

# *Joy to the World*

from the pulpit of  
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church  
Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania  
by  
the Reverend Agnes W. Norfleet

December 1, 2019  
First Sunday of Advent

## Psalm 98

<sup>1</sup>O sing to the LORD a new song, for he has done marvelous things. His right hand and his holy arm have gotten him victory. The LORD has made known his victory; he has revealed his vindication in the sight of the nations. <sup>3</sup>He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness to the house of Israel. All the ends of the earth have seen the victory of our God. <sup>4</sup>Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises. <sup>5</sup>Sing praises to the LORD with the lyre, with the lyre and the sound of melody. <sup>6</sup>With trumpets and the sound of the horn make a joyful noise before the King, the LORD. <sup>7</sup>Let the sea roar, and all that fills it; the world and those who live in it. <sup>8</sup>Let the

floods clap their hands; let the hills sing together for joy <sup>9</sup>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.

#### Matthew 24:36-44

<sup>36</sup>“But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. <sup>37</sup>For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. <sup>38</sup>For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, <sup>39</sup>and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. <sup>40</sup>Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. <sup>41</sup>Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. <sup>42</sup>Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. <sup>43</sup>But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. <sup>44</sup>Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

Worship on the First Sunday of Advent has a particular job to do, and it is not an easy job. Here on Thanksgiving weekend, when we realize that Christmas is just around the corner most of us cannot imagine how we will ever be ready, with the house trimmed in its seasonal finest, with gifts wrapped and under the tree, travel plans fully in order, or everything perfectly in place for when the guests arrive. On December first, not many of us have shown up for worship with our eye on the horizon, or a glance toward the sky, wondering if tomorrow might be the day of the Second Coming.

Well, in the First Century there was a vivid and lively expectation that the days were drawing near and the return of Christ would be soon. So when we hear the disciples earnestly asking Jesus, “*When will this be?*” and Jesus responds saying, “*No one knows, but keep awake and be alert!*” we are left wondering how the followers of Christ can possibly live on tiptoe for well over two thousand years. We have grown to live with the expectation for lesser things. The disciples’ preoccupation with when Christ would return in glory may not be our question, but how we wait and how we prepare for the coming of God is nonetheless a key to living faithfully.

Advent looks back and remembers angels telling Mary and Joseph, “Do not be afraid,” in order to look forward and encourage us to lean into God’s future unafraid – *at the presence of the Lord, for God is coming, according to the Psalmist, to judge the earth, the world with righteousness and the peoples with equity.* If we just spend the month of December looking back – all nostalgic about the baby in the manger, we will miss the true meaning of Christmas which is cosmic in scope and indescribable in joy. So, before our imaginations carry us back to that starry night sky over Bethlehem, to angel choruses on the wind, shepherds scurrying across fields of promise, exotic Magi beginning their journey laden with gifts fit for a king, to the little baby in the manger... Today we are invited to imagine the larger cosmic good news of the God who comes to us.

The Morehead Planetarium at the University of North Carolina was the first planetarium built on a college campus. Designed by the same architects who planned the Jefferson Memorial in Washington, with a projector from Sweden to project images of our galaxy and the stars beyond, it was quite an event when it opened in 1949. A visiting physicist from Denmark described it saying, “Never has a means of entertainment been provided which is so instructive as this, never one which is so fascinating... It is a schoolroom under the vault of heaven, a drama with the celestial bodies as actors.”

On a visit to Chapel Hill this past August, our family took in a show at the Morehead Planetarium. It was fascinating – largely because it included a tribute honoring the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Apollo Moon landing. Between 1959 and 1975 all of the astronauts trained at the planetarium there. They needed to be able to read the stars and use celestial navigation to ensure that they would be able to pilot their spacecraft if their computerized navigation systems failed – which actually happened a couple of times. So in that planetarium they learned to read the map of the stars as they would see them looking through the window of their lunar spacecraft. As I remember it, we were told that when they fired up their booster rockets on the moon, if the astronauts were off by as little as an inch navigating by the stars, they would have missed the earth upon their return by thirteen miles.

Our biblical texts for this first Sunday of Advent are intended to help us read the signs of God’s coming so that we will not miss the true hope of Christmas by as many miles. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus has been talking with his disciples about the future coming of God, and Jesus refuses to answer their question about the timing of his return. Instead what he tells them is actually just as instructive for us. Do not be so preoccupied with the things of this world, Jesus warns, as those in Noah’s time who were unprepared for the flood, but get your spiritual house in order. In Matthew’s gospel we know what that means is very specific. It’s an ethic of communal responsibility, of serving others. In the very next chapter Jesus will spell it out for us: feeding the hungry,

clothing the naked, taking the side of the marginalized, visiting those in prison, welcoming the stranger in the land, the refugee, serving the poor.

