

“The Accidental Carol”

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Text: “Joy to the World” by Isaac Watts, Psalm 89: 4 - 9

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A young boy once complained to his father that most of the hymns they sang in church were boring to him - too far behind the times – with tiresome tunes and meaningless words. His father put an end to his son’s complaints by saying, "If you think you can write better hymns, then why don’t you?" And so he did. That teenager was Isaac Watts.

Isaac Watts was born in England in 1674. At a young age he already had a propensity for rhyming that so irritated his father. The story is told that one day, Isaac’s father wanted to know why the young Isaac had opened his eyes during the family prayer time. Isaac is said to have responded, “A little mouse for want of stairs, ran up a rope to say its prayers.” Well, the father lost his patience and spanked his son. During the punishment Isaac cried out, “O father, father, pity take, and I will no more verses make!” With that the spanking continued...but so did Isaac’s passion for verse. In his lifetime he wrote about 750 hymns (such as “When I Survey The Wondrous Cross”). He is celebrated for being the father of modern hymnody.

In the early 1700’s Watts set himself to the task of writing a collection of poems based on the psalms. In this project he took great license in his interpretations of the psalms, intentionally rewording them so they became more explicit as references to Jesus Christ. His collection of these poems were published in 1719. One inclusion was Watts’ formulation of Psalm 98, verses 4 – 9. Let us hear these verses:

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 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.

The title Isaac gave to his poetic take on this psalm was “Joy to the World.” You may be surprised, because that beloved song does not really sound much like this psalm! But when you read the psalm closely with the song in mind, you see the parallels. It declares the coming of the Lord...that the world should make a joyful noise in response...that nature sings in the sea’s roar, the floods clapping, the hills singing together in joy! That the Lord comes with the glories of his righteousness! Yes, indeed, the song we know expresses echoes of this psalm. But here’s the thing: we think of “Joy to the World” as a favourite Christmas carol, but Isaac Watts was not writing about Christmas. It is based on an Old Testament psalm. We sing it with gusto, but “Joy to the World” was never intended to be a song. It was a poem. It would seem that everybody knows it, but in actuality Watts’ poem gathered dust for more than 100 years. We can’t think of Christmas without this song being sung, but the creation of this song we love was, remarkably, just a chance thing. “Joy to the World: is the accidental Christmas carol.

Indeed the poem gathered dust for decades until Lowell Mason read it. Mason lived in Boston in the 1800’s. He was a music educator, composer and a well-know publisher of church music. He published in 1836 a book entitled Occasional Psalms and Hymn Tunes. It was a collection of hymn tunes he arranged based on fragments taken from Handel’s Messiah. Some time later Mason read Watts’ poem “Joy to the World” and he was struck by the power of the poem. It occurred to him that his own hymn tune “Antioch” (based on one of those little bits stolen from Handel’s Messiah) might be used to set the poem to music. Mason edited the poem slightly to comply to his hymn tune, taking the last line of each verse and repeating it twice more. A poem (written by one of the greatest hymn writers of all time) and a piece of music (taken from one of the greatest oratorios of all time) were married together. And the rest, as they say, is history. “Joy to the world, the Lord is come; let earth receive its king!” With words like this of course it would become associated with Christmas. But that would not have surprised Isaac Watts, for when he himself wrote about his poem he said “it captures the essence of the entire message of the Bible.”

In this poem, one word stands out: “is”. It’s not “the Lord has come” (that implies something that happened in the past). Rather, the poem says “the Lord is come”, indicating in archaic grammar that the Lord has arrived and is now present among us. Is present among us here, now. That should change our sense of the hymn, shouldn’t it, away from simply noting an historic event. The carol is acknowledging that “the Lord is come” is our present reality.

How should we react...respond to this news that the Son of God, the Lord, the ruler of the earth is here, now, present to us? Well, Isaac Watts provides the answer. To the news that the Saviour reigns, he directs us to “let our songs employ.” This coming is a joy to the world that needs to be sung about! To the news of this coming—that the Lord is present among us now—Watts encourages us “that every heart prepare him room.” This coming is meaningless unless we receive him. “Let earth receive its king”, he wrote. To the news that he comes to make his blessings flow, that he rules the world with truth and

grace, Watts encourages us “to prove the glories of his righteousness and the wonders of his love.” According to my Oxford Dictionary, “to prove” is to “demonstrate the existence of a presence or the truth concerning a declaration.” To demonstrate an existence or a truth. And we can, and we will, if ours is a joy that cannot be contained within us. The child that was born 2,000 years ago, “is come.” Let us unleash our joy in song, for Christ is among us now.



