

Jon Hauerwas – “Joy to the Word” – November 6, 2016
Psalm 98: 1-9

Each week, I write an Evotional. This is essentially a devotional that is circulated electronically on Wednesdays. If you would like to receive these thoughts, I invite you to contact the main office and add your name to the list. This week, I shared some thoughts under the title “Why Do We Believe?” It’s a simple, four word question. And, in response, I received a powerful, four word answer from a member of our congregation. She wrote, “because God answers me.”

Our ability to affirm the existence of God is often dependent upon the ongoing sense that God hears our cries and provides for our needs. For if God neither heard nor provided then we would, in essence, be all alone in the world. Yes. We would still be surrounded by other people, by animals and nature. We would still be surrounded with a variety of earthly distractions. But, we would be alone in the sense of lacking any resources beyond ourselves and our natural environment.

Today, we have only one lesson from scripture, which comes to us from Psalm 98. This text is a joyful proclamation of faith in God. And from the inception of the Christian faith, this psalm has been read and interpreted in light of the saving work of God in Christ. Scholar J. Clinton McCann, Jr. reminds us that “the early Christians, who knew that Jesus proclaimed the reign of God, also saw in Jesus the

ultimate embodiment of God's reign. They experienced Jesus as a king/messiah who lovingly and faithfully enacted justice and righteousness for all people; they experienced his ministry as salvation; and they sang Psalm 98 as a song about Jesus."

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And though we may not recognize it at first, there is a very famous hymn based upon this psalm. "Joy to the World" was written by Isaac Watts in 1719. If you want to follow along with me, it is hymn number 40 in the blue, Presbyterian hymnal. Today, we associate this hymn with Christmas, and it's easy for us to make that connection. Here's the refrain: "Joy to the World! The Lord is come; Let earth receive her King; Let every heart prepare him room, And heaven and nature sing. And heaven and nature sing. And heaven, and heaven, and nature sing."

But, Watts did not intend for this enduring hymn to be associated with Christmas. As we take a closer look, we find no mention of shepherds or a manger, of wise men, angels, or any other character or element that we normally associate with the Christmas story. Instead, the central focus is on all of creation rejoicing, and giving thanks, and singing out in praise of God.

¹ J. Clinton McCann, Jr., *Psalms, The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary Volume IV*, ed. Leander Keck (Abingdon Press, 1996). Pg. 1073.

The first verse imagines the fields, floods, rocks, hills, and plains repeating the sounding joy. Of course, we know that these objects do not possess the same emotions or intellect that we do. They do not possess vocal cords and the same ability to praise which is found in human creatures. And yet, this is still a beautiful image and metaphor that all of creation could somehow give thanks and praise for our shared creator. That even the trees could lift their voices to heaven. That even the waves could clap their hands and rejoice. What a beautiful sign and symbol of the connected nature of life as we know it.

Isaac Watts intended “Joy to the World” as a hymn about the Second Coming. That’s because Christmas, as we know, will not always be a joyful time, when Jesus returns to live among us, even the rocks will sing! And so the hymn implies, just like the 98th psalm upon which it is based, that Jesus came to save the world!

I posed a four word question in this week’s Evotional, “Why Do We Believe?” And I received a powerful four-word answer in response: “because God answers me.” Today, our sermon title is also just four words, but it is equally freighted with meaning and power. “Joy to the World.” It is a title borrowed from Isaac Watts’ famous hymn which answers that same Evotional question. “Why Do We Believe?” “Joy to the World.” Jesus, the Son of God, incarnate, God with us.

The same God who hears us is the same God who answers us. And the same God who walks with us is the same God who saves us. And so, even in the midst of life's struggles, we are reminded to give thanks. To join the fields, floods, rocks, hills, and plains in repeating the sounding joy of children's laughter, and rays of sunshine illuminating colored leaves, and the fellowship of Christian community, the support of those dear to us, the sacrament of baptism, and the gift of music, artistry, and artists. Joy to the World. May it be so and all thanks be to God both now and forever. Amen.