Lutheran pastor, Peter Marty, says that when Jesus tells us to “Keep awake,” he means: “If the Lord were to ring your doorbell today, what would the inside of your spiritual house convey? Would there be order or chaos? Would life inside seem cozy and peaceful or haphazard and disheveled? What exactly would your life look like? Would there be a ‘you’ worth getting to know, independent of everything to which you cling? Would you be found living with and living for God?”<sup>1</sup>

The church’s observance of Advent is not meant to frighten us, but to offer a clarifying lens through which to see ourselves in relationship to the world; to see ourselves within the created order, and to be grateful stewards of God’s goodness and God’s love for the world. The gift of Advent is this counter-narrative to a consumerist culture, and divisive politics, and the ever-present clickbait headlines. Jesus gives us a wake-up call, to help us envision what truly matters. At any moment, we may find ourselves face to face with Jesus Christ, so what can we do to cultivate a sense of divine presence and purpose so we will be ready to respond in faith? As we make our way toward Christmas, the primary reason to remember what God has done in the past, is to help us be alert to God’s creative power around us, to respond in faith and service, and to live into the future with hope and joy.

*Joy to the World* has become one of our most treasured Christmas Carols, but the text actually shares more of the nature of an Advent hymn. The biblical basis is Psalm 98, which announces the future reign of God. How does the Psalmist know that God comes to rule as King of all creation and Savior of the world? Because God has done mighty deeds in the past: God rescued the enslaved people of ancient Israel and granted them freedom. Therefore the whole creation responds in joy:

---

1) <sup>1</sup> Peter Marty, “Holiness,” *Journal for Preachers*, Advent 2019, p. 7.

*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.*

You see, the coming of God is not to be feared; God's mighty power is to be welcomed with joy. For it is joy which fuels us to care for the earth and to participate in God's good work for human freedom, righteousness and equity for all people.

Isaac Watts is considered the Father of English hymnody. By the age of twelve he had learned Greek, Latin and Hebrew; and he added French so that he could converse with his refugee neighbors in London. His father was a pastor, imprisoned twice for his non-conformist views – standing up against some traditional teachings of the Church of England. Likewise the son, became something of a rebel and we are beneficiaries of his revolutionary thinking. In the late 1600's, the Calvinist churches sang only the metrical settings of the Psalms. The Psalter was the Bible's hymnbook, so they thought the church needed no other.

Young Isaac Watts found church singing way too boring, once noting: "To see the dull indifference, the negligent and thoughtless air that sits upon the faces of the whole assembly, while the psalm is on their lips, might even tempt a charitable observer to suspect the fervency of their inward religion." He so often complained to his father about the dull and indifferent psalm singing in worship, that – weary of his complaints – his father challenged his son to see if he could write something better. Watts became the author of more than six hundred hymns including some of the ones we most love to sing – *When I Survey the Wondrous Cross, I Sing the Mighty Power of God, Our God Our Help in Ages Past*, and of course, *Joy to the World*, written exactly 300 years ago in 1719.

While we remember Isaac Watts for his hymns, in his day he was more renowned as an academic. He was a pastor, theologian, ethicist, philosopher and the author of a textbook on Logic that was used for generations as the standard at Oxford and Cambridge, as well as at Harvard and Yale.<sup>2</sup> For the hymn *Joy to the World*, Watts used his methods of logic, making inferences from the Hebrew text that he concluded were the truth about God's creative and redeeming power fulfilled in the birth of Jesus.

The hymn proclaims Advent's cosmic hope in the God who comes to us. Because of who God has been in the past we face the future with hope. That hope strengthens us to follow with joy in the footsteps of Jesus Christ through whom sorrow and sin and the curse of death will be redeemed. Truth and grace will reign. Blessing and righteousness and love will flow.

The Coming of God is not a thing to be feared. Keep awake... *and let every heart prepare him room, and heaven and nature sing.*

AMEN.

---

<sup>2</sup> Isaac Watts history from a number of resources including internet; Robert McCutchan, *Our Hymnody*; Louis Benson, *The English Hymn, Its Development and Use*.