

Joy to the World! The Lord is Come

The Advent of Creation's Restoration

Psalm 98

David Sunday

December 22, 2013

Savior, our faithful Friend, Lord of Lords, King of Kings, shine into our hearts as we open Your Word. Flood us with the joy that none can take away, the joy of knowing You as our Savior, King and the coming Judge of all the earth. We pray for the help of Your Holy Spirit now as we open Your Word that He would quicken and enliven our minds and hearts to receive Your infallible truth, Your Word which abides forever. We ask this in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Turn in your Bibles to a most jubilant and lively Psalm 98. This psalm exudes joy and exhilaration with every note. Psalm 98 inspired one of our most beloved Christmas carols as Isaac Watts meditated on the words of this psalm. The fruit of his meditation is the song, "Joy to the World" (Isaac Watts 1719).

Let's listen with joy as we read God's Living Word.

*¹ 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.*

*² The LORD has made known his salvation;
he has revealed his righteousness in the sight of the nations.*

*³ 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.*

*⁴ Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth;
break forth into joyous song and sing praises!*

*⁵ Sing praises to the LORD with the lyre,
with the lyre and the sound of melody!*

*⁶ With trumpets and the sound of the horn
make a joyful noise before the King, the LORD!*

*⁷ Let the sea roar, and all that fills it;
the world and those who dwell in it!*

*⁸ Let the rivers clap their hands;
let the hills sing for joy together*

*⁹ before the LORD, for he comes
to judge the earth.
He will judge the world with righteousness,
and the peoples with equity.*

Thanks be to God. Amen.

In 2007 the Washington Post did an experiment to assess the perceptions, priorities and tastes of people in Washington D.C. It involved a man, a violin and a crowded Metro subway station. Listen to how one of the Post journalists describes the story:

[A man] emerged from the Metro at the L'Enfant Plaza station and positioned himself against a wall beside a trash basket. By most measures, he was nondescript: a youngish white man in jeans, a long-sleeved T-shirt and a Washington Nationals baseball cap. From a small case, he removed a violin. Placing the open case at his feet, he shrewdly threw in a few dollars of pocket change as seed money, swiveled it to face pedestrian traffic, and began to play.

It was 7:51 a.m. on Friday, January 12, the middle of the morning rush hour. In the next 43 minutes, as the violinist performed six classical pieces, 1,097 people passed by. Almost all of them were on the way to work, which meant, for almost all of them, a government job...

Each passerby had a quick choice to make, one familiar to commuters in any urban area where the occasional street performer is part of the cityscape: Do you stop and listen? Do you hurry past with a blend of guilt and irritation, aware of your cupidity but annoyed by the unbidden demand on your time and wallet? Do you throw in a buck, just to be polite? Does your decision change if he's really bad? What if he's really good? Do you have time for beauty? Shouldn't you?...

(Pearls Before Breakfast by Gene Weingarten, April 8, 2007 Washington Post)

I think that is a good question to ask this week as we get ready to celebrate our Savior's birth. Do you have time for beauty?

Here's what the commuters in L'Enfant Plaza did not know that January morning:

- The man playing the violin was no typical street performer—he was the world famous virtuoso Joshua Bell, who routinely fills up concert halls worldwide.
- Just days before his performance in the Metro station, an audience in Boston had paid around \$100 a person to hear him perform.
- In that subway station he was playing a Stradivarius violin made in 1713 for which he had paid \$3.5 million.

How much money do you think Joshua Bell took in during those 43 minutes? Just \$32.17. I watched it on YouTube this week. More than a thousand people passed by. Of those thousand people, only a handful stopped to enjoy the music.

My guess is that I would have rushed along too and that I wouldn't have had time for beauty. Why did so few people stop to hear? It's because they didn't know who he was.

As I read this story and watched the video I thought of Jesus. John 1:10 says, "*He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, yet the world did not know Him.*" They didn't know Who He was.

Jesus, Lord at His birth. Jesus, the Concert Master of the universe. Angels sang at His birth and the heavens rejoiced at His birth, but who took time to ponder, be amazed and enjoy the beauty and wonder of it all. A few shepherds out in the fields watching their flocks by night. Three wise men from the east following the star and a few others. But the vast multitudes of people went on their merry way and never stopped to ponder. They didn't know Who He was.

It's the same in our world today. We hear His name sung in the shopping malls, but how many people,

Fall on your knees, O hear the angel voices!
His pow'r and glory evermore proclaim!

(O Holy Night by Placide Cappeau, 1847)

How many people,

Hail the heav'nly Prince of Peace!
Hail the Sun of Righteousness!

