

“Prepare Him Room”

**A sermon in the Advent sermon series
“Tidings of Comfort & Joy—God’s Incarnation
Expressed in Beloved Christmas Carols”**

by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher

**Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
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- Psalm 98:4-9 (Good News Translation)
⁴ Sing for joy to the LORD, all the earth; praise him with songs and shouts of joy!
⁵ Sing praises to the LORD! Play music on the harps!
⁶ Blow trumpets and horns, and shout for joy to the LORD, our king.
⁷ Roar, sea, and every creature in you; sing, earth, and all who live on you!
⁸ Clap your hands, you rivers; you hills, sing together with joy before the LORD,
⁹ because he comes to rule the earth. He will rule the peoples of the world with justice and fairness.
- Matthew 11:28-30 (Good News Translation) ²⁸ “Come to me, all of you who are tired from carrying heavy loads, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke and put it on you, and learn from me, because I am gentle and humble in spirit; and you will find rest. ³⁰ For the yoke I will give you is easy, and the load I will put on you is light.”
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: Welcoming Jesus into our heart lightens our load and guides us toward God’s way.

Each Sunday of Advent and on Christmas Eve this year we’re taking a look at a different beloved Christmas carol. We’re looking beyond their familiarity to find their message about why the birth of Jesus changes our lives and gives us life.

Last week we explored a carol from the African American spiritual tradition, “Rise Up, Shepherd, and Follow.” In the weeks before that we heard about “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” and “It Came Upon the Midnight Clear.” You can listen to or read those sermons on our website or there may still be copies in the lobby’s literature rack.

On this Fourth Sunday of Advent we turn to “Joy to the World!” Let me start by pointing out that I’m *not* talking about the version written in the 1970s that begins with the lyric “Jeremiah was a bullfrog....” That was singer-songwriter Hoyt Axton’s treatment of the song for a children’s program. The program was never produced, but the song was picked up by the rock band called Three Dog Night who were shocked when it became a No. 1 hit. Many years later Mariah Carey included that whimsical treatment of “Joy to the World!” in a medley on her Christmas album.¹

But No, the version of “Joy to the World!” we’re considering today is what I’ll call the “accidental Christmas carol.” I call it that because while “Joy to the World!” is among the most popular and familiar of all the carols, it wasn’t written for Christmas.

To explain that, let’s start with the source of the text.

In England in the first half of the 1700s there was a pastor named Isaac Watts. He was also an author and prolific writer of hymn texts. He wrote the words for perhaps 750 hymns including the lyrics for enduring favorites like “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross,” “Our God Our Help in Ages Past,” and “Joy to the World!”

One of Isaac Watts’ literary innovations was in paraphrasing the Psalms so they could be sung to the steady beat of a song rather than being intoned in monk-like chanting. Watts had an agenda in the

¹ David A. Graham, “Joy to the World’ Isn’t a Christmas Song: the song is synonymous with the holiday, but it wasn’t originally written that way.” *The Atlantic*, December 17, 2015 at <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/12/joy-to-the-world-aka-christmas/420330/> accessed 12/16/19

way he paraphrased psalms: he intending to show that those Old Testament texts pointed to the eventual coming of Christ. Watts published his paraphrased psalms in 1719 in a volume called *The Psalms of David, Imitated in the Language of the New Testament*. “Joy to the World!” was a paraphrase of the second part of Psalm 98. Originally the opening line read “Joy to the earth,” but later he changed the word “earth” to “world.”²

I said that “Joy to the World!” wasn’t written for Christmas. A quick scan of the lyrics confirm that they don’t talk about Christmas at all. There’s no mention of a baby or manger or shepherds or wise men or any of that. The lyrics don’t talk about the birth of Jesus; they’re about the *resurrected* Christ returning to rule the earth. But the tune is so catchy, and the opening line declares in quaint English that “the Lord is come.” Those may be the reasons the song came to be included among the most popular of Christmas carols.

In case you didn’t know, hymns like the ones we sing have two components. There’s the text or poetry that’s sung—the lyrics—and there’s the music that it’s sung to—the tune. The text is given a title—often the title is taken from the opening words of the song, like “Joy to the World!” But the music or tune also is given a name. When we sing “Joy to the World!” the music we sing it to is a melody that is called “Antioch.” For more than a century after Isaac Watts wrote the lyrics for “Joy to the World!”, the words were sung to a variety of hymn tunes which fit the text’s poetic structure (Common Meter). It took more than a hundred years after Isaac Watts wrote the text “Joy to the World!” before it was put to the tune we associate with it. How did that happen?

Let’s move from the London of Isaac Watts the author to the Boston, Massachusetts of a man named Lowell Mason. Mason was a giant in the world of music in early America. He was a music educator and composer. He was responsible for introducing the study of music as part of public-school education. Lowell Mason enjoyed taking hymn texts—especially those coming from England—and composing new tunes for them. In 1839 he composed and published a new tune for the Isaac Watts text “Joy to the World!” Lowell Mason named his new tune “Antioch.” Mason chose that name because (according to the Bible) it was in the Syrian city of Antioch where followers of Jesus were first called “Christians.”³

For a long time there was confusion about whether the tune “Antioch” was, in fact, written by Lowell Mason or by George Fredrick Handel—yes, the fellow who wrote the oratorio “Messiah” with its famous “Hallelujah!” chorus. Why the confusion? You see, when Lowell Mason published “Joy to the World!” set to his tune “Antioch,” on the corner of the page Mason included the note “from Handel.”⁴ That made people think he had used some previously unknown work of Handel’s.

