

“Joy To The World!”

Luke 2:8-20

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January 1, 2023

This morning, we enter the new year “2023” on a note of joy as together we rejoice in the news that “the Lord is at last COME!” And SHOULDN’T that be the natural conclusion to Advent and the Christmas season- unconstrained happiness and joy for the gift God has given us in the birth of God’s son, Jesus Christ! I can’t tell you a whole lot about the circumstances under which this hymn came to be written but I CAN tell you some things about the man who composed it. Known as “the Father of English Hymnody,” Isaac Watts—born July 17th, 1674 and dying on November 25<sup>th</sup>, 1748--is famous for having penned some of the church’s greatest hymns including “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross,” “Jesus Shall Reign Where’er the Sun,” and “Our God, Our Help in Ages Past.” Isaac was an exceedingly intelligent child who learned Latin at the age of four, Greek when he was eight, French at eleven, and Hebrew when he was thirteen. He took to writing poetry at an early age so that by the time he was fifteen, he was already writing hymns, largely because he found the church’s music of his day to be so dreadful. As he later put it, “The singing of God’s praise is the part of worship nearest heaven, and its performance among us is the worst on earth.”

One Sunday, after returning from some particularly atrocious church service, he was complaining about it when his father exclaimed, “Then give us something better, young man.” He DID, and before the EVENING service had begun, Isaac had written his first hymn:

*Behold the glories of the Lamb  
Amidst his Father’s throne;  
Prepare new honors for his name,  
And songs before unknown.*

This was the beginning of a major revolution in hymn writing. Most of the hymns sung at that time were Old Testament Psalms which said very little about Jesus. Isaac thought that if worship were at least partly about the human response to God, it ought to include human words to express human thoughts and emotions to God. Further, he wanted more Jesus in Christian worship so he suggested that the Psalms be re-imagined in the light of Christ.

In 1719, Watts published a collection of hymns based on his ideas. All those hymns are today long gone with the exception of one half of one song- a two-part hymn inspired by Psalm 98. The first part has since been forgotten, but the SECOND part is what we now know as *Joy to the World!* Ironically, Watts never intended it to be a Christmas carol. He wrote it as a hymn glorifying Christ’s triumphant return at the END OF THE AGE rather than a song celebrating his first coming. The nations are called to celebrate because God’s faithfulness to the house of Israel has brought salvation to the world. In 1836, his inspired lyrics would be wedded to a stirring melody by Lowell Mason to make *Joy to the World!* the popular carol we know and love today.

Now joy and the Bible have ALWAYS gone together. The Greek and Hebrew word for “joy” is translated as “joy,” “rejoice,” “rejoicing,” “glad,” “gladness,” and “delight” some 650 times in the Bible. In Psalm 5:11, God exhorts us to rejoice, shout for joy, and be joyful! In Psalm 43:4, the Psalmist calls God His “Exceeding Joy.” Five times in the book of Job, God

promises to fill our mouth with laughter and our lips with shouts of joy. In Matthew 25:21, heaven is called “the joy of the Lord.” Acts 13:52 tells us that the disciples were filled with joy and the Holy Spirit. Romans 14:17 describes the kingdom of God is righteousness, peace, and joy while Galatians 5:22 includes joy as a fruit of the Holy Spirit.

Joy is central to Advent and Christmas, especially in LUKE’S telling of the story. In Luke 1:14, Zechariah was promised by the angel, “You will have joy, and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth.” In Luke 1:44, we are told that John the Baptist leaped for joy in his mother’s womb. In Luke 1:47, Mary rejoiced in God her Savior and a few verses later that the neighbors and townsfolk rejoiced with Elizabeth at the news of her pregnancy. Then, of course, you have the angel proclaiming “Glad tidings of GREAT JOY” with the news of Jesus’s birth.

Such an emphasis upon joy has inspired some of our greatest Christmas hymns:

- In “O Holy Night,” you have “A thrill of hope the weary world REJOICES, For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn!”

- In “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing,” we sing, "Glory to the newborn King! Peace on earth, and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled. JOYFUL, all ye nations rise, Join the triumph of the skies; With angelic host proclaim, "Christ is born in Bethlehem."

- There is “Come, all ye faithful, JOYFUL and triumphant, O come ye, O come ye to Bethlehem”

- And of course, this morning’s carol begins with, “JOY to the world! The Lord is come: Let earth receive her King.”

