

John 1:1-18

Psalm 96

May 29, 2016

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

THE GOD QUESTION

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

From 1986 - 1993, Tom Wright was a Lecturer in New Testament Studies at Oxford University. He also served as College Chaplain at Worcester College in Oxford. Each year Dr. Wright would meet individually with the incoming freshmen for a few minutes, to welcome them to school and to introduce himself. While most were happy to meet him, he said, many of the students were embarrassed and would say something like, "You won't be seeing much of me; you see, I don't believe in god."

Chaplain Wright says he developed a stock-response: "Oh, that's interesting; which god is it you don't believe in?" Inevitably the students would at first be surprised and stumped by his question. Then they would mumble some answers "about the god they said they didn't believe in: a being who lived up in the sky, looking down disapprovingly at the world, occasionally 'intervening' to do miracles, sending bad people to hell while allowing good people to share his heaven. Wright said he developed another stock-response to what he called this 'spy-in-the-sky' theology: 'Well, I'm not surprised you don't believe in that god. I don't believe in that god either.'"

In response to Wright's admission to not believing in *that* god, the students would be startled. Then some of them would smile a bit. Wright said it was rumored among the students that half of the Oxford chaplains were atheists. But Chaplain Wright would continue with his answer to the students, "I don't believe in that god either. No, I believe in the god I see revealed in Jesus of Nazareth."¹

In his version of Psalm 96 in *The Message*, Eugene Peterson writes, "Sing God a brand-new song! Earth and everyone in it, sing! Sing to God- *worship* God!"

Which God? That is the question! Is it "a being who lives up in the sky, looking down disapprovingly at the world, occasionally 'intervening' to do miracles, sending bad people to hell while allowing good people to share his heaven"? Why would we sing a brand-new song to *that* god? Why would we worship *that* God?

That god is not the god we praise and worship. The God we worship "made the heavens — Royal splendor radiates from him, A powerful beauty sets him apart. For God is great, and worth a thousand Hallelujahs! God Rules! He put the world on a firm foundation; He treats everyone fair and square. He comes to set everything right on earth, Set everything right, treat everyone fair."²

On my Presbyterian Planning Calendar, four scripture passages are listed on each of the Sundays of the months and on the special days of the church year: an Old Testament reading; a psalm; an epistle lesson from the New Testament; and a gospel reading. On Christmas Eve, we find Isaiah 9:2-7 about a light shining on the people who

walked in darkness; Titus 2:11-14 about the grace of God appearing and bringing salvation to all; Luke 2:1-20 about the shepherds hearing the good news of great joy for all the people, about a Savior being born. You also find Psalm 96, which doesn't mention anything about Jesus Christ or a baby in a manger or wise men from the East or anything else related to the birth of Christ. And yet, as one of today's margin notes says, "Christians have traditionally used Psalm 96 on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. The hymn looks back to the nativity and forward to the second coming; Christ has come, and will come again. Through Christ, the Lord is working out his rule of righteousness and faithfulness among the nations."³

How can Dr. Mays make the claim that the hymn in Psalm 96 looks back to the birth of Christ and looks forward to his second coming, when the psalm doesn't even mention Jesus Christ? Well, that's the beauty of this psalm and its call to sing a new song to the Lord! Why should we sing a new song to the Lord? Here are just a few reasons listed in the psalm itself: salvation, marvelous works, creation, kingship, judgment, righteousness, truth.

Depending on how you reckon the time, we're either five months late or seven months early singing "Joy to the World" as our second hymn this morning. While it may seem strange to sing this Christmas carol at the end of May on Memorial Day weekend, it would be even more strange to go through the Christmas season *without* singing "Joy to the World." Yet, did you know that Isaac Watts, the author of that favorite Christmas carol, didn't write the song as a Christmas carol?

Isaac Watts lived from 1674-1748 and was raised in a devout household. His father spent time in prison for his faith because he resisted the claims of the state church in England. Watts became known as "The Father of Hymns." According to one story, when Isaac Watts was a teenager, his father got so tired of him complaining about the music and singing at church, he told his son, "Then do something about it!" So Isaac Watts wrote his first of approximately 750 hymns and helped change church music.

Isaac Watts used the psalms as the basis for many of his hymns, but he wanted to write songs based on his "Christian experience." Who comes to mind when you hear these words? "He rules the world with truth and grace, and makes the nations prove the glories of his righteousness and wonders of his love, wonders of his lover." It becomes even more obvious when you hear these words: "Joy to the world, the Lord is come! Let earth receive her king; let every heart prepare him room, and heaven and nature sing, and heaven and nature sing."

