

Psalm 98:4-9 (TNIV)

⁴Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth,
burst into jubilant song with music;
⁵make music to the LORD with the harp,
with the harp and the sound of singing,
⁶with trumpets and the blast of the ram's horn—
shout for joy before the LORD, the King.

⁷Let the sea resound, and everything in it,
the world, and all who live in it.
⁸Let the rivers clap their hands,
let the mountains sing together for joy;
⁹let them sing before the LORD,
for he comes to judge the earth.
He will judge the world in righteousness
and the peoples with equity.

Romans 15:7-13 (TNIV)

⁷Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God. ⁸For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God's truth, so that the promises made to the patriarchs might be confirmed ⁹and, moreover, that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written:
"Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles;
I will sing the praises of your name."
¹⁰Again, it says,
"Rejoice, you Gentiles, with his people."
¹¹And again,
"Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles;
let all the peoples extol him."
¹²And again, Isaiah says,
"The Root of Jesse will spring up,
one who will arise to rule over the nations;
in him the Gentiles will hope."
¹³May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

The coming of Christ is for all creation and the whole world resounds with joy at the prospect of the babe's birth.

Seas resounding. Rivers clapping. Mountains singing. All creation sings praises to the creator (see also Psalm 65:13; Psalm 96:11-13; Psalm 148:7-10). When the Pharisees complain to Jesus about the crowds singing hosannas¹ and waving palms as they welcome him into Jerusalem, Jesus tells the Pharisees that even if the crowds are silenced, "the stones will cry out" (Luke 19:39-40). Paul wrote to the believers in Rome that "the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time."

These are just some of the many images in Scripture of a creation that has long awaited its salvation, the time when God would put things right. Advent prepares us for the time when "heaven and nature sing . . . when sins and sorrows grow no more nor thorns infest the ground." Christmas is an all-encompassing event that touches every corner of creation and every person in it.

To whom does Christmas belong?

For more than ten years after Jesus' death and resurrection, every believer was Jewish. Every disciple, every Jesus follower, every person who named Jesus as Lord. They were all Jews who embraced Jesus as God's Messiah and quickly came to worship him in the way that they had only worshiped the LORD God. Not surprisingly, many of these believers

¹"Hosanna" is a transliteration of two Hebrew words meaning, "Save, we pray."

understood what had happened to have been a “Jewish thing.” After all, God had made a covenant with the Jews. The concept of Messiah was completely Jewish. Jesus was Jewish. And for hundreds of years, one Gentile² conqueror after another had oppressed the Jews.

Yet, they were wrong. Though the Jews were the ones through whom God had chosen to work, God’s purpose from the beginning was to put right what was made wrong in the Garden of Eden. God’s goal had always been the redemption of all humanity and all the cosmos. Thus, Paul writes to the Christians in Rome that Jesus Christ had become a servant of God’s truth so that the promises made to the Jewish patriarchs would be kept *and* so that

The Story of “Joy to the World”

In his book, *101 More Hymn Stories*, Kenneth Osbeck tells us the story of this popular carol¹:

This advent hymn is another of Watts’ hymns from his well-known hymnal of psalms published in 1719. It was Isaac Watts’ intent in writing this collection to give the psalms a New Testament meaning and style. This he did by paraphrasing in Christian verse all of the 150 Psalms with the exception of twelve, which he felt were unfit for this purpose. “Joy to the World!” is a paraphrase of verses taken from the last half of Psalm 98.

Psalm 98 is a song of rejoicing at the marvelous ways in which God has protected and restored his chosen people. The psalm anticipates the time when Jehovah will be the God of the whole earth and Israel’s law will be accepted by all of the nations. Watts, however, has given this verse a fresh interpretation—a New Testament expression of praise for the salvation that began when God became incarnate as the Babe of Bethlehem and was destined to remove the curse of Adam’s fall. Isaac Watts first titled his text “The Messiah’s Coming and Kingdom.”