But what IS joy, a word that is perhaps overly used at Christmas time- a word sung in almost every Christmas carol and seen on the cover of many a Christmas card, also a word we use to describe many of our celebrations and parties at this time of the year. However, if we’re honest, we have to admit that REAL joy is often in short supply these days. There seem to be a lot of reasons NOT to be joyful this Christmas. Although we are no longer militarily involved in Iraq and Afghanistan, the present war in the Ukraine has the capability of spilling over into neighboring countries and even turning nuclear. Terrorism across the globe seems to be on an upswing. Meanwhile, if we are to believe the economists, many suggest we are presently on the cusp of a recession while the stock market, which began the year at record levels, is now cratering once again. Although the massive inflation and high interest rates we saw six months ago have begun to subside some, it hasn’t reduced the prices of many goods that were drastically increased at the beginning of it. And just when we thought that we were finally done with covid, new strains have suddenly emerged and hospitals have once again found themselves struggling to deal with the influx of new cases. A recent poll has revealed that both emotionally and spiritually, there is a growing dissatisfaction out there verging on desperation as increasing numbers of people admit to a deep hunger and thirst for something more than they are currently experiencing in life. Like Peggy Lee sang all those years ago, they wonder, "Is that all there is?" If the world ever needed a fresh influx of joy, we could certainly use one today, COULDN’T we.

Like many Christians, I’m also a huge fan of C.S. Lewis- you can’t read his writings without seeing how “joy” remains central in so many of his works. For Lewis, joy is never merely a feeling or a sensation that comes and goes as circumstances dictate. Rather, he speaks of it as a very UNIQUE and SPECIAL kind of desire. In his spiritual autobiography *Surprised by Joy*, he writes: “In a sense the central story of my life is about nothing else....it is that of an unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction. I call it Joy.” For

Lewis, joy is not to be confused with feelings of pleasure or happiness, fun or excitement. “Happiness,” UNLIKE “joy” is extremely vulnerable, unreliable, and unpredictable; happiness comes and goes as it pleases. You can be up one moment and down the next, and regardless how hard you try to maintain the excitement, it just can’t be done. It must never be made the goal or end of our lives, and if you don’t believe me, then just ask any drunk or addict how elusive that next high can be for him or her.

I was as close to my nephew Alan as anyone in my family- he was like my baby brother. I saw him grow up and even had him live with me at different periods in his life. But Alan was always getting caught up in the most self-destructive activities- whether it involved drugs or alcohol, sex or crime. Countless times, I would ask him, “Alan, WHY do you do the things that you do? Don’t you see how dangerous your behavior is and what it is you’re doing to yourself?” and he always had the same answer- he said he was just looking for some “fun.” Well, it couldn’t have been TOO much fun because it was always landing him in trouble- it seemed if he wasn’t in rehab, then he was in jail. He came to love his “fun” more than he did his own family (including his wife and daughter) which he wound up losing. He even loved it more than his OWN LIFE! One day, the police called his mother--my sister--to tell her they had found his body beside the railroad tracks, dead of a heroin overdose. Alan was basically a good person, not one that you would characterize as a “bad seed.” But you could see there was never any peace in his life, that he was always looking for something MORE than mere fun and pleasure could provide but never finding it. Like so many others in our WORLD, he was a lost soul in search of something and never quite sure what it was.

Joy, on the other hand, is a COMPLETELY DIFFERENT entity than either happiness or pleasure. Unlike them, joy is not something you can seek or manufacture or try to drum up; it’s not a goal or an achievement. We don’t say, “Let’s all get together and do a little joy.” No, pure and simple, joy is a GIFT- a gift of God, a response to something that God has already done for us. It is not a product but rather a BY-PRODUCT, a by-product of the GOSPEL. Joy, which has been described as the very “air of Heaven,” comes to us in the breathing of the Holy Spirit. St. Paul lists it as one of the nine gifts of the Spirit in his letter to the Galatians, listing “joy” the second immediately after “love.” This joy urges us to move away from those worldly pleasures and earthly delights we so earnestly crave and instead draw closer to God. As we come to experience the joy of knowing God and participating in his life, those illicit desires lose their stranglehold over us so that our craving for pleasure and happiness is supplanted by an even DEEPER, more MEANINGFUL impulse- a love for JOY in our lives.

To C.S. Lewis, this intense hunger or desire which nothing in the world could possibly satisfy was an object that TRANSCENDED the world. Gradually, he became convinced that this SUPREME OBJECT of human desire is nothing less than GOD HIMSELF! Of course, another great Christian some fifteen hundred years earlier had come to the SAME conclusion after a very SIMILAR struggle and search. His name was Augustine and he bore witness to this same realization when he wrote in his *Confessions*, “Thou hast made us for Thyself and our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee, O Lord!” For Lewis and St. Augustine--as it was for Christ and the disciples before them--biblical joy is inseparable from our relationship with God and it becomes the sign that God’s life and purpose is now being realized and lived out in our lives.