We hear Jesus in those words, even though Watts used one of the psalms as inspiration. Actually, he used the closing verses of Psalm 98 for his song "Joy to the World," rather than Psalm 96. But listen how closely those verses in Psalm 98 match our psalm for this morning: "Let the sea roar, and all that fills it; the world and those who live in it. Let the floods 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." (Psalm 98:7-9)

Isaac Watts wrote “Joy to the World” in 1719 and published it in his collection of hymns with the very long title, *The Psalms of David: Imitated in the language of the New Testament, and applied to the Christian state and worship*. As the note at the bottom of Hymn #134 in our *Glory to God* hymnbook says, “While Isaac Watts did not write this text strictly for Christmas use, he did purposely cast his paraphrase of Psalm 98:4-9 in Christian terms, titling it ‘The Messiah’s coming and kingdom.’ So ‘the Lord’ here is Jesus Christ, rather than the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.”

“Joy to the World” is actually about the *second* coming of Jesus Christ. When we sang “Joy to the World” last December 13 on the third Sunday of Advent and again a few minutes ago, we didn’t sing about the shepherds and the manger and the wise men and the baby in a manger and the angels and Mary and Joseph and a star in the East. We sang about the Lord coming to establish his kingdom of truth and grace and about the glories of his righteousness.⁴

That’s why we can sing a brand-new song to the Lord! That’s why we can hear about Jesus in these ancient psalms, even when his name isn’t mentioned. We are called to sing a brand-new song and to worship God because of his salvation and his marvelous works among all the peoples. God’s salvation and marvelous works didn’t stop back in Old Testament times — not even at Christmas when the Word became flesh and lived among us. That’s why Dr. Mays can say in his commentary about Psalm 96, “The hymn looks back to the nativity and forward to the second coming; Christ has come, and will come again. The psalm puts the Christ event in the sequence of the Old Testament marvelous works by which the Lord manifested his rule. It interprets the Christ as the Lord’s demonstration that other gods are mere nothings. Through the Christ, the Lord is working out his rule of righteousness and faithfulness among the nations.”⁵

Which brings us back full circle to the question, “Which god?” Somebody asked the other day, “How could the people back then believe this about God with everything that was going on around them, all of the chaos and struggles?” That’s a great question! And it’s a question that is just as relevant for our lives today. How can we believe this about God — that God rules, that God does marvelous works, that God brings salvation, that God is just and righteous — with everything that is going on around us, with all of the chaos and struggles in this life and in our world?

So, which God/god do we worship here today? Is it a being who lived up in the sky, looking down disapprovingly at the world, occasionally “intervening” to do miracles, sending bad people to hell while allowing good people to share his heaven? Is it “The Big Guy” upstairs who is at our beck and call but only when we need him or think about calling on him? Is it a vengeful, angry God that we need to be scared of, cower in the face of, and worry about? Is it some vague philosophical idea of a “greater power” beyond us that in some form or fashion has something to do with our being here?

Or are we here to worship the God we have come to know in Jesus Christ? The God about whom it is written, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into

being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being was life, and the life was the light of all people. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth." (John 1:1-4, 14)

"Joy to the world, the Lord **is** come!" Shouldn't that be, "the Lord **has** come"? Well, the Lord **has** come, but the Lord continues to work in our lives and in our world. God **has** come to establish justice and righteousness and truth, but God continues to set the world right. Which God? **This** God! Sing a new song!

As one biblical commentator has put it, "Because God is in the world, working to set things right in 'all the earth,' *we* sing a new song. And the singing of a new song energizes us to join God at God's work in the world. Ultimately, then and now, the singing of a new song situates God's people in an expansive community of praise, and it involves God's people in God's ongoing work of setting the world right!"⁶

As *The Message* puts it, "Bravo, God, Bravo! Everyone join in the great shout: Encore! Get out the message — God Rules! He put the world on a firm foundation; He treats everyone fair and square. Let's hear it from Sky, With Earth joining in, And a huge round of applause from Sea. Let Wilderness turn cartwheels, Animals, come dance, Put every tree of the forest in the choir — An extravaganza before God as he comes, As he comes to set everything right on earth, Set everything right, treat every-one fair."

Let us pray: Everlasting God, the heavens were glad and the earth rejoiced when you sent your Son, the Word become flesh, to dwell with us. Help us to proclaim your glory until the whole earth sings a new song to you now and forever. Amen.

Response to the Sermon

Great are you, Lord: you are holy and just;
by your power we trust in your love.
Great are you, Lord: you are faithful and true;
by your mercy you prove you are love.
Great are you, Lord, and worthy of glory!
Great are you, Lord, and worthy of praise.
Great are you, Lord. We lift up our voice;
we lift up our voice: great are you, Lord!
Great are you, Lord!

Hymn #614, "Great Are You, Lord," in *Glory to God*

NOTES

¹N.T. Wright, “Jesus and the Identity of God,” at www.ntwrightpage.com.

²Eugene Peterson, *The Message*, Psalm 96.

³James L. Mays, *Psalms* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1994), pp. 309-310.

⁴Information about Isaac Watts and “Joy to the World” was found at “Story Behind the Song — Joy to the World,” at www.agodlyheritage.org.

⁵Mays, p. 310.

⁶J. Clinton McCann, “Commentary on Psalm 96:1-9” at www.workingpreacher.org.