

Joy to the World

Psalm 98

John Breon

Do you ever get a song stuck in your head? It keeps playing over and over. The combination of poetry and music can speak to us, touch us, and move us in ways that plain speaking or writing doesn't. Music has a way of staying with us. It can take us back to earlier times.

Humorist Dave Barry writes about how personal music can be. "The songs we hear a lot—particularly the ones we hear when we're young—soak into our psyche, so that forever after, when we hear certain songs, we experience sudden and uncontrollable memory spasms taking us back to specific times—some good, some bad—in our lives."

Dave says whenever he hears a Beach Boys car song, he's transported back to the summers of 1962-65, when he was a teenager cruising the roads around his hometown. He was cruising in his mom's Plymouth Valliant station wagon, which had all the flair of a forklift. But the feelings of freedom and adventure he had when he was seventeen come back to him. Those songs help him revisit that time (*Dave Barry's Book of Bad Songs* 9-11).

Music can also have a more profound influence on us. In an article entitled "The Lyric that Saved My Life," Mary Ellen Rothrock describes being a graduate student in the 1960s. There was a prevailing mood of despair that Mary rebelled against. She had grown up attending the church where her father was the organist, so she knew about God. But she says that Jesus was just a historical figure to her. She never heard—or she heard without hearing—that Jesus died on the cross for her sins.

In college, atheism became her religion. But in graduate school, trying to fill a spiritual void in her life, she began practicing Transcendental Meditation (TM). She met periodically with a TM supervisor. After a year or so of meditating, she told her supervisor that a thought kept recurring when she was trying to concentrate on her mantra. It was a line from Handel's *Messiah*. "Something in my mind keeps repeating 'And the glory

of the Lord shall be revealed.'" Those words brought back wonderful Christmas memories from her childhood growing up in Pittsburgh.

Two holiday musical events were highlights in her mind. Each year, the Pittsburgh Symphony presented Handel's *Messiah* with the Mendelssohn Choir. Mary and her parents attended the performance every December from as early as she could remember. Not only did she find the music thrilling, but the words seemed to her to come from beyond this world. She loved the joyful language: "Hallelujah! for the Lord God Omnipotent reigneth ... For unto us a Child is born ... And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together."

The second holiday event took place at Pittsburgh's Carnegie Music Hall. It was a Christmas carol festival called "United We Sing" that celebrated the immigrant diversity of Pittsburgh. Colorfully costumed choirs representing different nationalities filled the auditorium, spilling off the stage and into the audience.

The native costumes dazzled young Mary's eyes and the choirs sang in strange languages. A tenor sang "Deck the Halls" in the baffling Welsh language. Bagpipers piped their piercing "O Come All Ye Faithful." Chinese women rose in vivid Oriental silks and sang. A Russian men's chorus roared.

But the high point was when the choirs rose together in their colorful costumes to sing Handel's great "Hallelujah" chorus. Mary's father directed the mass international choir. The hall reverberated with the triumphant refrain: "He shall reign for ever and ever. Hallelujah! Hallelujah!"

Holding these memories, Mary didn't follow her supervisor's instructions to ignore the words, and she told herself, "These aren't just random thoughts." Then she realized the phrase *And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed* was an invitation from a personal God of glory to seek him! Why couldn't he be "Wonderful Counselor, the mighty God, the everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace"?

Within months, Mary met a woman who explained how she could have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. It began to make sense. The words she had listened to in Handel's choruses and other carols had pointed to Jesus Christ, the Lord and Messiah.

Listening to the words from the Bible, the words from the musical score made sense. The Holy Spirit convinced her of the truth. The God she hungered for, the personal God, loved her (*Christian Reader* [from *Christianity Today*], Nov-Dec 1998).

All kinds of music impacts our lives. Maybe especially Christmas music touches us, stays with us, and keeps calling to us. It doesn't just take us back in time, but it opens up hope and possibilities for the future. Maybe some old lyrics or a new song will speak to us and lead us to new faith and commitment.

Number three in our favorite Christmas song countdown is *Joy to the World*. British pastor and poet Isaac Watts wrote the lyrics and published them in 1719. In 1848, an American musician named Lowell Mason composed the musical setting we use. In some publications, the tune was attributed to Handel. But it's most likely Mason was trying to be humble by not signing his composition and showing his admiration for Handel, whose music had influenced him. Some musicians detect a couple of musical themes in *Messiah* that are echoed in Mason's tune.