(Hark! The Herald Angels Sing by Charles Wesley, 1739)

How many have the time for the beauty of this Rose?

Lo, how a Rose e'er blooming from tender stem hath sprung!...
This Flower, whose fragrance tender with sweetness fills the air...

(Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming by Theodore Baker, 1894)

How many join in creation's song of "Joy to the World"? "*He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, yet the world [still does] not know Him*" (John 1:10). That's where Psalm 98 brings us good news of great joy. The good news of this psalm is that the way things are right now are not the way things are always going to be but the coming of Christ has brought a new song into the world—a symphony of joy that will rise in a swelling crescendo—until all creation is engulfed in the praise of the Savior Who rules the world in truth and grace.

This psalm tells us a day is coming when the name of Jesus will be impossible to ignore; when the song of His victory will be sung and will be heard. He will become the focal point of every song and every symphony will resound to His eternal praise.

This psalm is telling us that the momentum of creation is moving swiftly and irreversibly toward the universal praise of Jesus Christ the Lord. You cannot resist this divine momentum. Don't even dare to try; don't rebel against it! Jesus Christ is Lord of all the earth and His name will be sung, proclaimed and praised by all creation.

The psalm contains three stanzas:

- what God has done in the past
- what God is doing in the present
- what God will do in the future

Each stanza rises in intensity and broadens in scope with an expanding circle of praise with each stanza. The worshipping community continues to increase throughout the psalm until finally, in the grand finale, all of creation is enlisted to break forth in a joyous symphony of praise to Christ the Savior, King and Judge of all the earth.

This psalm is inviting us—compelling us—to join in that joyful song now. Enter now into the praise of Jesus Christ that will engulf creation. Surrender now to His saving power; submit now to His sovereign rule; stand in awe now of His righteous judgment. That is what this psalm is calling us to do.

Let's look at it stanza by stanza.

Joy to the World, for Jesus our Savior has come!

Psalm 98:1-3

"Oh sing to the Lord..." it begins. Sing. Christianity is a singing faith. It is impossible for anyone whose heart has been gripped by the gospel not to sing. "A Christian should be an Alleluia from head to foot." (St. Augustine of Hippo). We are a singing people. Christmas is a time filled with singing and music. Why? We sing *"...for He has done marvelous things!"*

What should we sing to the Lord? We should sing to Him *"...a new song..."*—a fresh song, not a song that is boringly familiar, not a song that is worn out, but a song of joy. Nothing stale befits the praise of this great God. "Not simply a piece newly composed [although it certainly includes new songs] but a response that will match the freshness of His mercies, which are new every morning" (Derek Kidner).

His mercies are ever new and fresh, renewed each morning. The song of our lives should be ever fresh and renewed as we sing to the Lord. Why? *"...For He has done marvelous things!"* Whenever the word "marvelous" is used in the Old Testament, it is speaking of things that are holy supernatural; things that only God could do; things that God does all on His own. It's a term that's used to describe the miraculous interventions of God to save His people, like in the Exodus.

Verse one says *"...His right hand and His holy arm have worked out salvation for Him."* This is speaking of a victory. Other translations, like the King James 2000 Version say, *"...and His holy arm, has gotten Him the victory."* In our salvation God has won a great victory. It calls forth a new song.

I heard a preacher say, "Every time God works salvation, he has to fight for it." It's always a battle. Salvation never takes place without deep opposition and resistance from Satan and sinners. We flatter ourselves to think that somehow we sought out salvation and that God is very

fortunate we found Him. Or that somehow we contribute to our salvation. Or that we were eager but God was reluctant.

The very opposite is true. Salvation always encounters deep, intractable opposition. It is only “...*His right hand and His holy arm...*” that can change the heart of a dead sinner and make him alive. It can release Him from the bondage from sin and Satan. Salvation is a marvelous work of God. It is all of God, “...*from Him and through Him and to Him are all things*” (Romans 11:36). In light of that, we are to sing to Him a new song. His right hand has done this.

Who is seated at the right hand of the Majesty on high right now? His name is Jesus. Hebrews 1:3 says, “...*After making purification for sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.*” The One Whose first throne was a manager, then His throne was the cross where He bled for the sins of the world. He accomplished His work on the cross and is now seated—reigning—at the right hand of the Majesty on high.

