



Joy to the World!

Sermon Series: Get Into the Spirit: The Songs of Christmas

Sunday, December 16, 2007
Rev. Dr. David E. Gilbert
Psalm 98:4-9

Yesterday I heard an advertisement on the radio for the Eastwood Mall. It highlighted the fact that the mall has a three-tank aquarium and that it has an exciting new exhibit – a shark exhibit. Being new here I didn't know that the Eastwood Mall had an aquarium. Well, I'm glad to know it because I love aquariums! Last year I went to the Chicago Aquarium. When you walk through the doors you see this huge, center tank – about as high as this sanctuary's ceiling – and the tank is filled with a whole array of sea life. The fish glide past, shimmering in a rainbow of colors. But my favorite section of the aquarium features the sea otters. O my, how they cavort and frolic! How they love to show off! I love their exuberance!

Do you ever stop to think that that exuberance just might be their way of expressing *joy in the presence of God*? Could the Eastwood Mall Aquarium be a holy space not unlike this sanctuary this morning? The great naturalist John Muir wrote these words: *"It is a great comfort that vast multitudes of creatures, great and small and infinite in number, lived and had a good time in God's love before human were even created."* The theologian Cornelius Plantinga says he thinks that the songs of whales may really be hymns of praise, and that when they breach out of the

water they're leaping to praise God, and praying and pleading and even making covenants with God.

One of our very favorite Christmas carols is about how all of nature welcomes the birth of the Christ-child. "*Joy to the world! The Lord is come. Let heaven and nature sing.*" Now what inspired Isaac Watts to write that was not a forest or wood; it was a psalm! Psalm 98. And I'd like to invite you to turn this morning to the 98th psalm, which you'll find on page 428 of the Bible we've made available to you. Now, we're going to hear about the history and background of the song. But first let's look at verses 4 through nine of Psalm 98 that inspired it.

Psalm 98, verses 4 through 9: "*Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises. Sing praises to the Lord with the lyre, with the lyre and the sound of melody. ---[like our talented guests from Boardman High have done so wonderfully this morning] – With trumpets and the sound of the horn make a joyful noise before the King, the LORD. [Now, here comes the aquarium] Let the sea roar, and all that fills it; the world and those who live in it. Let the floods [or "rivers"] – there's a whole section in the Chicago aquarium dedicated to all the creatures living in rivers] clap their hands; let the hills sing together for joy at the presence of the LORD, for he is coming to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with equity.*" Here ends the reading.

Joy to the World! was not an official hymn of the church; it was one of those bootleg songs that I told you about last week – that really did not receive the sanction of the church. In fact, *Joy to the World!* was exceedingly controversial and especially was hated by Presbyterians! Because Presbyterians were such a buttoned-down bunch of people that they thought that any hymn that gave license for people to express unfettered joy was a very dangerous hymn to have people sing in public. And so it was rejected by the church.

And there was another reason the Presbyterians detested it. The policy of the Presbyterian Church was to sing the very words of the psalms themselves, and only the express words of the psalms. All the songs of Isaac Watts were very controversial in the Presbyterian Church because what Watts did was: he took the words of the psalms, filled them with New Testament theology, and put them to music. And for Presbyterians of the day -- that just wasn't kosher!

In fact, one of my favorite stories about this was back during the Revolutionary War there was a Presbyterian pastor named James

Caldwell in New Jersey (and the city there in New Jersey is named after him). There was this pastor James Caldwell and George Washington's militia was guarding that Presbyterian church. The British hated Presbyterians during the Revolutionary War and the Hessians would often attack Presbyterian churches and often would even kill Presbyterian pastors and their families because Presbyterian pastors were leading the charge for the revolution!

And so here there were all these militia men around this church, guarding the church, when they found out that they had a desperate shortage of the paper wadding that they needed in their muskets. So what James Caldwell did is – he told the soldiers to go into the church and to get the hymnals out of the pews – and as they went into the church his words to the churchmen was, "Give 'em Watts, boys! Give 'em Watts!"