As a teenager, Isaac Watts complained about church music—how dull it was and how indifferent people were as they sang. His father got tired of hearing this, so he challenged Isaac to write something better. So he did. He kept writing and he eventually became known as the "Father of English Hymnody." He practically invented the hymn as we know it. If you look in the Index of Composers, Authors, and Sources in *The United Methodist Hymnal* (p. 922), you'll find eleven songs by Watts, including *O God, Our Help in Ages Past*, *Come We that Love the Lord* (which also appears as *Marching to Zion*), two versions of *When I Survey the Wondrous Cross*, and, of course, *Joy to the World*.

Isaac Watts was brilliant. He learned several languages, starting at age 4. His father was a Nonconformist, that is, he wouldn't embrace the established Church of England. Nonconformists were one type of Puritans who challenged many of the practices of the official Church of England.

Isaac had offers to get his way paid to attend Oxford or Cambridge, but that would have led him into the Anglican (Church of England) ministry. Instead, he went to a Nonconformist academy in London.

In 1702 he became pastor of London's Mark Lane Independent Chapel—a Congregational church. He wanted to help ordinary people sing and worship. Most English Protestant churches sang only the psalms. Watts didn't object to that, but he wanted to make them more lively. He tried to translate the psalms into language he believed David would have used if he'd been a Christian. So he paraphrased the Psalms in a collection called *Psalms of David Imitated in the Language of the New Testament*, published in 1719.

One article mentions some of the struggles Isaac Watts had. He was sickly throughout his life. Early in his ministry he began suffering from psychiatric illness that plagued him for the rest of his life. Also, he was five feet tall, pale and skinny, with "a disproportionately oversized head." One biographer hints that this was why a woman named Elizabeth Singer rejected his proposal of marriage (<http://www.christianitytoday.com/history/people/poets/isaac-watts.html>). He never did marry.

What's a man like that doing writing about joy, even joy to *the world*? How can the world know joy? How can we experience joy in a world like this? Can we hope for a better world where all is joy and peace and love and righteousness? The Scripture that Isaac Watts used for this hymn points the way for us.

Joy to the World is Isaac Watts' paraphrase of Psalm 98. This is an "enthronement psalm" that proclaims and celebrates that God rules, God is King. The psalm has three sections. In the first (verses 1-3), the word "salvation" appears in each verse. It gives reasons to praise God that lift up what God has done to save his people. The second section (4-6) is an invitation to praise. It begins and ends with the call to "shout for joy/make a joyful noise" to the LORD. The third section (7-9) continues the invitation to praise, but it calls on all creation to praise the LORD. The word "righteousness" appears in verses two and nine. That ties together the whole creation and the house of Israel. God works in both to set things right, to bring salvation (J. Clinton McCann, "The Book of Psalms," *The New Interpreter's Bible*).

Now, let's connect the psalm and the hymn. Let's overlay *Joy to the World* on Psalm 98 and see how they call us to rejoice in the Lord and praise our Savior who reigns.

Joy to the world, the Lord is come!
Let earth receive her King;
let every heart prepare him room,
and heaven and nature sing.

The psalm overflows with joyous praise. "Sing to the LORD a new song." "Shout for joy to the LORD." "Let them sing before the LORD." This joy and praise are because the Lord does reign, the Lord is King. And he makes his salvation known. He comes to judge, that is, to restore justice and righteousness, to put things right—which includes weeding out what's evil.

The line "let every heart prepare him room" points to the story of Jesus' birth. Mary gave birth to her firstborn and laid him in a manger, because there was no other room for them. The Lord rules now, even though we don't see everyone and everything submitting to his reign. But we can begin to experience it for ourselves, when we give him room to rule and work in our hearts. Our heart is the center of who we are. It's our spirit, our will. It's where intentions are formed and decisions are made. What happens when we open our hearts to the Lord and he fills them and rules them?

James Howell says that "what Jesus wants for Christmas is a vacancy, an opening, some room." He can't squeeze into our hearts if we keep everything we've ever accumulated. We have to let go. We need to start spring cleaning in the early days of winter. Saying yes to Jesus means saying no to some other things. Is there room in our hearts, in our lives, for Jesus to come? If we don't have joy, is it because we don't have room for joy? Our hearts are like a room, a little chapel for Jesus to come and stay within us. But has it become overgrown with weeds and cluttered with trash? That room can seem too shabby for the Lord of glory to enter.

But no room is too shabby. Jesus was born in a frigid stall where the cattle were housed. You have the room. Take a long look at the pile of baubles and busyness and decide this is the year to “let every heart prepare him room.” (*Why This Jubilee?* 16-18)

Joy to the world, the Savior reigns!
Let all their songs employ;
while fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains
repeat the sounding joy.

The *Savior* is King. The one who saves is the one who reigns. The first three verses of Psalm 98 each include the word salvation. We sing a new song to the Lord because he has done marvelous things. He has worked salvation. God has made his salvation known to the nations. All the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God.

