists, Quakers, and Congregationalists. The Salvation Army would later be included in this number but their arrival would have been about 150 years after Watts' era. Our traditions of Anabaptism and pietism would also fit into the nonconformist camp but they were rare or non-existent in England in that time period.

Being a nonconformist was not easy. For instance, Watts' father was serving jail time for his religious beliefs when his son, Isaac, was born. Watts was a gifted student and excelled in just about every subject, but especially in math, logic, and languages. He apparently mastered Greek, Hebrew and Latin. As I did research, and as I was looking for titles to see how many of his songs were in our hymnal, I noticed that many of his

songs were written in Latin, or at least had Latin titles. By the way, there are no less than eight hymns written by Isaac Watts in our blue Brethren in Christ hymnal which is found in the hymnal racks in front of you. Several of them are songs that we sing on a fairly regular basis, such as I SING THE MIGHTY POWER OF GOD, and WHEN I SURVEY THE WONDROUS CROSS, and, of course, the song that we're looking at today, JOY TO THE WORLD. The other five hymns, if I listed them here would probably be familiar to many of you as well.

Isaac Watts was so gifted that, had he been part of a proper Church of England family, he would have surely gone to Oxford or Cambridge, but instead he went to a "second rate" nonconformist university. By the time Watts was 25 years old he had become a pastor and would serve in that role for the rest of his life. While he was gifted in the pastoral office, his first love was writing and specifically he loved to write poetry. This suited Isaac well because he didn't like the church music of his day. This wasn't new then and it's still true because every generation seems to feel that they have a handle on what's the best music. For instance, the best music ever was the rock music of the late 1960s and early 1970s and the Christian rock music from those same years remains the best Christian music ever. Now any number of you will strongly disagree with me. I know that Ron Sprunger is shaking his head in disgust now (in Christian love, of course) and I know that those younger than me have a different opinion too. Thus it was with Isaac Watts. But he did have a point, he felt that much of the music (and lyrics) of his day were dense and unsingable and sometimes, theologically unsound. Apparently he complained enough that his father finally said, **"If you don't like it then write your own!"** So he did. As a matter of fact, he wrote thousands of songs. Now, they weren't necessarily all put to music right away because lyrics were his gifting, not writing music.

One of those poems is our Christmas song for today, JOY TO THE WORLD. It was put to music and was floating around for almost 100 years after Watts wrote it. But the tune being used isn't the tune we are familiar with. Apparently it was being sung to the tune of what we know as BE THOU MY VISION which is one of my favorite hymns. So, I tried it. Sitting there in my office, I tried to sing, *Joy to the world . . .* and it was just awkward! I'm no musical genius, but even I could see why it never caught on,

Fortunately, a little less than 100 years after Watts died, a Christian music educator and hymn writer by the name of Lowell Mason took the lyrics to JOY TO THE WORLD and put them to a tune by George Frideric Handel (you know, he's the guy who gave us the Messiah, and the Hallelujah Chorus), and he included the song in a collection of music that he published in 1836 – and the rest is history. That tune is what we know and sing as JOY TO THE WORLD.

Now, how did it become a Christmas song? Remember, there are those who like being technical about things such as when Advent is and when Christmas is and when did the Wise Men really show up in Bethlehem? So some are quick to point out that Watts didn't intend JOY TO THE WORLD to be a Christmas song? One theory is that the volume of songs that Mason published at the time, which included our song, was released at Christmas time, which apparently it was. Well, that works for me, but regardless of how it actually happened, it HAS become a Christmas song, and that is also regardless of what Watts thought of it in the first place.

What firmly embeds it as a Christmas song in my mind, at the very least, is the first line, *Joy to the world, the Lord is come*. And even though Watts, who intended the lyrics to be about the Second Coming, I'm certain he would certainly agree that for a second coming, there had to be a first coming. And that, of course, we celebrate at Christmas. So this has become and will remain, a wonderful Christmas song.

Watts based our song on Psalm 98 which Bill read at the opening of this worship service. He was actually writing poems based on the Psalms and this was the one that he produced that came from Psalm 98 which is decidedly not a Christmas passage, but it is full of the glory to God in the highest that the angels proclaimed to the shepherds in the fields outside of Bethlehem. Here's another cool thought from James Montgomery Boice. He writes, "There are striking parallels between the first part of Psalm 98 and Mary's Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55), which may mean that the mother of Jesus had the psalm in mind as she composed her hymn and that she rightly saw that the promises of the psalm were to be fulfilled in the spiritual victories to be achieved by Jesus Christ." That folks, is why I opened this talk with Mary's song of praise.

You see, Mary was spilling over with the goodness of God as she sang her song. One reason for that was the tremendous privilege it was for her to be carrying the Savior of humanity in her womb. But also she had just

had confirmation of that when she greeted her cousin Elizabeth, who was pregnant with John the Baptist. Let me quickly read that to you:

In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, and she exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord. Luke 1:39-45.

Elizabeth's unborn baby did an in utero somersault of joy when the mother of Immanuel appeared in the doorway. That joy, which had been bubbling in Mary's soul and could not be contained any longer so she sang, *My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior . . .* Luke 1:46-47. It works for me! Mary was a woman after God's own heart – that's why he chose her to be the earthly mother of God the Son. She knew the Psalms – she had sung them many times. And she knew the elation of Psalm 98, where the Psalmist proclaims,

*Oh 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.
The Lord has made known his salvation;
he has revealed his righteousness in the sight of the nations.
He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness
to the house of Israel.
All the ends of the earth have seen
the salvation of our God. Psalm 98:1-3.*

Sing a new song! All the ends of the earth have seen God's salvation! That's good news! That's inherently Christmas joy.

Charles Wesley's Christmas song, O COME ALL YE FAITHFUL proclaims in its final verse:

Hail the heaven-born Prince of Peace!
Hail the Sun of Righteousness!
Light and life to all he brings,

RISEN WITH HEALING IN HIS WINGS.

Wesley is quoting from Micah 4:2 where the prophet is promising a deliverer who will come with healing in his wings and it is the same sentiment of the Psalmist in Psalm 98. There is healing in the song so sing it out. One commentator says that "*The poet calls upon all the Earth to raise the festal clamor to Yahweh, to burst into song, to shout for joy, to make praising music.*"

That's what Isaac Watts was writing about here in the song about Christ's second coming that was written hundreds of years before he came the first time. It was that good in the Psalmist's mind's eye that he urges his listeners to praise God with the lyre, which is a harp-like instrument, with trumpets, and shofar horns. We need to make a joyful noise. That's all we're asked to do. You don't have to have a beautiful voice, because to our Heavenly Father, our praise is beautiful. The seas roar, the floods clap their hands, the hills sing for joy. Isn't that cool! It's a holy cacophony of praise. It is all creation praising God for the newborn King whom we celebrate at Christmas, and the one who's coming again.

So let's look at the song, JOY TO THE WORLD with new eyes – in fact I'm praying that you never sing it without thinking about what it's really saying. Maybe Isaac Watts didn't intend for it to be a Christmas song when he first wrote those words, but I'm certain he would be delighted that it has become one over the centuries. Here is something else to think about when you sing JOY TO THE WORLD as we close this service, or every time we sing it on Wednesday night as we go Christmas caroling or on Christmas Eve – did Lowell Mason pair the lyrics with the tune because the first line, "Joy to the world, the Lord is come" descended an entire octave on the music scale? I mean, think about it, the son of God coming to earth to bring salvation. The very first line of the song, makes it a Christmas song – from heaven to earth. Case closed. Amen.