

December 3/4, 2022

Joy to the World
A Reason to Sing Series
Psalm 98
Pastor Ryan Harmon

Now as I begin, I need to address something that's rather serious. You may remember that a week ago, Josh asked a very divisive question. Do you remember the question? "When should Christmas music start? When should it be played?" Did it result in any arguments with your family? Were there any fights on the drive home or perhaps at lunch after the service? Maybe not. I want to answer that question once and for all, though. It's a debate that has raged for centuries, and I want to resolve it. So, if you're ready for it, I'm going to give you the answer. Are you ready? Here's the question: Should it start at Thanksgiving, December first? November first? When should it begin? Answer: We should never stop singing Christmas music. (*Applause*)

Every hour, I've been surprised that there is a lot of applause. I'm sure there also came some boos. In the first hour last night—Saturday night—someone booed, and I was like, "Well, okay. Thank you." (*laughter*) For those of you that don't agree, let me strengthen my case for just a moment. Just a few minutes ago, we sang a version of *Joy to the World*, a new arrangement. And did you know that that song, a song that I think is universally understood as one of people's favorite Christmas carols, that song was originally written not to be a reflection upon Jesus' birth? It actually was written as a reflection on Psalm 98 and wasn't intended to be sung at Christmas at all, actually. It was intended to be sung and reflected on throughout the year. Can you imagine if you walked in here in June or in July, on a balmy summer day, and the team gets up here and they start singing out *Joy to the World*?

In 1719, the author, Isaac Watts—great pastor, hymn writer, poet—read Psalm 98 and decided to reflect on that in light of who Christ is, and he wrote *Joy to the World*. Now in time those lyrics were set to the tune of a few different songs, from Handel's Messiah, and others generally understood to be kind of Christmas tunes. And so, in time, it did become affiliated or associated with Christmas. And in fact, it's become one of the most famous Christmas songs there is. If you pull out Christmas song books, it will be found in more Christmas song books than any other Christmas song. But it wasn't intended to be a Christmas song, instead a Christian song. *Joy to the World* at Christmas? Absolutely! But even after the tree goes out to the curb and to the landfill, or back into storage for the spring and the summer, *Joy to the World* is a Christian proclamation.

Now we have to admit to a world that can be cynical at times, that phrase, that proclamation, might seem out of place to them. And so I do wonder if you had a friend that would come to you and say, "You know, in light of all the challenges, of all the struggles, and in light of all the pain in the world, how is it that you can sing this song *Joy to the World* with a straight face?" See, to so many, in light of the weariness of the world, it feels to them as though Christian singing is a bit of a pretending or maybe the ignoring of real problems. So the question is, "Are they right? Are they right, or do we have a rock-solid reason to sing, an absolutely steady and secure reason to sing *Joy to the World* not just now, but all year long?"

That's the question we want to consider here this morning, and to do that, we're going to look at the psalm that Isaac Watts was reflecting on when he wrote these lyrics. So, turn with me to Psalm 98. This psalm sits in the middle of a series of psalms, the psalms that are considered to be kind of a reflection and an adoration of God as King of Israel. Of course we know that Israel had human kings, but ultimately they knew and they acknowledged that God was their King. And so, a series of psalms were written to praise Him and think of Him on His throne reigning over Israel. Psalm 98 begins:

Sing a new song to the LORD—a rather abrupt beginning to this passage. (*NASB, Psalm 98:1)

It starts out with a command, a charge, a call, **Sing a new song to the LORD**. It's a command, an imperative statement being made to the people of Israel. It might ring a little odd to our ears because in our modern conception of worship, we typically think of worship as more of something that we invite people to do. We might even say, "I invite you to join me in singing." "I invite you to lift up your voices to the Lord." But here in the beginning of Psalm 98, there's no invitation. No, it's a command. It's **Sing a new song to the LORD**. He's telling the people of Israel to lift up a **new song**; that's what they were to do. And who is that new song for? Well, it is for the Lord. It is for Yahweh; it is for their God. Yahweh, of course I'm sure you remember, is this personal name of God that He gave to His people Israel. When Moses asked, "Who shall I say sent me?" "Say, 'Yahweh; I Am that I Am.'" It's a very particular, a very holy name of God. Just a little reading note: anytime you're reading the Old Testament and you come across that word LORD, and it's all in capital letters, it's an indication of that Hebrew word. There is that personal name of God's name of Yahweh—so holy to the people of Israel that they were fearful to even say it out loud because His name was so holy.