And so the soldiers reached in and they tore out all the hymns by Isaac Watts....*chuckle*.... And they crammed them down inside their muskets.Sort of BANG: ---- *Joy to the World!*

What made Isaac Watts so controversial, as I said, was that he took the words of the psalms and adapted them. I love the way it all began. I think Watts was a 15-year-old teenager who hated church. His father said, "Look, if you don't like the music they have down at church, you see if you can do any better." So Isaac said, "I will, Dad!" And he wrote a hymn and they brought it to the church, and they sang it the next week, and everybody loved it and said, "Would you do it again next week?...and the next week after that?" And for 220 consecutive Sundays Isaac Watts wrote a new hymn for his church and thereby revolutionized hymn singing in the English-speaking world.

One of the things I would wager you is that if you were to make a list of your ten favorite hymns one of those will be an Isaac Watts' hymn. – Hymns like "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross" and "Our God, Our Help in Ages Past" are from Isaac Watts. And "Jesus Shall Reign Where'er the Sun"and of course this "*Joy to the World! The Lord is Come.*" It was written in 1719.

Now Isaac had a few problems. Very often today people who write music and perform them are very attractive to the opposite sex. Isaac was, shall we say, not a "babe-magnet." There was a woman named Elizabeth Singer who fell in love with him simply from hearing his music, and without ever having met Isaac Watts she was determined this man was her soul-mate forever. And so she arranged a meeting. Big mistake!

She later wrote: "I walked a tiny little man with a hooked nose, prominent cheekbones and a death-like color." She later wrote a friend, "I admire the jewel, but not the package." Isaac was no matinee idol, I tell you, but he wrote jewels that lasted a lot longer than any matinee idol ever did.

I was thinking this past week --- for the last seventeen consecutive years the first thing I've done every Christmas morning -- a few seconds past midnight -- is sing "*Joy to the World!*" (It was the practice in each of my previous two churches to have an 11 p.m. service on Christmas Eve). And if you go to an 11 p.m. service that's what you do, too. The first thing you do when it's past midnight -- and it's Christmas -- is: you sing "*Joy to the World!*"

Now if you want to, open your hymnal to page 40. I'm going to walk us through this great hymn.

First of all, the first stanza. It starts with the word *Joy!* Now the word "joy" in Greek is simply the word for "surprise." -- SURPRISE.- C.S. Lewis wrote a book that had a play on words for the title -- "Surprised By Joy" -- and in the Greek that's simply "Surprised by Surprise." The other play on words is that C.S. Lewis fell in love with a woman in his latter years who became his wife. Her name was Joy, -- Joy Davidman.

So when we sing this we're simply saying, "SURPRISE WORLD!...THE LORD IS COME!" --It's not past tense, not future tense, but "The Lord IS come!" -- The King is on the scene....He's here! He's right here with you now as you sit there in the pew. He's with you when you go out this morning. And that's why -- bottom line -- we say to the world "JOY TO THE WORLD!" Jesus has been born.

But let's now go on to the second stanza. The second stanza says, "The Savior reigns." The Greek word for Savior is *soter*. The great word of the Old Testament is *shalom*. The great word of the New Testament is *soter*. The word "Savior." The angel says to the shepherds, "Unto you is born a Savior." The angel said to Joseph, "You shall name him Jesus for he shall save his people from their sin."

I grew up in southern California where that word "save" has a very specific meaning. There the youth culture is dominated by the ocean, -- revolves around the ocean and one little sentence -- "Surf's up!" -- can empty a high-school. If you move there as a teen, as I did, it doesn't take you very long to tell who the coolest dudes on the beach are. They're the lifeguards! Not because they sport cool "shades" -- because they wear cool sunglasses all day -- and ride a hot jeep up and down the beach, --

but because of what they do and who they are. Because of their strength and training. Strength and training such that they'll dive under even the biggest waves during a storm surge and they'll go out and rescue people, "save" people.

The reason that the invisible God became visible and lived among us as flesh and bone and blood for 33 years through a human personality was because He wanted to be our Savior. Our God dove into this world because He wanted to be with us and there was no sterile way to save us from the ugliness of sin. And so God came to save us – not from neutrality into religion – but He came to carry us from death to life! My friend, unto you is born a Savior! --- "Joy to the world! The Savior reigns!"

