

Luke 2:1-20 –Christmas Eve Program – Heaven and Nature Sing – December 24, 2022

+In Nomine Iesu+

During Advent, over the last four weeks, as we prepared for Christmas in the Church, I mixed little bits and pieces of lyrics from Christmas hymns, carols, and songs into the sermons. Perhaps you noticed. Typically, they call such things *Easter Eggs*. Although that seems like the wrong term on *Christmas Eve*. Not quite the right holy day. Even the title for tonight's service is part of a hymn. *Heaven and Nature Sing* comes from *Joy to the World*. We sing such amazing stuff around here at Christmas.

But it is also important to notice what we do not sing. Notice the absence of most of what gets played on the radio. No overly sentimental songs about reindeer or mistletoe or Christmas trees.

The highest grossing song for Christmas will once again be Mariah Carey's *All I Want for Christmas is You*. The song produced 6 million dollars in global revenue just this year. Her song was streamed more than 200 million times, again, just this year. But let's be honest, all this song has in common with Christmas is the timing. We can do better.

*Joy to the World* was written by Isaac Watts. His name is all over our hymnal. We will sing this hymn as our closing and recessional hymn today. And our Christmas Day Divine Service begins with this hymn. And here, Watts paraphrased Psalm 98 through the lens of its fulfillment in the coming of Christ to Bethlehem.

During Advent, we celebrate the fourfold coming of Christ: His incarnation, His dwelling in our hearts by His Spirit, His Sacramental presence, and His glorious return at the last day. The coming presence of Christ into our world is portrayed so clearly in Watts' hymn.

I would like to read this Psalm—Psalm 98 in its totality. It's not that long. If you have a Bible, grab it. Bringing a Bible to Church used to be a thing. I have tried to revive it. But there are Bibles at the end of the pews. Maybe you have one on your phone or tablet. Look at it with me. And listen for the themes of Christ's coming that we celebrate on Christmas Eve. And listen for our response and our reaction to this gracious and glorious news.

Psalm 98. "Oh sing to the LORD a new song, for he has done marvelous things! His right hand and his holy arm have worked salvation for him. The LORD has made known his salvation; he has revealed his righteousness in the sight of the nations. He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness to the house of Israel. All the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God. 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! With trumpets and the sound of the horn make a joyful noise before the King, the LORD! Let the sea roar, and all that fills it; the world and those who dwell in it! 8 Let the rivers clap their hands; let the hills sing for joy together before the LORD, for he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with equity."

The whole Old Testament builds to the moment that we celebrate tonight. But this Psalm especially has themes we see in Luke 2, the reading our young people are working through tonight. And we can learn from *Joy to the World* and Psalm 98 not to *merely*

sentimentalize Christmas. Even today, as we celebrate the incarnation, we don't just see Christ as a helpless baby. We must know why He is born. We must understand His mission.

The Christ Child will grow to be our Savior. He fulfills the psalmist's prayer for God to "deliver me in Your righteousness." He "makes the nations prove the glories of His righteousness and wonders of His love." "His right hand and His holy arm have gained Him the victory." God's salvation accomplishes all that His holy righteousness requires.

It is with these Old Testament prophecies in mind, that Luke writes what he writes about the Nativity. For Luke, Jesus is the One whom the voices of the prophets promised in their faithful word. Luke interweaves some of the most beautiful passages of Hebrew prophecy with his detailed narration into a masterful and moving chorus of praise.

*It is with these Old Testament prophecies in mind this in mind* that the angels do what they do at the birth of Christ. The first Christmas is met with worship—loud, passionate, biblical worship. And their worship sounds so much like this Psalm, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"

Christ's coming—when we truly understand what it means—always results in an outpouring of reverent and expressive worship and praise. And this praise deepens as it approaches the complete fulfillment of God's redemptive work.

*Joy to the World* and Psalm 98 instruct us in our response to the Nativity—to such a great salvation. For the believer, *Joy to the World* is a message of joy. Joy is a central motif of the entire Advent season, indeed of the entire Christian life.