There was *sing a new song to their God*, and this very first sentence of the song tells us something about worship. Worship is primarily a response to the magnificence of who God is. They're placing the reality of God before their hearts and minds. And what comes out of them is song; it's worship. It'd be as if the psalmist kind of said to us, "Hey, look, here is God. And now, in light of who He is, sing, worship." It's the appropriate response. A heart rightly aligned to God will worship Him when they behold Him in all His goodness. It's actually a rather natural thing for us; we're wired this way.

Just think in your own life of something that you really love, something that you just find to be magnificent, astounding, beautiful...a beautiful sunset, a fresh snowfall, a beautiful piece of art, an incredible choral anthem. Sure, for many of us, it's a perfectly run football play. Alright, there are things in our world that we just find to be astounding. And what happens when you see that, when you take that in? It's almost as if your whole body wants to rejoice. There's something in you that wells up and you want to kind of let it be known. "This is amazing!"

Think, if there were some buses, and we could all jump on those buses and make that long trek down to the Grand Canyon. If we could all travel there together, and then as we filed off the bus and we took in that wonder of the world with all its depth and color—just the scope and scale of it—imagine in that moment, if a person to your right or to your left kind of said under their breath, "I don't know what the big deal is...it's just a big hole." Now I think we would all rightly be justified to say, "Hold on! Pause!" We need to drive to Pearle Vision real quick and buy this person

some glasses. Clearly, they're not looking at what we are all looking at. They're not seeing this for what it is, because when you see this, the proper response is to say, "I'm amazed! This is astounding!" The psalmist is telling us something about who God is and what worship is. God, being who He is, is worthy! In fact, when you behold His magnificence for all its depth and beauty, the only proper response is explosions of spontaneous praise—to break out in song. Not just any song, the psalmist says. **Sing a new song to the LORD**...a fresh expression of praise.

I think one of my favorite songs that we sing here at Lincoln Berean is the song that is titled, *Hourglass*. Now one of the reasons I love that song so much is not necessarily because it's a good song—it is a really good song—I love singing it. I love the tune; I think it's well written, but I love singing it because of what it represents. See, it was written by our own team, and they, looking at God and beholding His wonder, His beauty, His magnificence, they said, "Let's write a new song. Let's write something that's never been written before." It's a beautiful thing. The beautiful thing, a new song, a fresh song, pours forth because God is so good. Don't get me wrong. I love the old standard hymns. I'm actually kind of wired that way. I like that old stuff.

This morning, we sang a version of *Joy to the World*, and we have to remember that that song, written 300 years ago, was new at one point. Every old song to us, was once new, right? In fact, when it was written in its day, it was rejected. It was too radical. "That's not the way we sing in church." It was rejected, but over time it now feels old to us. Now we sang a new kind of rendition of it—a different arrangement—and I am betting that there are a few of you in here that thought, "Why can't we just sing it like it's meant to be sung? Why do we have to add all this new finagle stuff to it?" I'll admit it. That's a preference. It's okay to have a preference. But we can't forget that given who God is, it is a beautiful thing that new songs are written, that new arrangements are made. That is a beautiful acknowledgement of the wonders of Him, because His mercies are new every morning. And because of that, we sing a new song.

