

December 29, 2019

Heaven and Nature Sing...Joy to the World

Youth Worship Sunday at Shepherd's Grace Church

Psalm 98

¹ O sing to the LORD a new song,
for he has done marvellous things.

His right hand and his holy arm
have gained him victory.

² The LORD has made known his victory;
he has revealed his vindication in the sight of the nations.

³ 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.

⁴ Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth;
break forth into joyous song and sing praises.

⁵ Sing praises to the LORD with the lyre,
with the lyre and the sound of melody.

⁶ With trumpets and the sound of the horn
make a joyful noise before the King, the LORD.

⁷ Let the sea roar, and all that fills it;
the world and those who live in it.

⁸ Let the floods clap their hands;
let the hills sing together for joy

⁹ 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)

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ²asking, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.' ³When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

⁶ "And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,

are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd my people Israel.” ’

7 Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, ‘Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.’ ⁹When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road. ¹³Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, ‘Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.’(Matthew 2: 1-13)

Good Morning! So...for the past five weeks, Pastor Jack has been talking about heaven and nature and singing and about Christmas as a way and not just a day. Now Christmas is come and gone and I’m starting to understand. I look around our sanctuary this morning and I still see all the light. All the decorations are up here and will be up for a little while longer. I am thinking that the church will look kind of bare when we finally take them down after the wise men get here next week.

What kind of stuff replaces Christmas? It seems like just the cold, gray cloudy days of winter where the sun shines too little and the nights are far too long! When you think about it, there really is nothing like Christmas. It’s not just the gift giving or the game playing with the new video games you get. It is not just the time off from school or the extra foods that lie around the house.

No...Christmas is different! It is in the attitudes of people everywhere they go. People walk faster and just seem more alive. They get caught up in what they are doing and they seem to have more of a purpose to their lives. There really is nothing like Christmas.

Maybe there is nothing like it because it is one time of year when giving gifts really feels good. It is the one time of year when you can watch as your dad or your mom opens that gift that you took so long to get ready. O.K., so it is only a gift card...but it is a gift card to their favorite restaurant and o.k., so your grandma did go out and get it for you. Still, it is the thought that counts, right? And still, it is exciting to watch as someone you care about opens it up and you can see the look on their face and enjoy the idea that they think you really had something to do with it. It does feel good. And, who knows, maybe someday, I really will get out and get that card all on my own! There is really nothing like Christmas!

But contrary to what Pastor Jack has been preaching, Christmas doesn't last. The glow of the lights gets packed away. The pace of the people gets slowed to the pre-Christmas crawl. The spirit of giving returns to a longing to receive. The way we were seeking turns to only a day and then we move on.

We have heard that 300 years ago, Isaac Watts wrote this song, *Joy to the World*. In the song, we hear the words...in fact we sang them just a few minutes ago. Let Heaven and nature sing, let Heaven and nature sing, Let Heaven and Heaven and nature sing. During this Christmas season we have heard that the whole universe waits for the coming of Messiah, the one who is to be King of the world. We have imagined that not only the heavens which affirm God's power continually; not only the earth which longs for truth and grace, but the entire universe, Heaven and nature sing a song of hope together.

We love this song and most of us...even us in youth group could probably get most of the words to the first verse at least. It is a Christmas favorite but the world seems to know a different *Joy to the World*. When the world takes down Christmas and puts away the lights that warm our lives, it seems to turn to this version.

<https://youtu.be/juT2DLXMBIs>

While singin' joy to the world and all the boys and girls is a nice thought, the group Three Dog Night sing in the very next verse, "If I were the King of the world, I tell you what I'd do. I'd throw away the cars and the bars and the wars and just spend time with you." The difference in meaning is striking. "Joy to the World" is no longer about heaven and nature working together. Instead, it is about a focus on the individual. Heaven and nature no longer sing in harmony, instead, they work against each other. The King of the world is no longer someone who will remove the curse of the world. Instead, the king is a worldly king interested in his own personal satisfaction.

"Joy to the World" represents a minute, an hour, a sense of personal satisfaction to be pursued in a day and not in a way. The joy Jeremiah seeks is a sense of personal satisfaction. It is a "Mighty fine wine." It is a sense of something to be enjoyed and consumed and taken advantage of until it is all used up.

When the world packs away the light and warmth of Christmas, the world looks once again at individual gain. People seem to look after their own interests and consider only what they as individuals can gain. The vision of heaven we have created here in this sanctuary fades and is soon forgotten. The needs of others are soon secondary to our own needs and "Joy to the World" serves a worldly king instead of the King we hoped to receive this year at Christmas.

Here's the thing. This putting away Christmas. This packing away the lights and forgetting all the promise...all this stuff is not new. It is exactly what happened to the world in the days of

King Herod. In those days, there were a few people who wanted to make Christmas a way and not just a day. They saw something special in the light of the world and they chose to follow it.

It was almost as if they saw what John...not the Baptist, but the guy who wrote the gospel; that John, said. "The light has come into the world and the darkness cannot overcome it." These guys...we think of them as the three wise men...these guys saw the light. They describe it as a star. It is for them a light that cannot be packed away. They see it and they are so filled with hope and warmth that they devote their lives to following the light.

