

“Joy to the World!”

Psalm 98:1-9; Luke 2:8-14

Rev. Nollie Malabuyo • December 24, 2017

Beloved Congregation of Christ: “Merry Christmas!” “Happy Holidays!” “Are you ready for Christmas?” These are a few greetings that we usually hear every Christmas season. Today is one of the most important days of the year for Americans. All of us long to be “home for Christmas” or “home for the holidays,” so we can gather together with our families. And we also love to sing and listen to our favorite Christmas carols.

Speaking of Christmas carols, did you know that “Joy to the World!” is a loose paraphrase of Psalm 98? Being a loose paraphrase of Psalm 98 is the reason why it is in the Hymn section, not in the Psalter section. This hymn was first published by Isaac Watts in his *Psalms of David* in 1719. He was born in Southampton, England in 1674. At age 16, he studied in the Academy of Thomas Rowe, a minister in London, and at 24, he became a minister. Watts paraphrased many of the Psalms because he was not satisfied with the existing metrical Psalms and their tunes. In those days, only Psalms were sung in the churches. So he wrote his own *Psalms of David* in metrical form.

Watts interpreted the Book of Psalms in a Christ-centered manner. This is consistent with the Protestant Reformers’ doctrine that all of the Bible points to Christ. Consequently, the four stanzas of “Joy to the World!” are all focused on Christ. However, Watts did not arrange his paraphrase according to the nine verses of Psalm 98.

Psalm 98 is easily divided into three sections of three verses each. Verses 1-3 is a call to Israel to sing joyful praises to the LORD. In verses 4-6, all the nations join in the joyful singing. And in verses 7-9, even nature joins in the praise of God.

Joy to Israel (verses 1-3)

Psalm 98 begins with a call for Israel to “*sing to the LORD a new song*” because “*he has done marvelous things!*” In the Old Testament, God’s “marvelous works” usually refer to his wonderful, merciful works in saving Israel from their slavery in Egypt for 400 years. So Psalm 98:1 continues, “*His right hand and his holy arm have worked salvation for him.*” These are the same words that Moses used in his song after Israel escaped from Egypt, in Exodus 15:6, “*Your right hand, O LORD, glorious in power, your right hand, O LORD, shatters the enemy.*” These are also similar to the words of Mary’s song after the angel announced to her that she will have a Son through the Holy Spirit, “[*God*] *has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts*” (Luke 1:51).

When God fought for Israel in their exodus out of Egypt and in the conquest of Canaan, all the surrounding nations saw God’s might. The woman Rahab told the spies that the people of Jericho heard how God defeated the Amorites, so they feared Israel. The Gibeonites also dreaded Israel’s

victories over the Canaanites, so they tricked Israel into a peace treaty. So the psalmist sings, *"The LORD has made known his salvation; he has revealed his righteousness in the sight of the nations."*

We too have new songs to sing when we remember how God saved us from our slavery to sin in the past. We were children of wrath, now we are children of mercy. We were in darkness, now we are in the Light of Christ. We used to sing songs of the world, now we have new songs to sing: psalms and hymns, and Christmas carols that come from God's Word. These are "new songs" not because they are new compositions. Rather, they are songs about the "new mercies" of God in saving us from sin through Christ, an event the Old Testament believers longed for. That's why Paul commands us, *"put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life . . . and . . . put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness"* (Eph 4:22-24).

What Christmas songs did you love singing before you came to Christ? I'm sure you liked "Oh what fun it is to ride in a one-horse open sleigh." And "Everybody knows a turkey and some mistletoe help to make the season bright." But now, you also have new songs in "O Come, O Come, Immanuel," "Unto Us a Child of Hope is Born," "Angels We Have Heard on High," and the other songs we are singing this morning. Therefore, we sing these beautiful Christmas hymns because we remember his *"steadfast love and faithfulness"* in the past because of Christ's work on the cross.

Joy to the Nations (verses 4-6)

But why do we sing "Joy to the World!" when most of the world are opposed to Christ and his church? Why would the nations whom Israel defeated sing praise to the Lord? Because in verses 4-6, the psalmist looks forward to the day when the whole world will praise God, *"Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises!"*

In the ancient world, when a king is victorious in battle, he comes home to shouts of victory and acclamation by his people. We see this in Psalm 66:1, where the psalmist calls, *"Shout for joy to God, all the earth."* Then in verse 3, he gives the reason for this joy, *"so great is your power that your enemies come cringing to you."* All the earth must shout for joy because Christ has defeated all of God's enemies. This final and complete victory of Christ has never happened in human history, so what is the psalmist singing about?