Even as a boy, Isaac Watts displayed literary genius and an aptitude for study. At the age of five, he was learning Latin; at nine, Greek; at eleven, French; and at thirteen, Hebrew. In addition to his hymn writing, Watts became known as an ardent student of theology and philosophy, and, during his lifetime, he wrote many notable volumes which had a powerful influence upon English thinking, during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. While Watts was still in his teens, he became very dissatisfied with the deplorable, psalm singing characteristic of this time in the churches.

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1. I’ve had to edit Osbeck’s background on this carol for space reasons.

the Gentiles would glorify God. To reiterate, Christ came as savior of the world, not just the Jews. As John writes, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

If we thought that Christmas was only for Christians, we’d be making the same mistake that some of Jesus’ first followers made. Christ does not belong to the Christians, but to the world. In his commentary on today’s passage from Romans, Paul Achtemeier³ writes:

“Paul’s discussion helps us understand the inclusive nature of God’s love. His purpose is inclusion, not exclusion. No area, no people, are in principle separated from his mercy. Whatever therefore that contributes to exclusion from the Christian community, whether social pressures or racial biases or whatever else, works at cross-purposes with the redemptive intention of God as shown in Christ. Christians are representatives of God’s plan of the redemptive unity of all peoples and are to act accordingly, both individually and as members of the community of the faithful.”

But going further, Christmas is a proclamation of the good news even to those who deny Christ or deny God. The angels’ proclamation to the shepherds of “good news of great joy,” which we’ll talk about more next week, is to be carried to all persons in all places. God’s charge to us to make disciples is no less a part of Christmas than it is any other time of year.

Joy to the world

Though Christmas is getting moved further and further from the public square, we are still to live out the joy of Advent and Christmas throughout this season.

Now . . . if you are as put off by the commercialism of Christmas as I am, it’ll take an effort to be visibly joyful as you trudge through the mall for that one last shopping run. Still, we are to be light to the world with a “Merry Christmas” not only on our lips but evident in our kindness, compassion, and patience. Let earth receive her King!

²Every person on the planet falls into one of two categories: Jew and Gentile. “Gentile” simply refers to anyone who is not “Jewish.” In his letters, Paul will sometimes refer to Gentiles as the “uncircumcised” and the Jews as the “circumcised.” Since the time of Abraham (See Genesis 15) the Jews had circumcised their male children as a sign of the covenant God had made with Abraham.

³From his commentary on Romans in the *Interpretation* series. A copy is in the St. Andrew library.

The Story of “Joy to the World” (cont. from the p. 2 textbox)

One Sunday after returning from a service and being deeply concerned and critical of congregational singing, young Isaac was challenged by his father with the words, “Well then, young man, why don’t you give us something better to sing?”

Watts, then eighteen years of age, accepted his father’s challenge. The next Sunday he produced his first hymn, to which the congregational response was enthusiastic. For the next two years, young Watts wrote a new hymn text for his people every Sunday. He published a collection of 210 of these hymns, in 1707, in a book entitled *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*. This 1707 collection and the later 1719 hymnal were the first real hymnals in the English language.

In all, Isaac Watts wrote approximately 600 hymns throughout his lifetime. He has rightly been called the “Father of English Hymnody.” Because of his bold departure from the traditional metrical Psalms and the use of ‘human composure hymns’—expressions based entirely on one’s own thoughts and words—Watts was generally considered to be a radical churchman in his day. But today, more than two and one-half centuries later, our hymnals still contain such Watts’ favorites as: “O God, Our Help in Ages Past”—a paraphrase of Psalm 90, “Jesus Shall Reign”—a setting of Psalm 72, as well as “human composure” hymns such as “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross,” “I Sing the Mighty Power of God,” and “Am I a Soldier of the Cross?”

It is interesting to make a brief comparison between Isaac Watts and George Frederick Handel, who is generally credited with being the source of this hymn’s music. Watts was a frail, five-foot tall, rather homely but gentle-mannered figure, while Handel was known as the robust, hot-tempered, cosmopolitan German master of the keyboard, opera and oratorio. Both men lived in London during this time and evidently knew each other.