For about three years, they follow the light until they finally get close to it. They come to Jerusalem which is just about 15 miles from Bethlehem. When they enter the city, they go to the palace. Herod is King of Judea at the time and they ask to see him. While they wait, I should probably tell you it has been about 400 years since any of the prophets have talked about God or spoken a word from God. The lights of God's promise have been packed away in Israel for a long time. The people are locked in to celebrating the Three Dog Night version of "Joy to the World."

When these guys who have been following the star come to Herod saying they have been following a star, Herod says, "What star?" Now, look! I am not a rocket scientist but these guys have been following a bright star for three years and it is right outside the window of the palace and right above Jerusalem and nobody has noticed! Only one of three things seem possible in this situation.

First, it has been cloudy for a long time! Now maybe there were strong storms in the deserts around Judea but for three years? Come on! Somehow it just doesn't seem possible that clouds could have covered such a bright light for that long a time period.

Second, new light was pretty common in Judea. Now, I mean maybe a new star appeared every few days or months and was so common that nobody noticed but that seems pretty unlikely too.

Third, they just weren't paying attention. You know how it is. People start to put up their Christmas decorations and the first one in the neighborhood gets a lot of notice. Probably mostly by dads who moan and groan that now they have to get their lights out because they can't be seen as being behind the "Joneses." Before you know it, everybody has their lights out and turned on and when one more comes on, it is no big deal. Maybe that is what happened in Jerusalem. It was just one more light in a universe full of lights.

For 400 years, no one noticed the light of God from the work God had done to create this great nation. Now, for the past three years, a new light had come to the nation and no one noticed. No one except these three guys from a far away place who probably didn't know the history of Israel and certainly didn't know the prophecy about where the new king would be born.

They asked Herod where the child was to be born and Herod, who might have learned about the prophesy of the birth of Messiah when he was a kid had long since forgotten if indeed he had ever known. I mean, it can happen. How many of you here could tell me how to calculate the area of a rectangle.(Long Pause) Right, area equals length times width. Most of us learned that in like 7th grade but we have just forgotten. We probably also forgot that we have to express the answer in square feet or inches...right. Anyway, Herod might have forgotten the prophesy or maybe he never knew it in the first place. It had been a long time.

These wise men came to him to ask. They probably assumed that since he was king, he had just had a kid and that kid was the new king. Logical assumption but not the way it worked out. Herod had not had children. In fact, he was going to get in trouble a little later in Matthew's gospel for some kind of improper relationship with his sister-in-law. Well, that is a different story. I just wanted to tease you with it so you would read more of the book. It is a pretty good read! But I digress!

Herod had not had any children. He had no new son who was king and when he heard the question asked by these guys...I said earlier that they were called the three wise men but Matthew never actually says there were three. There might have been only two or there might have been many. We like three cause it works out great with the gifts they bring. More about the gifts in a few minutes. Anyway, when he was asked the question, he got really scared!

We all know why he might be scared! He was king! A new king means the old one is either dead or driven out. Herod liked being king. The job had lots of perks. He didn't want to lose it. The lights of Christmas had been packed away for a long time for this guy and the idea of something better for his people was not something he could even consider. He was scared of what he might lose and he wasn't going to give up all his stuff easily...not even if it was best for the nation he was ruling.

So, two thousand years ago, the world wasn't much different from today. Herod wanted to protect his stuff and when it was threatened he was frightened. Jeremiah had great wine and wanted the girl. He wanted his stuff too. We can understand that because we all kind of like our stuff. Some of us got pretty nice Christmas gifts and we aren't bored with them just yet. We want to play with them or wear them or look at them for awhile longer.

We can understand why Herod was scared. Matthew tells us though that the whole city of Jerusalem was scared. Why would they be scared? It was Herod that was being threatened. Maybe they were scared because they knew if Herod was forced to leave, their lives would change too. Maybe some had cushy jobs where they didn't have to work very hard because Herod liked them. Maybe some just knew what their day would be like when Herod was in charge and they didn't like the idea of change. A new king meant a new way of doing things.

God had been a distant memory in the minds of the people for a long time. They were satisfied with the rules they were living under. So what if some people were hungry? So what if some people were homeless? So what if some people were bullied? So what if some people were beaten or battered? Things were predictable and while they were not perfect, they were still o.k..

Not much has changed in two thousand years, has it?

The people were scared. Herod was scared. The wise men were curious and they turned to the church. That seems like a pretty good idea to me. They turned to the church and the priests had answers. They remembered the words of God. They remembered the promises and they provided the information that was requested. Here's the deal though...they only provided the facts.

The king was to be born in Bethlehem they said. The king knew that Micah had made the prophecy and they gave the answer. That was all they gave. Just the answer. That was all Herod wanted and that was all they gave him. Perhaps if they had told him that this new king was to be called, "Mighty Counselor, Prince of Peace," the king would have paused. Perhaps if they had told him this king was to be called, Emanuel, the king would have listened as to the notion that God could live with us.