Our joy is in the finished work of Christ, whom we will glorify and enjoy forever. Psalm 98 is replete with references to joy—"Shout joyfully to the Lord, all the earth; Break forth in song, rejoice... Shout joyfully to the Lord, the King . . . Let the hills be joyful together before the Lord."

This beloved carol echoes Psalm 98's command to joyfully proclaim God's great deeds to all the earth. Just as God has openly displayed His salvation, righteousness, reign, and judgment in the sight of all nations, so also God's chosen people, all nations, and all creation, must burst forth in praise to Him.

So, notice what we are doing here today. Notice what we are singing. And notice what we are not signing. Take in the words of our Christmas hymns. Let them shape what you are doing this Christmas. What you are pondering.

Those of us who have grown up in the church may have a tendency to speed through these hymns without any engagement with them. Sadly, familiarity can breed contempt. They can wash over us—but never quite change anything about us. Something must be done in our hearts to help us feel the awe, the fear, the astonishment, the wonder.

Remember the truths these hymns confess. The Son of God—begotten by the Father from all eternity—reflecting all the glory of God—being the very image of his person—through whom all things were created—who upholds the universe by the word of his power—has come to us. Once, in our world, a stable had something in it that was bigger than our whole world. This Child is God with us.

It's funny, we allow the music on the radio to move us. At this time of year, there are competing sentimentalities vying for our affections. The world's sentimentality centers

around presents, food, the right relationship, snow on the ground, or the music we only hear in the month of December.

There is, however, another kind of sentimentality—a sentimentality of the Christian faith and the Christmas gospel. Martin Luther understood the glory and sweetness of Christmas. In fact, he understood this sentiment as necessary, for it was revealed in the nativity stories contained in our Gospel reading in Luke.

There was a tenderness, a sweetness, between Mary and Joseph. There was a sweetness in the heart of Mary as she responded to the angel Gabriel with submission and obedience. There is a beauty in the lowly nature of Jesus' birth—the second person of the Trinity, the very Son of God, the eternal Word lay swaddled in a manger. This story is all about our God—as the God of grace—who comes into the darkness of our lives—the darkness of our world—bringing His light, and joy and peace.

Luther wanted Christians to see this sweet narrative of God's compassion for those lost in error's maze. The one who spoke the world into being became the baby in Bethlehem's manger. He condescended in unimaginable humility to become the son of Mary.

He did not come into the world with the grandeur given to worldly princes and princesses. The Alpha and the Omega—the beginning and the end—the One who is the same yesterday, today, and forever—was that tiny Infant held in His mother's arms. This was the Savior of the world.

To capture this sweetness, Martin Luther wrote a song for his own children at Christmas. He never sang *Joy to the World*. It wasn't around just yet. But he wrote, *From Heaven Above to Earth I Come*. We will sing this one tomorrow too.

The song concludes with these words: “Ah dearest Jesus, Holy Child, prepare a bed, soft, undefiled, a quiet chamber set apart, for You to dwell within my heart. My heart for very joy must leap; my lips no more can silence keep. I too, must sing with joyful tongue, that sweetest ancient cradle song: Glory to God in highest heaven, who unto us His Son has given.”

That is the sentiment we are looking for. All others are merely a cheap imitation. I don't want a lot for Christmas. There is just one thing I need. And it is the wonder of knowing that Jesus has come to us in His blessed Nativity—to save us from our sins.

And so, may you celebrate Christmas in all of its wonder—in all of its glory—in all of its grandeur—in all of its sweetness. May you be filled with the knowledge of the glory of God in Christ Jesus. And may you proclaim that Christ indeed has come.

Tell the whole story of Christmas this season. Not just here, but in your homes—in your private celebrations. Teach it to your neighbors. Teach it to your children and your grandchildren.

Sing Christmas carols tonight and tomorrow—glorious and robust hymns—with real content. And sing them with gusto and passion. Celebrate the true sentiment of Christmas. Merry Christmas. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

+*Soli Deo Gloria*+