Mary spoke these words when she discovered through the announcement of the angel that she was bearing in her womb this Lord Christ:

*“My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior...*

*for he who is mighty has done great things for me,
and holy is his name...*

*He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts...*

(Luke 1:46-47, 49, 51)

Mary is thinking back on psalms like this about God’s right hand and His holy arm working salvation; about marvelous things God would do. She recognizes that in her womb she is bearing that marvelous Wonder, that salvation that God has ordained for the world.

Out of all the wonders you can imagine—all of the marvelous things God has done—can any compare with this? That the eternal God Who made all things became a Man—fully Man—and joined to His eternal nature our humanity so that He is fully God and fully Man in one Person. The more you think of this wonder of the incarnation, the more staggering it becomes.

- the Eternal enters time
- the Infinite becomes finite
- the Invisible becomes visible
- the Creator becomes created
- the Sustainer of the universe becomes dependent on His mother
- the Almighty becomes weak
- God becomes a man

God has done marvelous things for us which call forth a new song. We can praise Him for these things that He has done because they are not hidden from us.

Psalm 98:2 says, *"The Lord has made known His salvation..."* He has revealed His salvation. I think of Simeon in the temple holding baby Jesus saying,

Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation [I am looking at Him right now] that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel.

(Luke 2:29-32)

"My eyes have seen your salvation..." You have made it known. You have revealed Your *"...righteousness in the sight of the nations."*

God's righteousness is His dynamic activity whereby He establishes right order in a world that has been ruined by sin. God created an orderly universe that was designed for His glory and our good. Sin has brought disorder into the universe and it's by His righteousness that God is restoring right order to the universe.

He displays His righteousness in Jesus Christ. When we look at Jesus arriving in a manger, living in our world as a Stranger, dying on the cross to save us from our sins—this is where we see God's righteousness being revealed in the sight of all the nations. It's for all people.

Psalm 98:3 says *"He has remembered His steadfast love and faithfulness to the house of Israel..."* God keeps all of His promises.

God remembered the promise He made to Abraham that He would be a blessing and in him all the nations of the earth would be blessed (Genesis 12).

God remembered the promise He made to David that on his throne would sit a ruler whose kingdom would have no end (2 Samuel 7). Jesus is the One Who will reign forever and ever! Hallelujah!

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."* Despite the evil plots of men like Herod to extinguish Him, God has given King Jesus the nations as His inheritance; the ends of earth are His possessions (Psalm 2).

Colossians 1:6 says that His gospel is going forth into the entire world and bearing fruit. His salvation is being known as His gospel goes forward. We are to praise Him for this and sing a new song because of the mighty things God has done.

Let's apply this for a minute. What is the first name or title you think of when you hear the name Jesus? I would hope one of the first words you would think of is Savior. Jesus means the Lord saves!

Today parents have the privilege of naming their children. Mary and Joseph didn't have that choice. Think of the names they could have chosen,

- Moses, the great law giver, which was a popular name for people of Israel
- Aaron, the great priest
- Solomon, filled with wisdom and knowledge

But God said, "No, what My people need most is not more rules and laws, nor knowledge and education, nor religion. What My people need most is salvation from their sins. They need a Savior, so He sent an angel to Mary and Joseph who gave them explicit instructions, "*...you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins*" (Matthew 1:21). Salvation from sin is the primary gift that God has given us in His Son.

Sometimes when we look at what's under the Christmas tree we think, "I'd like to return that gift. It's not really what I need or wanted." Sadly that's how a lot of people treat Jesus. They are thinking, "I don't *want* to be saved from my sin. I don't *need* to be saved from my sin. What I want is for my credit cards to be paid off. I want a new I-pad. I want a body that is fit and strong. I want more time off and less stress. I want peace, affluence."

These are the things people say they want, but God graciously yet persistently says, "Yes, but what you need most is Someone Who can save you from your sins, Who can rescue you from the hold that selfishness has on your life." You need Someone Who can transform your heart so it is not always thinking about "me" but starts to think about God and His glory. You need Someone Who can change you so that you start living according to the purpose for which God created you. You need a Savior.

At Christmas God says, "I am going to send my Son from the heights of Heaven's glory to the depths of earth's misery. His name shall be Jesus because He will save you from your sins." Only Jesus can do this. Only His right hand and holy arm can do this.

If you feel yourself in need of saving, then you are just the person He came to save. He came for you. Christ the Babe was born for you! If you have tasted of His salvation, it calls for a new song to continually flood your life, singing to Him of the triumphs of His grace—the marvelous things He has done for you.

Joy to the world, for Christ our Savior has come. That is the first and foundational stanza. If we don't know Christ as our Savior we are not going to appreciate what is said about Him in the next two stanzas.

Joy to the earth, for Jesus our Savior reigns!

