

Sermon Preached December 24, 2009
Christmas Eve
Isaiah 9:2-7 & Luke 2:1-14
St. Paul's Episcopal Church
North Andover, Massachusetts
The Rev. Stephanie Chase Wilson

In the name of God: Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.

When I was living in Lithuania, our little English-speaking church did an outreach project at the local Seaman's Center. We lived in Klaipeda, a city on the Baltic Coast, which was a huge shipping port. Sailors would come through there from all over the world. Because it was located in a former Soviet city, the Seaman's Center didn't really provide for religious accommodations for visiting sailors, and frankly didn't see the need. But after speaking with the director of the Center, he agreed to let our church come in and provide a Christmas party for a bunch of sailors from the Philippines, who were stranded in town for a week. Most of them were devout Catholics. The big night came and we had a Christmas tree, and lots of food, and presents. Everyone was talking and eating. After some social time, I gave a short talk about the meaning of Christmas, and then someone from the church lead us on the piano in singing Christmas carols. Did you know that Filipinos know the song "Silent Night"? And "Oh Little Town of Bethlehem" and a bunch of other carols?

They know the tune from their home country and sang along in their own language. We had a room full of people from around the world: America, Canadian, Lithuanian, Cambodian, Filipino, German, Russian, Belarusian, and Ukrainian, all singing together about the miracle of Christmas. When we sang Joy to the World! It really was holy and joyful, because we in that room represented the world, and we rejoiced in God's goodness! It's no wonder that hymn is especially beloved in many countries.

The hymn "Joy to the World" was written in 1719 by Isaac Watts and remains the most published Christmas Carol in North America.¹ As I reviewed the words this week, I realized how beautifully they capture the meaning of the Christmas story. Lots of other hymns sing about baby Jesus in the manger, while Joy to the World sings about the bigger purpose of Jesus' birth and why that is worth jumping up and down about!

The first verse: "Joy to the world, the Lord is come: let earth receive her King; let every heart prepare him room, and heaven and nature sing."

¹ Wikipedia

Now we may sing this today and think, well, we have no king, so sure, we can make Jesus our King. It's a gallant Dungeons and Dragons/ Runescape kind of image so we're happy to let Jesus claim it. But at the time of Jesus' birth, that was a radical sentiment. Rome was occupying the country. Soldiers were everywhere. We are told in the opening words of the reading that Augustus was Emperor. There was no room for another king. In fact, at the end of Jesus' life it because he claimed this very thing, to be a king, that he was executed by the Roman government.

So we proclaim our King and rejoice that he has arrived. But not only we, but all of the heavens and earth. Jesus isn't king over just people, but over the earth: plants, animals, oceans, rocks, hills and plains, and over the heavens. Even the realm beyond our world claims Jesus as king and is thrilled that his kingdom is coming.

The second verse says, "Joy to the world! The Savior reigns, let us our songs employ, while fields and floods, rocks, hill, and plains, repeat the sounding joy."

In this verse we, and all creation, are singing and partying because the “savior reigns.” But what do we mean by “savior”? From what do we need to be saved? It’s not like I’m in a burning building, or sinking on the Titanic. Why would I, or most of us, need a savior? It’s helpful to look at our first reading. In it, the prophet Isaiah comforts the people of Israel 600 years before the time of Christ. They too had been conquered by oppressors, their land destroyed, their people enslaved. They have been living in darkness. But Isaiah reassures them and says that soon a Savior, a Messiah, will come. He shall have all authority and goodness and will usher in an age of justice, righteousness, and peace. But this promise isn’t just for the ancient Israelites, Isaiah’s promise is for all people. Because while we ourselves may not be suffering from an occupation, we all suffer from injustices and conflict, either within families, between neighbors, or between nations. We need only read Yahoo news to know that the world, including our nation, is not all rainbows and ponies. People suffer from poverty, joblessness, conflict, greed, pride, and corruption. We need a savior because we need God to save us from ourselves. We need a God to save us from sin, from those things which cause pain to ourselves, to others, and to God. The Lord created the world, and it was good. Salvation is simply healing. Salvation is about healing us and our world to bring it back to its original goodness, as it was created to be. The Kingdom of God. That’s why we need a savior.

The third verse of the hymn says, “No more let sin and sorrows grow, nor thorns infest the ground; he comes to make his blessings flow, far as the curse is found.”

Again, this new Kingdom to be ushering in by our Savior and King will not allow sin and sorrow to prevail. God will bless all creation, and the curse of injustice and hatred will be washed away. This means that we will be able to see each other as we truly are, with our hearts, and be able to love fully. There will be no need for fears, insecurities, posturing, or put downs. We instead will live heart to heart, full of love for ourselves and for each other, so that sin and sorrow are simply... unnecessary.

The final verse of the hymn is the clincher. It says, “He rules the world with truth and grace, and makes the nations prove, the glories of his righteousness and wonders of his love.”

Compare those words with the opening line of the scripture, “In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered.” These lines tell us about who is in power in Rome. This opening doesn’t simply tell you the year the birth takes place, it tells you who rules the

world. Caesar Augustus and the Roman Empire. And in flexing his power, the Emperor, who was known by his people as the “Son of God,” commands a census be taken. This forces a poor man and his pregnant wife to travel a long distance and bear a son in a stable far from home. Augustus seems to be the ultimate authority.

But I believe it is written this way as intentional irony, because the point of Luke’s story is that Jesus is the Son of God and it is he who rules the world, despite current evidence to the contrary. He is the savior of whom Isaiah spoke and who will bring justice and peace to the earth. The peace brought about by the Roman Empire was a “peace” forged through conquest and oppression. The peace brought about by the Kingdom of God, through Jesus, is established through love and righteousness. So although this baby looks awfully unpromising next to the might of the Roman Empire, it is he who ultimately conquers evil and death, and in the fullness of time will bring peace to the nations.

In all this, as people of God, we too are called to be part of this Kingdom, to step outside our comfort zones and engage in healing and peace between nations, between people. Like St. Paul’s collecting food for the hungry.

Like a group of Americans in Lithuania trying to bring cheer to a bunch of homesick Filipino sailors. Like all of us loving God and loving our neighbor as ourselves, even if our neighbor lives 10 time zones away.

So yes, we sing Joy to the World! The Kingdom of God, a reign of justice, love, and peace has begun. Our Savior, who heals what is broken in our world, has arrived. The heavens and the earth rejoice. The powers and principalities of this world may seem to be in control, there is much war, sin, and sorrow, but their power is fleeting and not real. Ultimately God rules the world. And that vulnerable baby in a stable is beginning of the new age of joy.

Amen.