When the child Jesus was presented in the temple, there was a man named Simeon, who had been waiting for the *"Consolation of Israel."* When he saw the child, the Holy Spirit revealed to him that that child was the one he had been waiting for all his life. So he said, *"my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles."* He was prophesying that Jesus would save many from all nations. The gospel of Christ will keep expanding into all the world until all the elect are saved, and then he will return (Matt 24:14).

Therefore, when the psalmist calls for all the earth to sing for joy, he is singing about the Second Coming of Christ. In his First Advent 2,000 years ago, Jesus came as a humble baby in a manger and a Suffering Servant crucified on the cross. He now rules over his people, but not yet

over all the world. But when he returns from heaven, he will be a wrathful Conquering King of Kings who would trample upon all the rebellious kings of the earth who defy his rule (Rev 19:15).

And how will God's people praise the LORD? They will make music with their voices and instruments. When Israel worshiped in the temple, they used only four instruments – cymbals, harps, lyres, trumpets – not any instrument to the liking of people. This is in obedience to God's commandments in 2 Chronicles 29:25-26.

Joy to the Earth

But the psalmist doesn't call only Israel and the whole world to sing joyful songs to God. He even calls all nature to do the same.

In Stanza 1 of "Joy to the World!" Isaac Watts writes, "And heav'n and nature sing." And in stanza two, he elaborates that even "fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains" sing with joy at the coming of the LORD. This is a paraphrase of Psalm 98:7-8, *"Let the sea roar, and all that fills it; the world and those who dwell in it! Let the rivers clap their hands; let the hills sing for joy together."* The psalmist uses a literary device called personification to dramatize that the whole creation also praises God for his wonderful works of salvation. God's works are so marvelous that if the sea, the rivers and the hills can sing praises to God, they will.

The totality of the rejoicing of all life in earth and sea because of the complete restoration of creation is also anticipated by Paul. In Romans 8:19-23, he says that at present, the whole creation - man and beast and nature – is *"groaning"* under the weight of sin. But when Christ returns, *"creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption . . . and . . . we wait eagerly for . . . the redemption of our bodies."*

But our restoration to perfection is only one aspect of his Second Coming. The other aspect serves as a warning to unbelievers and rebels against God. The whole creation will rejoice at his coming because he will complete our salvation. But we will also rejoice because he *"comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with equity."* These two events will happen all at once. Our Apostles' Creed and Nicene Creed reflects verse 9 when we affirm, "from [heaven], he will judge the living and the dead." Believers will rejoice because God will exact vengeance on God's enemies.

And that is why using Verse 8 as a proof-text to encourage people to clap during worship services in praise of God is wrong. Who are clapping? The rivers, not people! And why are they clapping? Because the LORD is coming to judge the earth! The most common reason for clapping is to rejoice at the judgment or destruction of someone. For example, we read in Nahum 3:19, *"All who hear the news about you [Nineveh] clap their hands over you"* (see also Job 27:23; 34:37; Psa 47:1, 2; Lam 2:15; Ezk 6:11; 25:6). Isaiah 55:12-13 also says that mountains, hills and trees will clap. Why will they clap? Because God has redeemed his people and restored the whole creation. These are the most common occasions for clapping in the Bible.

Dear Friends: The prophecy of Psalm 98 that all the world and all creation will sing joyful praises to God started being fulfilled when Jesus was born 2,000 years ago in his First Advent. The gospel of Christ has reached all the nations of the world, and continues to save God's people.

One of the verses in "Joy to the World" says, "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." While this is not found in Psalm 98, Watts refers to the fall of Adam into sin in the Garden of Eden. God placed a curse of sin and death on all mankind and all nature that only the Seed of the woman, Adam's wife, could break (Gen 3:14-19). Jesus the child born in Bethlehem was that Seed who would banish the curse and bring blessings to all who would believe in him (Rom 16:20; Gal 4:4-6; Heb 2:14).

In the eight songs we sing today, we express our joy, praise and gratitude to God who has saved us from our slavery to sin, and who will complete our salvation in his Second Advent. All these songs are "new songs" for us who believe, because God has shown his "new mercies" in Christ our Savior. Therefore, we look forward to the "Joy to the World" in the heavenly assembly in Revelation 5:9, *"And they sang a new song, saying, 'Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.'"*