

Revelation 4:1-11

Psalm 98

May 10, 2015

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

JOY TO THE WORLD, THE SAVIOR REIGNS

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.

“O sing to the Lord a new song . . .”

And that’s exactly what we did to begin our worship this morning.

Hymn #413 is a “new” hymn for us here at the Wallace Presbyterian Church. The verses echo our two Scripture lessons for the day from Psalm 98 and Revelation 4:

Come into God’s presence singing “Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia.”

*Come into God’s presence singing “Jesus is Lord,
Jesus is Lord, Jesus is Lord.”*

*Praise the Lord together singing “Worthy the Lamb,
worthy the Lamb, worthy the Lamb.”*

*Praise the Lord together singing “Glory to God,
glory to God, glory to God.”*

Our second hymn is a little more familiar. Written in 1972, though, it’s still relatively “new” compared to the long history of psalms and hymns and spiritual songs. The note at the bottom of Hymn #641 in our new hymnal says, “Written to supply this tune with words suitable for occasions celebrating music, this text explores how human song gives voice to creation, how music can convey new insight, how sung faith has kept the church authentic, how Jesus relied on the psalms, and how sound can be praise.”

Listen to the strains of Psalm 98 and Revelation 4 in some of the lines of this majestic hymn:

*it is as though the whole creation cried: Alleluia!
as worship moved us to a more profound Alleluia!
Let every instrument be tuned for praise!
Let all rejoice who have a voice to raise!
And may God give us faith to sing always: Alleluia!*

Then there is our final hymn of the day, the very familiar #134, “Joy to the World.” Is it even possible to hear and sing this song without thinking about Christmas? Does it surprise you to learn that Isaac Watts didn’t write this beloved hymn as a “Christmas” hymn? As one blogger wrote, “If you notice the lyrics of the song, *Joy to the World*, you will see nothing about shepherds, a manger, wise men, angels, or any

other character or element that we normally associate with the Christmas story. The reason being that Isaac Watts did not write *Joy to the World* to be a Christmas song. The original theme of this song was the second coming of the Lord. . . think about the words. Yes, they apply to the Christmas story in that the Lord is come! We should rejoice! But, let the lyrics point you to the reason Jesus came: to save the world.”¹

Isaac Watts “re-wrote” the second half of Psalm 98 from a Christian perspective. Listen again to what the psalmist says:

*Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth;
break forth into joyous song and sing praises.
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.*

Now hear Isaac Watts’ “re-write” about the coming of Jesus Christ:

*Joy to the world, the Lord is come!
Let earth receive her king;
and heaven and nature sing.*

*Joy to the world, the Savior reigns!
while fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains
repeat the sounding joy.*

*He rules the world with truth and grace,
and makes the nations prove
the glories of his righteousness and wonders of his love.*

“Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth . . .”

For ten years, I stood next to Carlton in the choir at the Stanley White Presbyterian Church in Roanoke Rapids. By his own honest and frequent admission, Carlton couldn’t, as they say, “carry a tune in a bucket!” However, Carlton was quick to add, “The Bible doesn’t say anything about singing in the right key. The Bible says, ‘Make a joyful noise to the Lord.’ And that’s what I do — I make a joyful NOISE!”

At Tuesday night’s gathering of Presbyterian men at the Mt. Zion Presbyterian Church in Rose Hill, I led a Bible study of the whole Bible (in twenty minutes!) that used hymns and scripture passages.

I introduced the Bible study with these words from our church’s “Directory of Worship” about **why** we sing as a congregation when we worship God: “*Song is a response which engages the whole self in prayer. Song unites the faithful in common prayer wherever they gather for worship whether in church, home, or other special*

place. *The covenant people have always used the gift of song to offer prayer. Psalms were created to be sung by the faithful as their response to God. Though they may be read responsively or in unison, their full power comes to expression when they are sung. In addition to psalms the Church in the New Testament sang hymns and spiritual songs. Through the ages and from varied cultures, the church has developed additional musical forms for congregational prayer. Congregations are encouraged to use these diverse musical forms for prayer as well as those which arise out of the musical life of their own culture.*"²

We sang hymns about God the Creator, God's guidance and providence, the Trinity, the Incarnation (we sang "Joy to the World"), the crucifixion, the resurrection, and God's amazing grace in Jesus Christ. After we sang each hymn, different people read scripture passages. We ended by singing "Jesus Loves Me!" and hearing John 3:16-17: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

"in order that the world might be saved through him . . ."

"He is coming to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with equity."

Did you hear that? "He is coming to judge the earth." **That's** why the psalmist invites all of us to "sing to the Lord a new song" and to "make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth." How often do you hear "judgment" and "joy" in the same sentence? The two just don't seem to go together. But that's exactly what the psalmist is saying: "Joy to the world! The Savior reigns!"

"His right hand and his holy arm have gotten him salvation."

"The Lord has made known his salvation."

