

Making a Joyful Noise

“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, the Savior reigns. Let us our songs employ; while field and floods; rocks, hills and plains repeat the sounding joy.” These are words from a popular carol. It is an 18th c. piece based on a poem by Isaac Watts, an English Christian minister. The lyrics were inspired by the 98th Psalm from the Hebrew Scriptures written long before the event we celebrate as the birthday of Jesus of Nazareth. The psalmist was expressing the joy felt by his people because God’s presence with them had provided rescue. Considering the long history recorded of God’s relationship with the Hebrew people, it’s not possible to determine which time of God’s many actions on their behalf led to this song being composed. It is found in the Hebrew text as part of their collected songbook. The psalm and song both open with an imperative, shown in the exclamation punctuation used. In many psalms the verbs used carry this sense of command which is given in the imperative sense. This is especially true of three psalms grouped together which declare that God is king, ruler over all things. It is God’s sovereignty which calls for everything to lift up joyful praise for God’s presence and rule over creation. These psalms are 96, 97, and 98 are part of a group of psalms termed enthronement psalms. These are ones where the kingship celebrated is God’s; unlike other psalms which are known as the royal psalms. Those psalms celebrate the rule and achievements of a human king over the nation, the enthronement of a human ruler. That God’s sovereignty is celebrated in these three particular psalms makes them the selections for psalms read for services on Christmas Eve, Christmas Day and Christmas Day Morning and Evening. As this day approached I am sure each of us has heard the sounds of Joy to the World based on Psalm 98 being played by passing cars and over speakers in stores, malls and restaurants; even as the background to TV advertisements. We associate their celebratory lyrics with this season and with the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. However, when written the psalm was not anticipating the birth of an infant to be the way God came to earth. A careful consideration of the carol’s wording also reveals something outside our usual expectations celebrating the infant born in Bethlehem. The carols lyrics reveal that what is being celebrated is God’s final coming to set all things right within the world God created, the reigning ruler rules the world with truth and grace and makes the nations prove the glories of His righteousness and wonders of his love. His coming is to remove the “curse” and release the world from sins and sorrows. Clearly, both the psalm and the carol have depths which we don’t often consider. The 98th psalm calls for a new song to be sung. Psalm 98 has the heading “A Psalm” which designates it as a musical piece suitable for use in worship. Within the psalm the verses call for musical accompaniment, with both stringed and brass instruments. Verses 5 and 6 are clear in this call: “Sing praises to the Lord with the lyre, with the lyre and sound of melody. With trumpets and the sound of the horn make a joyful noise before the King, the Lord. When examining the structure of this psalm, it can be seen to have three parts. The first imperative is that a new song should be sung. The reason for the new song is included defined in this first portion of the psalm. The psalmist tells us that the Lord has done marvelous things and has obtained a victory. This victory of the Lord for Israel is being made known in the sight of the nations. The people are called to celebrate because God has remembered his steadfast love