And now we come to the third stanza. Let me tell you about third stanzas. If you've ever been to "hymn-sings" you know there is a thing that recurs at hymn-sings: – The leader at the hymn-sing will stand up and say, (now Errol would never do this) "Alright, we're going to sing the first, the second, and the fourth verse." And they leave out the third stanza. Why? Because third stanzas of hymns are very often downers. Very often that next to last stanza is about the bleakness of the human condition. And so we tend not to sing those.

But oh friends, we need third stanza joy! Especially at Christmas time when we tend to stay on the surface and everything's "fa-la-la-la-la" and "figgy-pudding" and all the rest – it's the time of year when we need most to get a strong dose of reality. So let's look now at the third stanza:

*"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."*

Suddenly we're taken back to the curse of Genesis 3 where in the Garden of Eden you know how the serpent came and said, "Say, Eve, I hear you like fruit, huh?...God's had everything go His way. Why don't you have everything go your way for a change, Eve? Why don't you eat of the fruit?" And Eve and Adam ate....

Well, my friends, in the moment of that disobedience there was a rupture that went through creation. You see it right there. The chapter before Adam had looked at Eve and rhapsodized "O you are bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh" ...and now he goes, "Who is she? I want nothing to do with her!" –And it echoes out from there. Adam and Eve had two sons – Cain and Abel -- and Cain killed Abel. After that there came Lamech,

Cain's son. Lamech promised seven-fold revenge on anyone who sought to hurt him or his own. And the history of humankind becomes the history of violence and fear and danger and heartache.

But God has not given up on this world yet.

There's a wonderful story that's told by Richard Mouw about Pope John the 23rd. When he was still a cardinal before he became pope he had a magnificent, beautiful wine goblet. It was made of alabaster and was intricate and very beautiful. One day a priest came in and told him about this renegade priest who was out there filled with hate and fomenting rebellion against the scriptures and against the church. And the young priest said, "Aren't you upset?" And with that the cardinal lifted up his precious wine goblet and said "Who's goblet is this?" And the young priest said, "Well, it is yours." And with that the cardinal took that precious goblet, lifted it up above his head and flung it to the ground, shattered it to a hundred pieces. "And who's goblet is it now?" The young priest said, "It is still yours." And the cardinal said, "That broken life is still God's."

This broken world still belongs to God.

And that was what gave hope to Isaac Watts in all of his brokenness...as a person. The curse in his life was episodic mental illness. Isaac Watts had kind friends who gave him a place to stay. And there were times when he would just stay in that house for months unable to do anything except just wait until his sanity would return.

What did he do when his sanity returned, did he say, "O woe is me! O, ain't it awful?" Here's what he would do. He would write songs with lyrics like these, "Come, let us join our song with cheerful angels round the throne. Ten thousand, thousand are there tongues, but all their joys are one." Or, "Were the whole realm of nature mine, that were a present far too small. Love so amazing, so divine, demands my life, my soul, my all." And of course he wrote the happiest song any of us knows, "*Joy to the World! The Lord is come!*"

My friends, we need that third-stanza joy, the deep, surprising joy – that comes to us through Jesus Christ in the midst of hardship and heartache.

There's a large church in Atlanta that does something I think is just wonderful! A police officer down there in Atlanta, Mark Cross, was shot and killed in the line of duty. A man in that church said, "Let's do something that will truly honor our Atlanta Police Officers! What if we, as a church," he said, were to pay for \$100,000 life insurance on each of the

1600 Atlanta police officers?" And that's what they have set about doing. They're doing it because, as their pastor says, "We have joy in Jesus Christ that we want to give the world."

Isn't that great? Now we may not be able to take on anything so grand as that, but we can give joy to the world also. Next Sunday we will take our Christmas Joy Offering that helps assist Presbyterian clergy who served churches unable to provide adequate pension benefits. The Joy Offering also assists our Presbyterian racial/ethnic colleges here in the U.S. to help students at those colleges get the financial assistance they need to attend. And we do it as a way of living out the fourth stanza *of Joy to the World!*

The fourth stanza ends with words that always ring in our ears whenever we finish singing "*Joy to the World!*" And I think it's one of the reasons we love it, because it always ends with these words: "*and wonders of His love. And wonders of His love. And wonders, and wonders, and wonders of His love.*"

My friends, let's go out into this world and be wonders of His love. Let's bring JOY to the world!

Would you stand with me and let us sing.