As the psalmist continues, he elaborates on all the reasons to sing, on why making a new song is the proper response to who God is. It says in the second part of verse 1:

For He has done wonderful things,

That word **wonderful** could easily be translated *amazing*, astounding—things you never would have conceived of. He has blown your mind with incomprehensible things Yahweh has done for His people, Israel. I do wonder whether a good reflection for each of us this week would be to take a little time and just write down all the wonderful things, the astounding things, the incomprehensible things, surprising things that God has done for us? Maybe even make a run at writing a new song, a new song of praise because of what He has done for you. So he says, **For he has done wonderful things**, and so you say naturally, "Okay, like what has He done?" Verse 1 ends with:

**His right hand and His holy arm have gained the victory for Him.
The LORD has made His salvation known;
He has revealed His righteousness in the sight of the nations.
He has remembered His graciousness and His faithfulness to the house of Israel;
All the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God. (Vs. 1b-3)**

So Israel is to make a new song. And then their attention is turned to the fact that God has over and over again been their victor, the Warrior that has brought victory for them. Some commentators say this psalm should be called a divine warrior victory song. Yahweh is the one who has gone to battle, and He has won the victory on behalf of His people. Throughout the Old Testament, when the words of salvation come up, so often what is keynoted and what's being kind of talked about, are described as salvation in the sense of deliverance, that Yahweh is the deliverer of His people. He's the One that has brought them out of difficult places. He's the One that has saved them from the hands of their enemies. Salvation was deliverance of His people; God is their deliverer. Now we don't know exactly when this psalm was written, but we can say with confidence that it certainly was probably multiple generations after that incredible moment, that moment that Israel reflected on over and over again, the Exodus out of Egypt. The moment where God's mighty hand brought about salvation, deliverance for His people, brought them out of the land of bondage and slavery, to that world power, Egypt. doing only what God could do. Wonderful things He has done. And Israel was called, even generations later, for people that hadn't seen that with their own eyes, they were called to reflect on who God is and praise Him because that is who He is. And He didn't stop there, did He? Throughout the history of Israel, He continued to deliver.

This last summer we studied the last part of Judges, and we saw how God was the deliverer. He kept pulling Israel out of bondage, out of slavery, out of struggles that by their own sinfulness they had gotten themselves into. And then as time goes on, He brings about a king—a human king. God continued to deliver over and over again. That is what He did because that's who He is. And nation upon nation saw God's strength, His righteousness, His justice, His goodness to Israel. Throughout the Old Testament, God's power and His commitment to Israel were on full display. And nations, both large and small, had to behold His power, His goodness. So Israel was to sing a new song. Why? Because God was their warrior, and He had brought about the victory for them. And as the psalmist continues, in this next stanza, this call to worship continues. But as we'll see, it's going to be amplified and extended beyond the borders of Israel, because God, being who He is, is so great, it is not enough that only Israel sing a new song, verse 4:

**Shout joyfully to the LORD, all the earth;
Be cheerful and sing for joy and sing praises.
Sing praises to the LORD with the lyre,
With the lyre and the sound of melody.
With trumpets and the sound of the horn
Shout joyfully before the King, the LORD. (Vs. 4-6)**

Now in this stanza, we were not given any new reason that they are to sing. Instead, it kind of expands on that original reason. God is deliverer, therefore sing and do more than sing. Make an incredible noise to Him. Some of the details of what that worship is to look like is kind of expanding upon the how and the why of worship. **Praises** should pour forth, he says, with **cheer** and with **joyful shouts, with the lyre and the sound of melody, with trumpets and the sound of the horn**. Now this imagery might make some of us—maybe the quieter among us—a little uncomfortable because, make no mistake, this is a pretty raucous scene, isn't it, a pretty loud scene? I mean, **trumpet** and **horn**; that's a lot of brass, right? Trumpet and the horn? I'm kind of a quiet person; I'm not really expressive, a little more subdued. That's kind of the way I prefer to worship. I would like it if we can all just calm down a little bit, okay? It's kind of my temperament. If I start to sway, you know I'm really into it. Often I'm sitting there and I'm not really too expressive. But

then I look to my right, and my wife is like moving, and just into it. But I'm like a different person; she's just wired differently than me. I'm not a big dancer, not super expressive.