TRUE joy--the joy that comes from GOD--goes much DEEPER than any pleasure. Where pleasure and happiness has an EARTHLY basis, joy is SPIRITUAL in nature. It is

Christ's OWN joy that has become rooted in our own spirits. It is an abiding sense that our lives are safely in the hands of one far greater than ourselves. It is the security that comes from knowing that God loves us with an everlasting love and has assured us that NOTHING will ever be able to separate us from either his PRESENCE or his LOVE. It is a profound sense of gratitude for the presence of God in our midst and in our lives. Hence, joy is foremost a GIFT- one that cannot be earned or manufactured or sought for as an end in itself. It can ONLY come when we discover our lives filled with the light and love of God's presence and no other way.

It is joy which makes it possible to rejoice EVEN IN THE MIDST OF TROUBLES AND DISASTERS. In John 15, during our Lord's last supper with his disciples, he told them that what was about to befall him and the rest of them would cause them to wail and lament. But then he added that their sorrow would soon be turned into joy, using the illustration of childbirth. The anguish a woman feels in giving birth to a baby is real, but after it is born, the pain is replaced by something else- by joy. In the same way, their fear, their uncertainty, their hopelessness in the face of his arrest and death would be replaced by an IMPERISHABLE JOY that the world would NEVER be able to take from them.

I close by employing an example I heard about in this past week's news. Beginning last Thursday, just ahead of New Year's Eve, Russia launched one of its biggest missile barrages at the Ukrainian people since the war began almost a year ago. Explosions rattled villages and cities across Ukraine, damaging civilian infrastructure and killing at least three persons. For days, the authorities had been cautioning citizens that Russia was getting set to launch an all-out assault on the power grid to close out 2022. It would plummet most of the country into darkness, leaving them without heat and electricity just as the coldest time of year is upon them. It ALSO comes just as Ukrainians prepare to ring in the New Year and joyously celebrate the Christmas holidays, which for the country's Orthodox Christians begins next Saturday, January 7th. Said Ukraine's Defense Minister, "Russian terrorists have been saving one of the most massive missile attacks since the beginning of the full-scale invasion for the last days of the year. They dream that Ukrainians will celebrate the New Year in darkness and cold. But they cannot defeat the Ukrainian people."

When Anastasiia Hryn, a 34-year-old Kyiv resident, woke up to the sound of air raid sirens followed by an explosion, she and her son hurriedly descended into the basement shelter beneath their building. But they were not particularly surprised, nor did they let it dampen their spirits. "I expected this kind of attack before the New Year. There were reports in the news that something like that was being prepared," she said. Eventually, the sirens gave the all clear sign and life in the capital returned to normal. In the elevator, she met her neighbors with their child who were in a hurry to get to the cinema on time for the new Avatar movie. Meanwhile, parents took their children to school and people went to work, while others continued with their holiday plans in defiance of what was going on around them- they were determined to not let the Russians ruin her upcoming celebrations. I believe Anastasiia was speaking for all Ukrainians when she added, "Not a single attack will cancel the fact that we will JOYOUSLY celebrate the new year with our families."

Friends, such indomitable confidence, courage, and hope evidenced all year long by the Ukrainians in the face of such suffering, destruction and death, is NO LESS instructive about the nature of faith and its connection to joy. You see, more than a state of mind, joy is a STATE OF HEART; it is a CONDITION OF THE SOUL which no smart bomb or enemy bullet can

possibly vitiate or steal from us. The fact is that the same joy that our Lord made possible to his followers is now made available to US, TODAY, some two thousand years later. To have God's joy does not mean that we will never have moments of sadness or depression- these are but a natural part of LIFE ITSELF. However it DOES mean that when we DO experience such periods, they will never overwhelm or destroy us because EVEN GREATER AND DEEPER than such feelings or attitudes is the presence of CHRIST'S OWN SPIRIT in our lives, applying the sweet balm of his comforting peace and tender love to each one of our hearts. Often, we do not recognize it, but he is there ALL THE SAME, quietly ministering to us, reminding us of his personal presence both in and among us, assuring us how he will never leave or forsake us, EVER! Therefore this morning, God has given us EVERY REASON to sing from the top of our lungs "JOY TO THE WORLD!" If we HAVE no joy, then as the American evangelist Billy Sunday once remarked, "there's a leak in our Christianity somewhere." Yet, by allowing our joy to emerge and naturally express itself, we then alert others to the fact that, unlike my nephew, who never stopped feeling lost and lonely, searching for love and joy in all the wrong places, they don't have to despair forever. Their searching CAN end when they meet Christ, and then HIS joy--which is OUR joy--can become THEIR joy, AS WELL. Let us pray...

*Heavenly Father, we believe that your desire for us is to share in your joy. Unfortunately, we are too often wrapped up in ourselves and our own problems to see your presence and as such, our faith wavers and we fail to let your joy shine through. Forgive us for stifling our true purpose, the very thing we were created for. Enable us to allow your love, your peace, and especially your joy to emerge that others might experience them too. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.*