The psalm writer was probably thinking about things like the exodus from Egypt or deliverance from various enemies. We can think of what God has done in Jesus Christ, coming to be one of us, redeeming and sanctifying human life, dying on a cross to take away sins, rising victorious over sin and death and all the enemies of God’s kingdom. We can think of our own experiences of God’s salvation, deliverance, help, healing, redemption. And we can sing with joy to the Lord.

The rest of creation, what we call the natural world, joins in the praise. Fields and floods—pastures and rivers—praise God. Rocks, hills, and plains—every part of the world echoes joy. Heaven and nature sing. All of created reality, spiritual and physical, gives glory to the Creator and Savior who reigns.

No more let sins and sorrows grow,
nor thorns infest the ground;
he comes to make his blessing flow
far as the curse is found.

Here, we're not just looking back to what God has done or seeing our present experience. We're looking forward to the end result of what God has done and is doing. Sins and sorrows still grow, thorns still infest the ground. But there will come a day when God's blessing will overtake and overflow the curse.

What's the curse here? Watts is probably thinking of Genesis 3. The man and woman in the garden listened to the tempter and chose to grasp for themselves the knowledge of good and evil. They disobeyed God. They tried to be like God on their own instead of in relationship with God. After all that, they tried to hide from God, but God kept looking for them. Then God pronounced curses on them and on the serpent and on the ground. It's not that God wanted these terrible things to happen, God was simply pronouncing the consequences of sin. One of those consequences was that the ground would be cursed and produce thorns and thistles.

But the salvation Jesus brings reverses the curse. In another garden, Jesus prayed and surrendered to God's will. Usually, pictures of Jesus praying in Gethsemane include thorns. They're reminders of the curse of sin and of the crown of thorns Jesus would wear as he gave his life to defeat the curse and bring blessing. Isaac Watts tells us that God's salvation in Jesus brings blessing that reaches wherever the curse of sin can be found. And someday, there will be only blessing and no curse at all.

He rules the world with truth and grace,
and makes the nations prove
the glories of his righteousness
and wonders of his love.

Truth and grace, righteousness and love are qualities of God's character. God's righteousness is glorious and God's love is wondrous. This is the essence of God's kingdom, the fruit of the salvation God gives.

The Lord rules with truth and grace. He will make all the nations show the glories of his righteousness and wonders of his love. God rules now. Jesus is Lord now. And yet, God's rule is not fully realized. Not everyone acknowledges Jesus as Lord. We often hear about the kingdom of God

being “already and not yet.” The kingdom of God is already present and active and available, but it’s not yet fully realized. We still wait for and long for the final fulfillment of God’s rule when, everywhere in every way, God’s kingdom comes and God’s will is done on earth as it is in heaven.

Because of what Jesus has done, because of the present work of the Holy Spirit, we can live in light of God’s kingdom now. We can surrender to Jesus as Lord. We can live in ways that anticipate the final coming and fulfillment of the Lord’s rule of truth and grace.

I recently read a piece that illustrates this. Think about the Underground Railroad—that secret network of individuals, groups, churches, and others who helped slaves escape from the South to the North and Canada. Though President Lincoln had not yet delivered the Emancipation Proclamation, the people of the Underground Railroad lived as though it had already happened. So they worked to free as many slaves as they could, usually by subversive means.

Dr. Alexander Ross was one of those subversives. After having a conversation with an abolitionist, Dr. Ross became convicted and then got creative in helping slaves escape. He pretended to be a scientist studying birds. This ruse would allow him onto plantations, where he would quietly give slaves information on routes of escape. Sometimes he would offer them food, money, compasses, weapons, and the names of people who would shelter them. He once pretended a female slave was his personal servant and led her all the way to Ontario to be reunited with her husband. According to his records, Ross helped free at least 31 slaves.

Subversion means undermining the power and authority of an established system or institution. That’s how we get ready for Jesus’ return. We go subversively among the plantations of sin and take the time to walk with that one person to freedom. We live in the upside down of the already/not yet as we wait in hope for Christ our Judge, the Savior who reigns, to return and proclaim the final emancipation from the world’s slavery to sin and death (Omar Al-Rikabi, *The Seedbed Daily Text*, <https://us4.campaign-archive.com/?e=465f32ae3c&u=02db73c05fa1c7c5736358be4&id=ac006635c3>).

We sing *Joy to the World* during Advent and Christmas. But it's not just about the first coming of Jesus. It also looks forward to when he will appear again to complete salvation, to bring in the final fulfillment and form of God's reign, to put all things right. And then we will truly prove, we'll show, reflect, and rejoice in the glories of his righteousness and wonders of his love for ever.