I remember in high school—I went to high school in Jefferson City, Missouri. One of the happiest days of my high school career was the day that I walked out of my last high school dance, and I thought, “I never have to do that ever again. Thank goodness! The worst four hours of my life.” Consequently, I went to a Christian college, and they believed it was wrong to dance. So I was off the hook. No dancing! But then the winds of change blew through Wheaton, Illinois. And as I came to my senior year of college, Wheaton College decided, “You know what? Maybe dancing isn't so bad, and we're going to allow it. Not only are we going to allow it, but we are going to have a couple of school-sponsored dances.” Swing dancing was gaining in popularity at this time, around 2001. So they said, “Let's have a swing dance,” and I was mortified. Mortified! I did not want to participate in that; I thought I had gotten away from all that. But I bit the bullet. I was a good team player. I went to that swing dance, and I am so thankful that social media didn't exist, *(laughter)* so thankful no one had little recording devices in their pockets. There was no evidence of my horrible dancing. It's just not my style. It's not my preference. That's not who I am. But I can't miss the point the psalmist is saying: “Whatever it looks like for you.” The call is to exuberant worship, to joyous worship, to raucous worship. The scene being described here is almost one of this crescendo. There's growing noise; voices are shouting, horns are blowing, people are gathering. It's almost as if the psalmist is saying, “We can never attain it, but let's try to make the noises loud, as extravagant as God's goodness is to us. We'll never attain it, but let's try.”

And we can't lose sight of the fact, of course, that worship is something that happens in the heart. That is the most critical place. Someone can make a lot of noise and not be worshipping. Someone can make no noise and be worshipping in an amazing way. The psalmist is calling us to be people who are filled with awe and wonder and joy at who God is. And if we were in the woods, and there were no instruments, we could do it with our voices. And if we were in a library, and you couldn't raise your voice above a whisper, we could worship exuberantly in our hearts. Praise rises up from the heart and even if it doesn't find expression externally, praise is a matter of being awed by God.

Here is a question though. I do know there are some people, because I'm here every week, and some of my friends, when I stand next to them, I don't know that I've ever heard them sing a note. For whatever reason, singing out loud, singing publicly is something they're uncomfortable with. And I just want to offer a little bit of a challenge, maybe an exhortation, because I've got to be honest with you. Sometimes when I'm here, the voices that are the most beautiful to me are the voices that are out of tune, the voices that are off-key, because when I hear a voice that is off-key, you know what I think is that they just love God. They don't care. They're not worried about what the person next to them thinks; they just want to praise God. He's that good. You know, I think there is a temptation, if you have a really good voice, let's be honest, there's a temptation...

When I was growing up, there was a lady it seemed like (it was different people) but someone who was always behind us, that would sing in four-part harmony, even if the song was not being sung in four-part harmony, always doing these little flourishes. I think there's a temptation if you have a really beautiful voice, there is a temptation to let everyone know, “Look how beautiful my voice is.” You don't have a great voice? It's okay. Shout to the Lord; make a joyful noise. It's a beautiful thing. Now, if that's too big of a hurdle, I do want to challenge you to think, what does it look like

for you when you are here to worship God with extravagant joy, to lift up your heart to Him because, as a people, we are called to make a joyful shout to our God? *Joy to the world*. It's a good title. Joy to the *whole* world.

You see joy everywhere this time of year, that word Joy. I was driving down Highway 2 the other day, and First National Bank told me on a billboard, Joy! You see it everywhere, and it's probably important to talk about what that means. Sometimes we think joy means really feeling good and maybe being excited, that kind of thing. But as I was studying, I came across an author, Elaine O'Rourke, and she summarized joy this way. She said, "Unlike happiness, which is a transitory feeling, joy is an overall sensibility. Joy is a deep-seated sense of wellbeing, of ultimate safety in God's universe. Joy is not triggered by external events, and so it is not crushed by them either. The world cannot give you joy, and it cannot take it away. Joy is a deep-seated sense of wellbeing. It's a sense of safety in God's great universe because He and His kingdom are sufficient. God is your provider; He is your protector. Therefore, what happens externally is not going to impact your joy."¹

Israel is called to shout joyfully before the Lord, shout and sing praises while experiencing a deep sense of wellbeing, even when they are in the midst of danger, because God is their victor. He is their Savior, and He is their king. He is in charge. Therefore, joy to His people. But not just his people. Did you catch it? He said, the whole earth will shout for joy. Even those nations that had to behold the strength and the power of God, they, too, are to lift up shouts of joy to Yahweh, the King of the whole earth. As they took in what God did on behalf of His people, Israel, they too were to lift their voices in praise.