Handel’s *Messiah* is undoubtedly the most frequently performed oratorio ever written, as well as the most highly esteemed. In 1836, Lowell Mason, an American choir director, composer, and public school educator, is thought to have rearranged a portion of Handel’s *Messiah*, likely from some of the phrases in the numbers “Comfort Ye” and “Lift Up Your Heads,” to fit the words of Watts’ “Joy to the World.” This adapted tune became known as the “Antioch” tune.

Lowell Mason is also the composer of the music for the hymns “A Charge to Keep I Have,” “My Faith Looks Up to Thee.” Other popular hymns for which Mason contributed the music include “Nearer, My God, to Thee” and “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross.”

Through the combined talents of a frail English literary genius of the eighteenth century, a German-born, musical giant from the same period, and a nineteenth-century, American, choir director and educator, another great hymn was born that has since found a permanent place in the pages of our American church hymnals for use during every Advent season.

READING WITH HEART & MIND, DEC 9 – DEC 15

These are lectionary readings for the second weekend of Advent. Here is the key question to ask yourself about each of these readings. Why do you think it was selected by church leaders as especially appropriate for Advent? Or to put it another way, when they had the entire Bible from which to select, why these passages?

Sunday, Isaiah 11:1-10 Jesse was David’s father. This is a portrait of the ideal Davidic king. What makes this sort of king ideal?

Monday, Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13 The arrival of God’s light, the light of Christ in a dark world. What do you think is encompassed by the pardoning of sins?

Tuesday, Matthew 3:1-12 What is John the Baptizer’s vocation? What is his message?

Wednesday, Mark 1:1-8 How does Mark’s portrait of John the Baptizer differ from Matthew’s?

Thursday, Luke 3:1-6 How about Luke’s portrait? You might read all three at the same time? What portrait of John emerges from considering all three depictions?

Friday, 2 Peter 3:8-15a What are we waiting for? The writer uses powerful imagery to describe the magnitude of the Day of the Lord? What does this have to do with Advent?

Saturday, Philippians 1:3-11 The “day of Christ” is the Day of the Lord. What is Paul’s hope for the Philippian believers? Advent and Christmas are not only about what God has done but also what God is doing and will do!

Sermon Notes

A Dickens of a Christmas

Are you hoping for a Christmas season with more joy and less stress?

If so (and who isn't!), we hope that you'll join us for a special Advent series in Scott Engle's Sunday morning class. We're looking at the world-transforming coming of Jesus Christ through the familiar Charles Dickens' story, *A Christmas Carol*. Without ever referring to Jesus by name, Dickens created a memorable story about the power of Christmas (hint, Christ!) to transform lives.

This series continues through December 23.

Scott's class meets every Sunday in Festival Hall at 11am.

Coming in January: *Exploring World Religions* at 11:00

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. You might begin by talking about Christmas in the public square. How can Christmas be a proclamation of "Joy to the World" when it is being pushed further and further away from public life? Of course, the secularized, commercial holiday of Santa and Rudolph remain, but what is the place of "Christ Mass" in an increasingly secular society? How can believers hang on to any notion that Christmas is not just for Christians? What sort of public voice should Christians have at Christmas? How can "earth receive her King" when so many fail to acknowledge who the king is? What are our responsibilities at this time of year to be good evangelists? The word "evangelist" is simply a transliteration of the Greek word, *evangelion*, which means "good news/gospel/glad tidings." It's the word used by the angels when they come to the shepherds announcing Jesus' birth.
2. Paul writes that all creation awaits its own redemption (Romans 8:20). Thus, we shouldn't be surprised that the mountains sing at the coming of Christ. But what do you think Paul really means by a creation in need of redemption? What are some signs of creation needing saving, not just humanity? What do you think a redeemed world would look like? What sort of place would it be to live? Do you think it would resemble the depiction of the Garden of Eden in the opening chapters of Genesis? How could we better incorporate this redemption of creation into our celebration of Christmas? We often note that God has charged us with building for the kingdom of God. Are we similarly charged with building for a redeemed planet? What is our part in God's work of redemption?