

Why are we reading the Christmas story in September? No, I'm not trying to outdo the stories in promoting a holiday several months ahead of its actual date!

But this sermon is not really about the Christmas story.

On this Choir Dedication Sunday, I want us to think about this biblical heavenly choir, our own FPC heavenly choirs, and our lives of faith that sing the song “Joy to the World.”

You see, Isaac Watts, the author of this great Christmas carol, never intended for it to be a Christmas carol at all.

Isaac Watts was born in 1675 and grew up in the church during the time when congregations sang nothing but the psalms of the Old Testament.

The psalms were put in poetic form and with somewhat limited success, tried to rhyme the psalms, as one person called these rhymed verses of scripture: “scandalous doggerel!”

After one Sunday morning service, Isaac Watts, 15 years old at the time, complained of the dreadful, horrendous songs for worship. (Some things never change, do they?)

One of the deacons of the church, maybe his father, challenged him, “Give us something better, young man!”

By the evening service, he had written his first hymn, and from that time on, songs seemed to flow like a river from his pen.

What Isaac Watts did was to take many of the psalms, not to rhyme them, but to paraphrase them in New Testament language.

Look back at our Scripture Reading, Psalm 98: “Sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous things... Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth, burst into jubilant song with music...”

You can see and hear where Isaac Watts came up with the paraphrase we know as “Joy to the World, the Lord is come, let earth receive her king.”

This hymn was introduced in 1719 when a collection of his songs were published as “Psalms of David Imitated”, not a Christmas carol at all.

Isaac Watts did what the psalm said to do. He took the old psalm and wrote a new song for us *to sing*.

He used New Testament language and gave us a new song that sings the gospel, and over the years it became a Christmas carol, sadly limiting this celebration of the good news to once a year.

Or maybe another way to say it is that this song, this nearly 300-year-old carol is based on a psalm written over 2,500 years ago and tells a story that is 2,000 years old, and brings the story into our world today.

In other words, it's not just ‘joy to the world;’ our faith is all about ‘joy in the world’ all year long.

This song reminds us that we make that “joyful noise” joining the chorus of the heavenly host ‘bringing good news of great joy to the world.’

This song reminds us that as we go from this place, we become the shepherds who ‘repeat the sounding joy’ of all they have seen and heard.

And as we let this song become a new song in our hearts, we become like Mary and Joseph who treasured all they had seen, who did what God desired.

Joy in the world is the joyful noise gifted to us through our ministry of music for you and me to join this biblical story of celebrating God's love in Jesus Christ.

Here at First Presbyterian we are fortunate to be led by a gifted and dedicated Director and to have classically trained singers and musicians, while others of us can't carry a tune in a bucket.

But making a joyful noise is not ultimately about how beautiful a sound comes from our mouths and vocal chords.

Some of us may be able to harmonize melodies, but I hazard to guess that all of us experience some disharmony and dissonance in our lives.

Some of us may be able to sing on key, but we are all out of tune at one time or another with God and with others.

Yet, we are invited to "Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises.

Why?

Because the Lord "has done marvelous things..." and this 'joy in the world' is how we remember his "steadfast love and faithfulness."

Even though God hears the dissonance in our lives, God's love embraces us to work toward harmony with God.

Therefore, we come before the Lord with joyful songs, because in worship, our Lord hears not only the singing that comes out of our mouths and vocal chords; but all week long our Lord hears the singing from our hearts.

In other words, every time we live the good news, we are a part of that choir singing the same song of the gospel telling the same story of joy to the world.

And yet, as the psalmist says, "We sing a new song."

Just as John Coble reminds us, "...though it may seem that we're just repeating familiar stories (think of the Christmas story), it's not mindless repetition. The old stories may not change, but we change."

We bring to life what Paul wrote to the church in Rome, that "the God of hope will fill you with all joy and peace..."; a reminder that, even if our joy is muted, God still wants to fill us with joy.

Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, seems to repeat what the angels said on the night of his birth when he was talking about loving has he had loved, he said: "These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full."

That, for me, is the summary statement of the reason for music and song in our worship: that your joy may be full!

It is here that the shepherds in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night, are of great help to you and me.

They got the message of joy and then they acted on it!

The Bible says the announcement came 'suddenly', 'all at once.'

A lone angel and then the sky was filled with angels, praising God, saying...that's the word used, SAYING...and that word sort of catches us by surprise, at least it does me.

We 'say' the Lord's Prayer; we 'say' what we believe when we recite the Apostles' Creed; we 'say' the benediction...but we know deep down that's not how the angels were 'saying' the greatest news the world had ever heard.

The picture I have is the angels are called together, choir practice time...they've been there before, rehearsal time, eons going over the same piece.

But this time, they're told this is the big show, and one of the teenage angels in the back row gives it a great big "YESSSSS" and fist pump!

And the old fogie angel next to her, just turns to her (and fist explosion!)

And the angelic chorus comes into the night sky over those shepherds, praising God and saying... Handel is the one composer who captures this...saying "YES" true to the Scriptures, I think.

He has a soloist, a single angel, sing, "For unto you is born this day in the city of David a savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord." A crystal-clear voice...so easily heard and understood.

That's what 'saying' the good news is all about: easily heard and understood.

And then, when finished, the mighty crescendo of the army of singers needed for the singing of the "Messiah" lift high their powerful voices into the chorus, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased."

Howard Thurman, the great preacher, said, "There must always be remaining in everyone's life some place for the singing of angels...where the commonplace is shot through with new glory."

Joy in the world, where the commonplace, like a manger, is shot through with new glory.

Joy in the world, and it comes to those, like the shepherds, like you and me, who hear the angels sing.

And when the heavenly choir had finished announcing the good news, the shepherds turned to one another and said, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place which the Lord has made known to us."

The emphasis is on the NOW.

They could have sat by the fire in stunned disbelief. They could have run into the hills to hide out of fear.

They could have gone off individually to think about it and sort through it. They could have formed a committee to investigate and study in and report back to next month's meeting.

But they didn't do any of that. They went to look; they went to see; they went to find it!

Many of us have no joy because we will not budge, we will not move, we will not make the effort to go to see what God has done, is doing!

There is very little joy to be found when you refuse to risk transformation, refuse to reach for the joy of believing what God is doing for you.

I believe that one of the most serious problems of our time is the tendency to spectate and not participate, to avoid rather than get involved, to give in rather than get up and go!

Joy is not for the fence-sitters, but for the seekers, the searchers.

The shepherds had joy because they heard the angels and they went to see! And oh, what they saw! They saw a baby in whom heaven and earth meet. The Lord, the Savior, Flesh of our Flesh.

There they were, standing around the manger, like God standing over creation with the same sense of joy, "It is good."

And they had to tell everybody!

As Isaac Watts put it, "Repeat, repeat the sounding joy! repeat the sounding joy!"

And so we do, each Sunday repeat the sounding joy through our wonderful ministry of music and all of these children, these young men and women, and some a little bit older!

We are grateful to you for the joy in our worship, the joy you give that we can take to the world.

As someone described it, "Joy is the echo of God's life within us."

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TO GOD BE THE GLORY.