So this call to worship began with God's people and it extends, the psalmist says, to the whole earth, a remarkable shift. And then as we come to the final stanza, we'll see one more expansion of this call to worship. Verse 7:

**May the sea roar and all it contains,
The world and those who dwell in it.
May the rivers clap their hands,
May the mountain sing together for joy
Before the LORD, for He is coming to judge the earth;
He will judge the world with righteousness
And the peoples with fairness.**

Not only Israel, not only all peoples, but all creation, make a joyful noise. Everything that was brought into existence by God's very hand and by His power, make a joyful shout to the LORD. The psalmist extends his exhortation to the sea, the world, the rivers, the mountains, all created order, "Sing for joy to the Lord!" See, God is so vast; He is so amazing, so astounding. There is nothing that we could do that would be commensurate with His goodness. But maybe the best we can do is to say that for everything He has brought into existence, we should lift up joy and shouts

¹ Elaine O'Rourke, *A Dallas Willard Dictionary: Second Edition Revised and Expanded* (2016).

of worship to Him. That's how amazing He is. The psalmist has called Israel to worship because God is their victor, because He is their King.

And now in verse 9, we're given one more reason, and the reason is that God is the coming judge of the earth. And when He judges, He will judge with **righteousness**, and with **fairness**. In other words, His judgment is true. It is accurate. You can count on it; it is upright. The scales are not tipped in the favor of the powerful oppressors...not when God is judge. God is judge means at the end of the day, things will be set right. The crooked will be made straight. Evil will not have the last word. In the great relief of fair and righteous judgment, should bring about for all creation shouts of joy, a sense of well-being. God is in charge, and we can trust His goodness. So, therefore, the psalmist says, "Let the whole earth, all creation, praise His name. Joy to the world; there is a reason to sing!"

As I imagined this scene, I think of Israel gathering together; they make their way to the temple, and the call goes out to sing a new song to the Lord. A few people pull their trumpets out of their pockets that they brought along. The horns start playing, and the noise rises up, and they are praising God with all their hearts, with all their bodies, engaging all of them in worship of Him. This is an incredible scene.

And I wonder, "What do you think they would say to us if we could put them in a time machine, let's say, and we can have them fast forward to this moment? What do you think they would say to us here in this moment?" I think they would look at us and they would say, "You're so lucky. We worshiped God with all our might, but we longed for the day that His Messiah, His anointed One would appear. We longed for that day. We didn't know when it would come. You get to live in light of it all the time. What is that like? What's it like for you? Are you constantly losing your voice as you raise it in shouts of joy? Is it just overwhelming you? Is your heart about to explode all the time because you live in constant light of God's Anointed One? You're so lucky."

This Christmas, as we worship, as we reflect, let us be a people that just considers the incredible privilege we have of knowing Christ, of knowing the Messiah, knowing God's anointed One. One of my favorite scenes surrounding Jesus' birth—one we don't talk about a whole lot, mainly because it occurred eight days after His birth—but eight days after He was born, as was customary, Joseph and Mary took Jesus, their newborn, to the temple to be presented to God. They made that trek from Bethlehem up to Jerusalem to present Jesus before God, to kind of dedicate Him to God. But as they were doing that, as they were entering the temple, another scene was also unfolding. God was doing something else at the same time. And Luke tells us about that in chapter 2, beginning in verse 25. I'm just going to read that for you. Luke says:

And there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; and this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel; (I love that title for Jesus, the consoler, the consolation of Israel) and the Holy Spirit was upon him. And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ (that is the Messiah). And he came by the Spirit into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to carry out for Him the custom of the Law, then he (Simeon) took Him in his arms, and blessed God, and said,

**“Now, Lord, You are letting Your bond-servant depart in peace,
According to Your word;
For my eyes have seen Your salvation,
Which You have prepared in the presence of all the peoples:
A light for revelation for the Gentiles,
And the glory of Your people Israel.”**

Simeon longed to see the Messiah, the consolation of Israel. And then God said, “Hey, He's here.” And Simeon saw Jesus and he said, “I can die; I can depart in peace. This is what I was waiting for.” Israel worshiped in a room, to use a metaphor, a room that was dimly lit. Yes, they worshipped what they knew. But we worship in a room where the lights are turned on. It is fully lit by the glory of Christ, by what Christ has revealed about God, and by what God has done in and through Jesus Christ, a light of revelation to the Gentiles.

As we sit here in 2022, we are called to worship God in the same way that Israel was called to worship God, called to lift Him up. I know they couldn't imagine that hundreds of years later, God was going to bring about fulfillment in the fullest extent, in a little baby that was born to a carpenter's wife in obscurity, in a stable in Bethlehem. They couldn't have imagined it. But we know it's true, and because we know it's true, we can say that we are full of hope. We are full of joy. Not only us, but the whole world can be full of joy. So, we sing *Joy to the World*. In Psalm 98 Israel was called to worship Him, lift up a new song to Him, because He is your deliver, because He is your King, because He is the coming judge.

And now as we approach Christmas day and we reflect on the birth of Jesus Christ, we, in the same way, lift up shouts of joy, hearts of worship, because He is *the* Savior. He is *the* king. He is *the* One that is coming to judge. Do we have a reason to sing? Jesus is the reason we sing. He is the reason we sing. He is the one that delivered us. He is our Savior who delivered us from the bondage of sin and death, delivered us from the debt that we could not pay ourselves, by death on the cross. He delivered us from the power of sin and death. Therefore we can say, “Oh Death, where is your sting?” He delivered us, brought us out of slavery to sin and death, and into life in the Spirit, in which there is no condemnation.

Therefore we sing *Joy to the world, the Savior reigns*. He is the One. He is the one that is King of kings and Lord of lords. He's the One who is sitting at the right hand of God this very moment, reigning supreme. His kingdom, His righteousness and joy and peace in the spirit. His kingdom is an eternal kingdom that will have no end. You and I, we have been transferred from the domain of darkness and into His kingdom. Therefore we also sing *Joy to the World. Let the earth receive her King*. Amen! He is the coming judge. He is the One that is coming to judge, and we are told his judgment is righteous and true. He is the One that is coming. He will set the world right. All creation, Paul tells us, longs for its redemption. Wait for that moment when Christ is judge, and all will be made right. The crooked will be made straight. Therefore we sing, “*He rules the world with truth and with grace.*”

Do we have a reason to sing? Oh yes, we have a reason to sing. Are we people who pretend that darkness and pain and struggle don't exist? No, not at all. We worship with eyes wide open.

Christian songs, Christian worship is a joyful shout of defiance against sin and death and all its effects. We see pain in the world, and we know it exists, but we know it won't have the final word, because we worship the One who, 2000 years ago, was sent into the world. He came and He reigns now, and He is coming again to judge. Therefore we sing *Joy to the World, Joy to the World, Joy this day*. Yes, enjoy every day. Let's pray together.

Our Father, we do praise You. We praise You that in love You sent Your Son into the world to do that which we could not do for ourselves. And, Jesus, we lift You up. You are our Savior; You are the King. You are the judge, and we can trust You because Your judgment is righteous. Your judgment is true. We thank You. We praise You. We pray that You will give us a broad vision of Your goodness this season, that we might be a people that well up with joy because You are sovereign, that You might stir up in us a new song of praise because You are the Lord. We thank You; We praise You; We pray all these things in Your glorious Name, Amen.

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