

Isaiah 35:1-10
John 3:22-30
Text: Isaiah 31:10

St. John's Presbyterian Church
Devon, Pennsylvania
Victor M. Wilson, D.Min., Pastor

First Sunday after Christmas
December 31, 2006

JOY TO THE WORLD

If this season asks anything of us it asks us to capture and broadcast, that is to “sow” spirit of Christ, the spirit of joy.

I had a couple of delightful discussions recently with two people to whom I had helped introduce the splendid sea novels of Patrick O’Brian. Those conversations put me in mind of a phrase often used by the ebullient hero of those novels, Captain Jack Aubrey, a sea captain in Nelson’s navy during the early 1800s. The phrase is as delightful as it is odd to our ears. When someone shares good news or good fortune, perhaps a victory at sea, or a promotion, or the birth of a child, he would exclaim “*I give you joy with all my heart*”—I give you my own heartfelt gladness. In a delightful way it says of the giver, *I give you my own heartfelt gladness. I give you my joy.*

Isaac Watts was acting out of a deep personal faith to the stifling stodginess of his times when he gave us such marvelous hymns as “Joy to the World.” Watts virtually single-handedly transformed English hymnody from its pitiful state in the 1700s. Set to Handel’s soaring melody, Watts’ hymn gloriously captures the spirit of a season and the gift of God’s Son to creation.

Joy to the world, the Lord is come,
Let earth receive her King;
Let every heart prepare him room,
And heaven and nature sing.

Joy to the world! Because for all its hurriedness and its sometimes crassness, for all its pockets of despair so many about are celebrating this lovely season. Out of the long dark night of the soul through centuries of uncertainty, the world finally could come face to face with the God of creation. A people who had only heard about God’s mysterious, even terrifying veiled presence, now could say with Job,

Behold, I had heard of thee with the hearing of the ear,
but now my eye sees thee (Job 42:5).

Of course, God was and still is partly veiled. All through the gospels even the disciples who are closest to him still struggle to comprehend who Jesus really is. God appeared to them in the person of Jesus as manifest power and wisdom and courage, dressed all the while as a Palestinian peasant.

It is still true today. Physically, Jesus would be indistinguishable from a thirty year old plumber stopped along side you on the Schuylkill, or the person pushing a grocery cart toward you down the dairy aisle at the Acme. One so completely human in the physical aspect as to be a mere man of the crowd, yet so possessed of the Spirit of God as to rise above all humanity, offering to take us with him.

Isaac Watts great hymn captures the spirit of our text in Isaiah 35 in which all of nature rises on tiptoe to shout with joy. The wilderness blossoms with a canopy of new life. The fearful find new courage, the frail and feeble new strength, those deprived of sense and limb find newness of life. Whatever our need or hope, a new day dawns. This is not Pollyanna hopefulness, all froth and popcorn, but a real presence with the permanent offer of abiding companionship, real partnership. the sort of partnership that's often lost on those who come to the touchstone of our high holy days expecting something to happen, but then step apart for a long season. Something does happen on Christmas Eve, briefly—in a hymn, or the light of a candle on an upturned face, or a story that touches the soul. There's often the hint of an answer on Christmas Eve of "God's in his heaven and all's right with the world" (Browning). But the real answer comes in *the journey afterward*. Christmas begins a life journey, no matter how old we are.

"Joy to the World" is Watts' understanding of a gift given away. It's his "I give you joy" to the believing world. A gift given away is hardly a private thing sequestered—though it certainly needs cultivating as an inward intimacy. But a privatized god is like a log removed from the fire; it quickly loses its heat and dies. Instead, it is God given away: godly practices shared, compassion spilled, reconciliation sought, relationship healed, wisdom scattered like seed on a spring breeze. Joy givers are like Isaiah's desert floor after the deluge, they are transformed.

Have you ever noticed that nature has no other goal than to simply be its best self. It does its utmost to sing its best song. It always aspires to its full potential, its single-minded focus on the best that it can be, to celebrates its creator. "Joy to the World." So fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains, repeat the sounding joy in a profusion of color, harvest and fruitfulness. There's a heartwarming resiliency in nature, a natural courage that just picks up after the drought and the storm and simply moves on—like spring in Aceh, Indonesia, after the Tsunami. Or the extraordinary resurrection plant that lies shriveled like a dead thing for decades in the blazing sun and cold of night in the desert of trans-Jordan. But when a rare rain shower hits the area, the plant springs to life and flowers in a matter of hours, and blooms like a radiant perennial. It's apparently possessed of an extraordinary type of sugar that literally resurrects it. What a way to live—such that no matter what life throws at us, we always endure and blossom again. That's a good lesson.

I rejoice that in this joy-filled season, many a human heart is enlarged, both the giver's and the receiver's. Your annual "Joy Offering" will bring life and hope to older clergy from an earlier generation who are struggling on a meager pension, and to students who otherwise would have little hope of college. The angel tree was decked with 110 requests for gifts for inner city children with incarcerated parents or needy families. By the time I made it downstairs for coffee after worship it was stripped clean. And when those were gone we got another 60 requests from Sherwood Community Church, with whom we partner in the city, and they also got swept up like leaves in a windstorm of gratitude by this church family Within days Barbara McConnell and Lisa Christy and their crew of Deacons had the gifts on their way into the city for distribution. And three times on Christmas Eve we filled this sacred space with the sound of "Joy to the world!" from choir and vocalists, instrumentalists and congregation. All of this inspired by an extraordinary story trimmed with mystery and wonder, and just enough sense of history and place to ground it in our world. It's a story at the intersection of two realms where heaven stoops to earth with gifts of God, and earth reaches for heaven with a "Thank you!" for the promise that we are not alone. That this is not all there is, and our world still barely hints at what it can be.

All good stories, I sense, have to do with overcoming adversity, and when they include supernatural characters they appeal to our particular sense of helplessness—aiding us where we cannot help ourselves. We can juggle, even manipulate the small things, like fixing lagging sales at work, or co-managing a fifteen year olds' schedule. But the big things often elude us: our making sense of life; finding meaning in our existence; figuring out how to get along with one another; or figuring out how

God works. The story of the Christ child brings it all together for a season, even sub-consciously, with the reminder that: we are no longer alone; that God cares deeply for us; and that *not feeling* that does not put God at a distance but rather speaks of our hesitancy to draw close—as did a dozen of us in our Spiritual Companions group just a few days before Christmas. The story reminds us, too, that such love as God lets loose upon us can be the answer to the world's ills, and that worldly power and wealth and political influence are no match for the influence of God through the human heart. All of this in the extraordinary story of a newborn infant in whom lies a benevolent power and influence greater than that of all the Caesars.

And so, *I give you joy*, of the season, and of His birth.

Joy to the world, the Lord is come,
Let earth receive her King.
Let every heart prepare him room
And heaven and nature sing.

Amen.

Shall we sing it . . .