But over the years music scholars have determined that Handel didn’t compose the tune “Antioch.” When Lowell Mason composed his tune he *did* imitate two short musical phrases from Handel’s “Messiah.” In those days imitating someone’s work was considered a way of honoring that person. Mason imitated just four or five notes from two different movements in Handel’s “Messiah.” They’re easy to hear once they’re pointed out (and if you’re curious, come up to the choir loft after the service and Glen will give you a brief demonstration!). So when Lowell Mason published “Joy to the World!” set to his new tune, his note of “from Handel” was simply a tip of the cap to his musical inspiration; he didn’t mean to suggest that Handel had composed the hymn tune “Antioch.”

The result of the work of lyricist Isaac Watts and composer Lowell Mason is a favorite *Christian* hymn based on a *Hebrew* psalm, set to music by an *American* who was inspired by musical phrases composed in *England*, written for *any season* of the year but most closely associated with *Christmastime*.⁵

Maybe we’re especially drawn to this hymn at Christmas because of the clear invitation in the carol’s first verse: “Let every heart prepare him room.” It may remind us that often we prepare our homes to receive family and guests over the Christmas and New Year’s holidays. At our house we can’t prepare guest rooms too far in advance. Parker the Dog likes to hop up on the beds and burrow into the pillows and shams for a special place to take yet another nap. Apparently the three doggie beds he already has

² https://www.hymnsandcarolsofchristmas.com/Hymns_and_Carols/joy_to_the_world-1.htm accessed 12/16/2019

³ Acts 11:26

⁴ <http://www.americanmusicpreservation.com/joytotheworldmason.htm> accessed 12/17/19

⁵ <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-joy-to-the-world> accessed 12/16/19

aren't enough. He must think that the carol's instruction to "prepare Him room" is what *we're* supposed to do for *him*.

Yes, the carol urges, "Let every heart prepare Him room." In the birth of Jesus God comes to us, to live with us, to live *in* us, to guide and guard us.

But have we made room for Jesus in our lives? Can we? There may be things going on in your life that make it hard for to you to "prepare Him room" in your heart, in your daily outlook.

- Maybe you're hesitant to "prepare Him room" in your heart because you feel you don't deserve God's gifts—you find it hard to believe that God accepts and loves you for who you are right now; you can't believe that God already offers you forgiveness for the things that haunt the remote corners of memory.
- Maybe you resist preparing room for Jesus to guide your heart because prideful overconfidence in your own abilities convinces you that you don't need any help; you don't need Jesus.
- Maybe you struggle to "prepare Him room" in your life because you're preoccupied with providing "the perfect Christmas." Have you ever felt like it's up to you to meet what you perceive to be everyone's expectations of what *has* to happen in order to make Christmas just the way it's supposed to be?
- Or maybe you simply laugh at the idea of "preparing Him room" in your life because your life already feels as crowded as an RTA train leaving Tower City after an Indians game:
 - you're barely managing to keep up with the list of all the things your doctors want you to be doing;
 - you're being run ragged by the schedule demands of your kids' schoolwork and private lessons and activities and medical appointments;
 - a personnel change at work resulted in you covering your job *and* half of someone else's for the foreseeable future;
 - one of your teachers unexpectedly blessed your Christmas break with two extra projects that are due the first day back at school;
 - at home you're paying the bills and buying the groceries and touching a vacuum and dust rag, then doing the same at your parents' place, too;
 - oh, and then there's the fact that nineteen relatives are coming for dinner to *your* house on Christmas Day.

Yes, there may be things going on in your life that make it hard for to you to "prepare Him room" in your heart.

But taking Jesus into your life is not like assuming the burdens of taking in a boarder, or even an overnight guest. Remember Matthew's gospel, where Jesus uses the image of a yoke for cattle to promise that he won't be a burden but rather a blessing:

"Come to me, all of you who are tired from carrying heavy loads, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke and put it on you, and learn from me, because I am gentle and humble in spirit; and you will find rest. For the yoke I will give you is easy, and the load I will put on you is light."⁶

Celebrating the Nativity is a cause for joy for all the world because God has come to us in Jesus the Son. Let every heart prepare Him room—let us accept Jesus in our lives—because embracing Jesus does not clutter our lives; Jesus clarifies what's central, important, meaningful about our lives. Embracing Jesus does not add to our load; Jesus lightens our load. The world knows joy because God has come into our world in Jesus the Son of God—let every heart prepare Him room!

Let us pray: *Jesus, you stand at the door of our hearts and knock. You await our invitation to come in to us and to live our lives with us, to guide us, to comfort us, to empower us, to give us patience, to correct our missteps, to encourage us in our good deeds. As we prepare to mark yet again the blessing of your birth into our world, may we accept the blessing of your gracious presence in our hearts and in our lives. Amen.*

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⁶ Matthew 11:28-30 Good News Translation