As it was, the church only gave the answer. They had been trained to only give the answer. Now...it is great to have answers like the area of a rectangle, but it is better to know the formula. It is better to be taught to think instead of just having someone give you the answers. If the people had been in Bible Study for the past several years, they might have known to look for the light. If they had been talking among themselves about the possibility of the coming of Messiah, they might have noticed the new light that had entered the world. If they had been imagining a world filled with light and warmth, the light that does not come from the sun but from the Son, they might have been interested in pursuing hope along with the wise men.

Instead, they just got answers to the limited questions they were asking. Right now, the youth group is studying the Bible together every other Wednesday. We are moving slowly through the book of Genesis. To imagine the story as it unfolds, we are working with a metaphor about creation being like a cell phone. Inside the phone is everything in our world but it is inaccessible as long as it is turned off. Once the phone is turned on, there is an explosion...a big bang. With the big bang, there is everything and it is open and available to us.

The Bible is a lot like that big bang. We can go inside and get the answer but we can also let it teach us how to think. We can know where Messiah is to be born but we cannot fully appreciate why Messiah is to be born without looking at the whole story. Herod did not care about the whole story and the church of the day did not teach it. The people of the day were

willing to just let things unfold and they were going to unfold without any understanding of all that was to happen.

Not much has changed in two thousand years. Leaders want to know only those things that will maintain their power. Churches only teach what is asked and not how to think. People do not want to know what is going on so they do not come to learn. Christmas is just a day...at least for many.

But not for all!

For wise men and women, the search continues. For the ones who came to Jerusalem, the search did not end with the information. The search did not end with Bethlehem. The search took the information and followed the light...a light that had come into the world and the darkness could not overcome it.

Herod encouraged the search. He invited the wise people to go out into the world and find what they were looking for, a new king...a new promise...a new relationship and then come back to him so that he also could go and worship. Herod did not want to do the work of searching. He was satisfied with what he had.

How many people in the world today are satisfied with what they have. "Joy to the world, all the boys and girls, joy to the fishes in the deep blue sea. Joy to you and me." The world invites us to be satisfied. The world invites us to wait for the answers, to not think for ourselves. To be o.k. with what we have. The world invites us not to take notice of the light, not to enjoy the warmth. The world invites us to pack up the lights and live with the answers we get. The world invites us to be like Herod...to be comfortable and accepting of the way things are.

Wise people, however do not just accept the shadows that are part of the world we live in. Wise people look for the light, the light that will overcome the darkness. The wise people that left Herod pursued the light. They followed it to where it came to rest over the house where Jesus was.

It was not enough, however for them to simply find the house. They had to go in. Now, I'm pretty sure every person who lives in Arkansas City knows where at least one church is. It is not enough to just know where the churches are. You have to go in. You all have gone in! You are inside and now you have to learn what to do. You can learn from the wise people who followed the same light you followed today.

When the wise men entered the House of God, they fell down and worshiped. They found the Messiah and they worshiped Him! (Kneel down here)(Someone bring the wise men to the altar) Psalm 98 tells us to sing a new song to the Lord. It tells us to rejoice and worship. It tells us that the one who is coming into the world will bring peace and righteousness. (Stand)

The Christmas Story is an easy story to tell. Jesus came as a baby born in a stable in Bethlehem. He was born of the Virgin Mary and shepherds and angels sang together Glory to God in the Highest and on earth, peace, goodwill toward all people.

It is an easy story to tell, but what does it mean? It means that a light has come into the world. A light that we may not have noticed. It means that the light cannot be packed away. It will burn for all who are wise enough to seek after it. It means that it will not last for only a day but that this light is in fact, the way. Jesus, the baby born in the manger is not the end of the story. He is the beginning.

It is as John said...again, John the gospel writer..."In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God and without the Word, not one thing came into being."

Jesus is the one who turns on the Cell Phone. He is the co-author of creation and He will be the redeemer of all who believe in Him. His light is bright enough for all to follow and His mission is to restore all that has been lost.

What do we do with the story? We worship. We fall on our knees and offer our gifts, our gold, our frankincense, our myrror...now, I don't know what all those things are, but I think what the scripture means is that we are supposed to give Him our lives. With all that we have and all that we are, we are to worship Him!

I notice that the wise people heard from God at the end of worship. They didn't go back the same way they came. They went by another road. They were warned not to turn back to the darkness and evil they had seen. Instead they were to walk as people of the light.

In a few days, we will take down the decorations of Christmas from our sanctuary. We have a choice to make. We can put them away and wait for the day of Christmas that will happen until the Lord returns or we can prepare a way for Christmas. We can be that voice that cries out in the wilderness...prepare the way of the Lord.

Three Dog Night, those guys who sang "Joy to the World," sang a new song a little later in their career. It was called "Just an Old Fashioned Love Song."

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gvDlz9GhhmA>

Our old songs of selfish personal interest can be transformed. We too can write old fashioned love songs. Songs in three part harmony, songs that speak of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We can leave this place of safety and sanctuary and sing as we walk back on a different road, a road that is the way and not just the day, the road where heaven and nature sing. Amen!