Psalm 98:4-6

What's the effect of this new song in our mouths? It's the same as in Psalm 40:3, "...*Many will see and fear, and put their trust in the Lord.*" What we see in this psalm is that God is on an international campaign of redemption. He's remembering His promise to Israel and He's revealing His salvation to the ends of the earth.

How will the nations see and hear of this great Savior? The answer is in verse four. It's as we, the redeemed, "*Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth...*" This is something all the earth needs to hear. They need to hear a joyful noise to the Lord, God's people "...*break[ing] forth into joyous song and sing[ing] praises!*"

This is what we are called to be doing during this time in between the first coming and the second coming of Jesus Christ. We are to be making a joyful noise to our King. Instead of complaining all the time we are to be going forth joyfully into all the world, into our communities, in our neighborhoods, into dark places. As we spend time with our families this week, we are to be rejoicing with loud songs of praise and with glad hearts that He rules the world with truth and grace, that Jesus our Savior is on the throne of the universe. He is the King, the Lord (Psalm 98:6).

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

(Joy to the World by Isaac Watts, 1719)

We are to be all wrapped up in this truth; rejoicing in this truth so much that our lives are overflowing with a joyful noise to Him. This is God's mission strategy. God is going to conquer the nations through the worship of His people. As we worship Him with energy, volume and joyful expectation, we will become agents of all the earth coming to know the glories of our God and King and the triumphs of His grace.

We've moved from the first stanza of what God has done in the past by bringing salvation to what God is doing in the present. God is reigning as King. In light of that we are to tune all of our voices to sing, tune our strings to play (Psalm 98:5), take our instruments, trumpets and horns—all the instruments that God has made in all creation—and make a joyful symphony of praise and celebration to the Lord.

What God is saying to us in this middle stanza is, "Don't hold back." Don't restrain your praise; don't wait until you feel like it. Let the actions that God has done for you inspire your

worship of God. Don't sit around waiting for feelings of worship to come over you. Look at what He has done for you and worship Him and the feelings will follow.

John Wesley gave some instructions on how to praise God in the Methodist Hymnal. One of the things he said was,

Sing [heartily] and with good courage. Beware of singing as if you were half dead, or half asleep; but lift up your voice with strength. Be no more afraid of your voice now, nor more ashamed of it being heard, than when you [sang] the songs of Satan.

Sing! Lift up your voice because He is King!

When you go to a game played by your favorite sport team, in the last minute of the game they have an arousing victory that is impossible for the crowd not to erupt in joyful celebration. You automatically join in shouting the triumphs of the team. What this psalm is picturing is our King—Jesus, the Baby in the manger—now being crowned King of the universe and all of His people joining together in harmony, shouting victory to the crowning King. That is the way God wins the nations to Himself.

Joy to the earth, the Savior reigns!
Let men their songs employ;
While fields and floods, rocks hills and plains
Repeat the sounding joy,

(Joy to the World by Isaac Watts, 1719)

**Let all creation repeat the sounding joy,
for Jesus our Savior is coming again!**

Psalm 98:7-9

The last stanza excites me so much. I love the imagery here as heaven and nature sing with joy to the Lord. Verse seven says, "*Let the sea roar, and all that fills it; the world and those who dwell in it* [every creature of our God and King]! *Let the rivers clap their hands* [isn't that an amazing thing to imagine?]; *let the hills sing for joy together before the Lord...*"

While fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains
Repeat the sounding joy...

(Joy to the World by Isaac Watts, 1719)

Crashing waves, babbling brooks, roaring waterfalls; rivers clapping, hills humming in harmony. Why is creation getting so excited? Why are the rivers clapping their hands, the hills erupting into joy? Psalm 98:9 says that creation is excited "*before the Lord, for He comes to*

judge the earth.” All of creation is getting excited by God’s judgment. The Lord will judge the world.

They’re praising God’s just judgment because creation knows there cannot be a world of peace and justice if unrighteousness is left unpunished. There can be no rejoicing of fields, floods, rocks, hills and plains as long as evil is allowed to run its course in this world.

This is good news. If you have trusted in Christ as your Savior, if you have surrendered to Him and said, “Yes, the thing I need most is what You came to bring on Christmas. I need salvation from sin. Jesus, save me.” Then as you have been saved by Him you have learned to bow to Him, submit and obey Him as your King as the second stanza says.

Then the news of the last stanza is wonderfully good news. Your Savior—your King—sits on the throne and He will judge the earth. He will judge the earth in righteousness. He will exercise His power to set right all that sin has made wrong. He will bring back right order to what sin has disordered.