"All the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God."

"Salvation" is another way to talk about God's "victory." Isaac Watts put it this way: *"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, far as the curse is found, far as the curse is found."*

Today's message is both simple and profound: *"Joy to the world, the Savior reigns . . . O sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous things . . . Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises . . . for he is coming to judge the earth."*

God has certainly blessed us with music here at the Wallace Presbyterian Church. Under Karla's direction and with Vera's talented playing on the organ and piano, our choir leads all of us week in and week out in singing "new songs" and in making "a joyful noise." I loved it when, in a new member class, Karla shared with folks what you have to do to become a member of the WPC choir. She said, "Park in the church parking lot. Come in the door and turn left into the first doorway into the Music Room. Now you're a member of the choir!"

When our kids were growing up, we listened to and sang along with a guy named Red Grammer. One of our favorite Red Grammer songs was “All God’s Critters Got a Place in the Choir.” Bill Staines, an American folk musician and singer-songwriter from New England, wrote the song. I think the words are a great “re-write” of Psalm 98:

*All God’s critters got a place in the choir
Some sing low, some sing higher
Some sing out loud on the telephone wire
And some just clap their hands, or paws, or anything they got.
Listen to the bass, it’s the one on the bottom
Where the bullfrog croaks and the hippopotamus
Moans and groans with a big to-do
The old cow just goes MOOOOO
The dog and the cat pick up the middle
While the honey bee hums and the cricket fiddles
The donkey brays and the pony neighs
And the old coyote howls
All God’s critters got a place in the choir
Some sing low, some sing higher
Some sing out loud on the telephone wire
And some just clap their hands, or paws, or anything they got.
Listen to the top where the little birds sing
On the melody with the high note ringing
The hoot owl hollers over everything
And the jaybird disagrees
Singin’ in the night-time, singin’ in the day
Little duck quacks, and he’s on his way
The possum ain’t got much to say
And the porcupine talks to himself
It’s a simple song of livin’ sung everywhere
By the ox and the fox and the grizzly bear
Grumpy alligator and the hawks above
Sly raccoon and the turtle dove
All God’s critters got a place in the choir
Some sing low, some sing higher
Some sing out loud on the telephone wire
And some just clap their hands, or paws, or anything they got.³*

You’re one of God’s critters!
You’ve got a place in the choir!

You're called to sing a new song, to make a joyful noise with all the earth . . . with the lyre and the sound of melody . . . with trumpets and the sound of the horn . . . with the sea and all that fills it . . . with the world and those who live in it . . . with the floods that clap their hands . . . with the hills that sing together for joy. Another "new" song in our "new" hymnal was actually written in 1869, and says, "*My life flows on in endless song, above earth's lamentation. I hear the clear, though far-off hymn that hails a new creation. No storm can shake my inmost calm while to that Rock I'm clinging. Since Christ is Lord of heaven and earth, how can I keep from singing? Through all the tumult and the strife, I hear that music ringing. It finds an echo in my soul. How can I keep from singing? No storm can shake my inmost calm while to that Rock I'm clinging. Since Christ is Lord of heaven and earth, how can I keep from singing?*"⁴

Friends, the Lord has done marvelous things for us. How can we keep from singing? Joy to the world, the Savior reigns!

Here is prayer inspired by Psalm 98 and written by Thom Shuman, who writes excellent worship resources on his blog called "Lectionary Liturgies." Let us pray:

*You raise your hand
and gently begin
the concerto of creation:
birds carry the melody
while stars keep the beat;
mountains dance in merriment
and little children clap
their hands with joy.
Love's Composer,
our new songs are lifted to you.*

*The old, old song
is made new in our hearts:
Christ is Risen!
Sing Alleluia!
You invite us to sing to a world
deafened by despair
and haunted by the tunes of fear.
Lord of the Dance,
our new songs are lifted to you.*

*Believing we cannot
carry a tune,
we hesitate to join in
the chorus of praise
sung by all creation.*

*So, you softly and gently
hum the melody in our hearts
until they burst with you,
raising a rousing chorus
of Amazing Grace.
Music-making Spirit,
our new songs are lifted to you.*

*Every song, old and new, is offered to you,
God in Community, Holy in One. Amen.⁵*

NOTES

¹Monica Hunter, “Story Behind the Song — Joy to the World,” at “A Godly Heritage” at <http://agodlyheritage.org/story-behind-the-song-joy-to-the-world>.

²Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), *Book of Order: The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*, W-2.1003, “Music as Prayer: Congregational Son,” p. 87.

³Lyrics found at <http://bussongs.com/songs/gods-creatures-place-choir.php>

⁴Glory to God: The Presbyterian Hymnal, #821 My Life Flows On (How Can I Keep from Singing?).

⁵Thom Shuman, “Prayer of the Day (inspired by Psalm 98),” at <http://lectionaryliturgies.blogspot.ca>