and faithfulness to the house of Israel and done marvelous things which have given Israel victory. Psalm 98, verse 4 issues that imperative command: "Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises." The joy comes from marvelous things the Lord has done. Biblical religion is a historical religion. This means that it records that God has been acting through major events in the lives of God's people, like the Exodus freeing from Egyptian slavery; like the forty years wondering in the wilderness; the conquest of Canaan; and later the provision for return to the Promised Land. In the New Revised Standard translation the Hebrew word *yeshuah* is translated as "victory" and appears three times in the first four verses. It is also translated this way in the King James translation and some others, but the word can be translated with another meaning. This is the case in other translations like the New International Version where it can have the sense of "rescue, salvation" as well as "victory". These events already named where God acted on behalf of the descendants of Abraham with whom God had initiated a covenant are events where God rescued or saved the people. That covenant relationship was always honored by God, but was often ignored by the people and their leaders. So whatever event in their relationship with God led the psalmist to compose this song, it seems God was coming to their rescue. The reason God came to their rescue is attributed not to any merit on their part, but because according to the third verse "God has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness" to them. To the psalmist who wrote this particular piece, it appears that this saving event was of such significance that the whole world to the ends of the earth knew of it. *Yeshuah*, is also used as the basis for a proper name. This happens with two names in particular. In Hebrew Scriptures, the name for the one who assumed leadership to actually take the Hebrews into the Promised Land was named Joshua which translates as the Yahweh saves. This use of *yeshuah* as basis for a proper name is also found early in Matthew's gospel account with this same association to salvation for the angel who visits Mary says in Matthew 1:21: "you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." God is once again doing something marvelous as God continues to act to rescue, to save humanity with whom God has initiated a relationship from the beginning of creation. God walked with human beings in Eden, in Jesus God came again to walk among humanity. This time God enters history as one en-fleshed in order to bring about God's desire to rescue that humanity from its own stubborn desire to turn away from the relationship. This, like the other rescues is done because of God's own nature, God's hessed, that steadfast love of God's creature made in God's own image, however blurred that image has become. The psalmist connects this call to praise God's marvelous deeds to go out to all of creation using both stringed instruments and brass ones. Finally, the psalmist concludes that all are invited to join in this joyful praise...not only all the people, but all living creatures and everything in God's creation will break forth in joyous song so that even the hills sing together for joy. It seems that we are called to do no less. We are promised that a great day is coming, when the Lord will return to straighten out everything in our tired, war-torn, broken and warming world. When that happens, it seems that all creatures, humans, hills, plains, mountains and seas are invited to join together in a mighty, loud and joyous hallelujah, praise be to God. Psalm 98 is a fitting choice for Christmas celebrations because it begins with that imperative "call to praise" followed by a reason to praise. The psalm celebrates a long history of God's saving actions and wonders which we recognize as including the gift of Emmanuel. Even though the action we

celebrate with Christmas services happened over two thousand years ago, God is still at work doing marvelous things among us, so each time God acts within our world, it should draw forth that “new song” of celebration because each act of God creates something new with our world which we should announce and offer praise and thanks for God’s continuing efforts to restore, to redeem, to rescue this world. Biblical songs appear frequently from Jubal in Genesis 4, to Moses and Miriam, and on into the reactions of Zechariah, Mary, and the angels who sang at Christ’s birth. Beyond scriptures the singing of songs of deliverance or rescue continues into those from Martin Luther, Charles Wesley and us as we sing the faith. In many ways, our Christian faith must be sung because by singing, we can at one and the same time both respond to God’s active work in this our world and also challenge the anti-God powers and regimes that seek to wrench this world from God’s will. Eugene Peterson’s *The Message* is a translation that seeks to faithfully translate and paraphrase the ancient texts. His paraphrase at the start of the Magnificat says it well. Mary sings: “I’m bursting with God-news, I’m dancing the song of my Savior God.” Bursting with God-news! What a wonderful description. Mary was bursting with God-news in response to what her cousin Elizabeth had said, but also in challenge to the powers of the world, the powers of sin, death, and the evil that clings to us so closely. The evil that crowds into grand jury courtrooms so that justice itself is strangled to death and injustice happens instead. Throughout the church year, the words and tunes change. But the God-news that God’s people sing stays the same. The God-news of Advent, the God-news of Christmas, the God-news of Epiphany, Lent, Easter and Pentecost demands that we sing. We sing because we too are bursting with the God-news that in Jesus Christ, God is reconciling God’s self to the world, overcoming sin and all the powers of death. And we sing in resistance to the power of death and injustice of the world. We sing because we understand what both the psalmist and Isaac Watt sang, the presence of the Lord is returning again to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness and the peoples with equity, ruling the world with truth and grace. We sing to prepare our hearts for this coming. We sing to celebrate the love brought to us. We sing with joy for the Lord is present with us. We sing because we have this God-news to share. We have many reasons to be making the joyful noise both psalm and carol express. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.