We are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. It will be the abode of righteousness, all will be well. It will be like the Garden of Eden except better because it will be filled with redeemed sinners who will know what it is like to be rescued by God’s mercy, who will be able to sing with all their hearts of the victories of their God and King. We will sing a new song continuously in that new heaven and new earth. We’ll sing worthy is the Lamb Who was slain.

God is bringing about this new heaven and new earth. If you are in Christ—trusting Him as Savior and King—this fact is good news. If you are not, then this word is like a warning to you. Look at verse nine, “*He will judge the world.*” Think of that as a warning sign.

Many years ago when Kate and I went to a beach in Big Island, Hawaii there were warnings not to go out in the water because of the powerful riptides. I thought I would be fine going out there but soon realized how powerful that tide can be—how it was carrying me far from shore. If it weren’t for a little piece of stump in the ground that I could hang onto for dear life, that would have been a terrifying experience.

Consider this as a warning to you: if you think you can be swept into the riptide of God’s judgment without clinging to the Rock of righteousness, without clinging to the Savior Who is Christ our King, without submitting yourself to Him, you will find the fact of His judgment to be terrifying. “*He will judge the world with righteousness and the peoples with equity*” (Psalm 98:9).

If you are in Christ it is good news that He Who began the good work of salvation in you will be faithful in His righteousness to complete that work (Philippians 1:6). Creation looks at the

truth and says, "How wonderful." How wonderful to know that God is going to come again as Judge because ever since the Garden of Eden, creation's destiny and our destiny has been bound up together.

Creation has been caught up in our sin. Paul tells us in Romans 8 that creation groans, longing for redemption, longing for what is spoken about in this stanza because it is in bondage to a cycle of death, decay and futility.

Joni Eareckson Tada knows a lot about that decay—the results of the fall—as she has been a quadriplegic since her eighteenth year of life. She writes,

Can you hear the sighing in the wind? Can you feel the heavy
silence in the mountains? Can you sense the restless longing in
the seas? Can you see it in the woeful eyes of an animal?
Something is coming...something better.

(Secret Strength: For Those Who Wait by Joni Eareckson Tada p.201)

Creation feels that. Creation waits with eager longing for the day when Christ returns as Judge. Creation is standing on tiptoes waiting with bated breath for when He comes.

Those who have surrendered to Him as Savior and submitted to Him as King will finally experience the fullness of His righteousness as our bodies will be redeemed. We will be revealed to the world as children of God. This world will be re-created and liberated—set free—from its bondage to death and decay to share our glorious liberty. When the creation thinks about that and imagines what that will be like, fields and floods start to clap their hands, hills rejoice at just the thought of Christ's return.

We've gotten used to a world that is filled with disease, decay, pain, sorrow and death. We think this is normal, natural. Creation vehemently disagrees. Creation has been off kilter, frustrated, groaning ever since Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden.

Then Jesus came and the heavens rained with praises; the earth rejoiced. He cast out demons, drove out the power of darkness, healed the sick and restored creation to health. Creation looked at Jesus and said, "Yes! That's what we all need."

That's the way things ought to be. One theologian says the miracles of Jesus,

...are the only true 'natural' thing in a world that is unnatural,
demonized and wounded...Finally, with the resurrection of Christ,
the new creation begins...with the crucified One.

(The Way of Jesus Christ by Jurgen Moltmann, 1993)

The new creation begins with the risen One Who died for our sins. When Isaac Watts mediated on this great psalm he had to include these wonderful words:

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...

(Joy to the World by Isaac Watts, 1719)

No more cancer, sickness, relational disharmony, interruption of peace, frenzied activities, racing about. No more 'not enough time' to stop and enjoy the beauty, just resting in Him. We will have time to dwell on His beauty forever. There will be no more frustration, futility, disappointment. No more death. That means something to us—it means everything to us. He comes to judge the earth.

He will judge the world with righteousness. The beautiful thing is in His righteousness He has provided a way for sinful human beings to stand in His judgment and to look at the face of their Judge, not with fear but joy celebrating His righteous judgment as He sets right all that had been destroyed by sin. Those who trust in Him as Savior and bow to Him as King know that His righteousness was put on display on the cross where His blood covered all of our sins. What good news this is.

He comes to make his blessings flow
Far as the curse is found.

(Joy to the World by Isaac Watts, 1719)

Amen. Come Lord Jesus.

New Covenant Bible Church

4N780 Randall Road, St. Charles, IL 60175

(630) 584-2611 ♦ www.newcbc.org

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