

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller, Pastor

December 21, 2014

Fourth Sunday of Advent

Psalm 98

And Wonders of His Love...

In these weeks before Christmas, we've been making our way through the beloved Christmas carol, *Joy to the World*:

*And heaven and nature sing
Repeat the sounding joy
Far as the curse is found - and today we come to
And wonders of his love.*

It is so interesting that one of the standard favorites of the Christmas carols, was NOT written as one and has NOTHING to do with the birth of Jesus. He is not mentioned; there are no shepherds, angels, wise men, Mary or Joseph - none of it!

Isaac Watt's is the writer of the words. (born in 1674 in England) He started writing hymns when he was just 15 years old. His father was a pastor and the story goes that one Sunday after worship, he complained that the hymns they sang were awful and boring. To which is father replied, "Well if you think you can do better, then write one!"

And he did!

*Behold the glories of the Lamb
Amidst His Father's throne;
Prepare new honors for His name,
And songs before unknown.*

And he kept writing hymns... more the 600 in fact. He is the most prolific hymn writer of all time. Including *Joy to the World*.

It was published in 1719 in a hymnal called *Psalms of David Imitated*. *Joy to the World* is "imitating" Psalm 98 in New Testament language/imagery, but not as a Christmas hymn.

In fact, the Puritans in the Church of England banned any celebration of Jesus' birth, since there was nothing in the Bible commanding it (early 1600's). Eventually the Puritans were kicked out of the Church of England and came to America, where they continued the ban on Christmas celebrations. In Massachusetts in 1659 it was a criminal offense, with a penalty of five shillings.

Christmas did not become a legal holiday until 1856, and as late as 1905 the state of Maine still had school classes on Dec. 25th!

Anyway – Isaac Watts was a product of this era, this thinking and practice around not celebrating Christmas. He wouldn't have written a Christmas hymn. Even when we pair *Joy to the World* with Psalm 98, there is still no obvious connection with the birth of Jesus and the celebration of Christmas.

Until we get to the fourth verse of the hymn: *He rules the world with truth and grace*. I wouldn't expect that you would make the connection – one of my pastor friends pointed it out to me a couple weeks ago...

You know the service of Lessons and Carols – we will do it on Christmas Eve.... Well the last reading is from the Gospel of John, and the last words of the lesson are...

the glory as of a Father's only son, full of grace and truth (John 1:14).

But back to today...So here we have in the middle of our Christmas celebration a hymn of praise based on a Psalm of praise, which when we look at it may have something to say to deepen our Christmas.

When the ancient Israelites thought of God, their first reflex was Praise. Our first reflex might be more utilitarian: We ask God for things, we measure God by whether He seems to be doing what we need or not, and on our timeline.

But Israel praised.

Praise is our amazement at God and His greatness, our recognition of both the power and tenderness of the creator. Praise enjoys and celebrates God's love, and it is our best attempt to feel, say, or sing something appropriate to God. Praise doesn't ask "What have you done for me lately?" but instead exclaims "How great Thou art!"

Psalms scholar Walter Brueggemann explains praise this way:

All of life is aimed toward God and finally exists for the sake of God. Praise articulates and embodies our capacity to yield, submit, and abandon ourselves in trust and gratitude to the One whose we are. (Brueggeman, *Israel's Praise: Doxology against Idolatry and Ideology*, 1988, p. 1)

Praise doesn't "work." It is not productive, and it isn't about us. Praise means being lost in adoration, being awestruck by beauty. Praise is downright wasteful in terms of possible ways to spend your time.

Praise is also our best counter to evil in the world. If we are "lost in wonder, love, and praise," there is less chance we will stumble into destructive habits or decisions, or find ourselves jaded and cynical. Praise can also combat despair and loneliness. Making "a joyful noise to the Lord" (Psalm 100:1), can quiet the soul.

Psalm 98 praises the Lord "for he has done marvelous things... He has made known his victory" (Psalm 98:1-2). Weaving the universe into existence, designing the delicate petals on a rose, crafting massive canyons, providing for our daily needs, promising eternal life – we could spend every minute of every day noticing some new aspect of the greatness of God.

Of course, the most marvelous "thing" God ever did was to visit us on earth. Jesus, by simply showing up on earth, by teaching, touching, suffering and rising, was and is marvelous. Jesus is the victory of God, and the only fitting response is one of praise.

Psalm 98 is part of a little cluster of Psalms (93 through 99) whose primary theme is: "The Lord reigns! The Lord is King!"

Other gods – like the Babylonians or the Egyptians' gods - could boast of military triumphs, vast hordes of gold, and shiny icons and objects. If success was the measure, the gods of the Assyrians or the Phoenicians were far more praise worthy than Yahweh.

What a powerful proclamation "Our Lord is King!" by which they were also saying, "And yours isn't!"

Then when Jesus arrived the world was treated to the ultimate display of what God was really like. He lay in a manger instead of a palace. He surrounded himself with poor, clueless fishermen instead of a slick bureaucracy. He recruited an army of grateful lepers instead of well-drilled regiments.

Then, at the end of his life, Jesus rode a wobbly donkey instead of a sprightly stallion. Jesus assumed a cross instead of a throne, a crown of thorns not gold and jewels.

Psalm 98, not once or twice but three times, proclaims the Lord's victory. And interestingly the Hebrew word translated "victory" is *yeshua*, which is the Hebrew version of the name Jesus.

Want to see power? Watch Jesus touch the untouchables. Watch Jesus wash the feet of those who would gladly have washed his. His love was so powerful that we watch Jesus surrender his very life. We watch Jesus forgive the very people who just spat on him and drove nails into his flesh. We watch Jesus breathe his last and then quite fantastically show up three days later.

"The Lord is King!" And our only reply is the way Isaac Watts rephrased this Psalm: "Joy to the world!"

You know, the world may laugh, or yawn. But we know and we praise the Lord who is our king. And we pray that we would grow in faith and understanding of what it means to be subject to the Lord we worship.

Making the God of truth and grace our Lord is to open ourselves to possibilities that will change us for the better, and sometimes in ways we could never imagine.

The story goes about Betty Hutton, a former movie star from the late 40's and 50's. Betty's life was challenging from her childhood on, and even though she enjoyed success as an actress she also struggled and suffered with alcoholism and depression. Eventually through the mentoring of a Catholic priest she had an encounter with God and consciously invited Christ into her life, converting to Catholicism. And in her new life with Christ, God in fact, turned her life around.

And she began a comeback. In 1980 she joined the cast of the Broadway musical *Annie*, playing the role of Mrs. Hannigan. When they print the play bill / programs they always have full biographies of the actors and production crew – some quite lengthy with all their roles and accomplishments to date.

However under the picture of Betty Hutton, there was no elaborate biography. Instead there were simply five words which Betty had written herself.

"I'm back. Thanks to God."

Betty knew the wonders of His love.

My prayer for us is that as we move through this week, you will encounter the wonder of God's love, in such a way, and that you too are moved to praise.

Joy to the world!
Amen.