***JOY TO AND FROM THE WORLD***

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Texts: Psalm 98 and Acts 10:44-48

In his book, *One Summer: America 1927*, Bill Bryson writes this of President Herbert Hoover:

*Whatever high spirits he was born with – and it is by no means certain that there were any – were thoroughly extinguished by the experiences of his youth. Herbert Hoover lived to be ninety, and never in the whole of that time, so far as can be told, experienced anything approaching a moment’s real joy.[[1]](#endnote-1)*

How sad – a whole life lived without a moment’s joy, a whole life without a time that brought a real smile to his face or a warm glow to his heart. Perhaps that is why Herbert Hoover was the less than stellar president that he was! By contrast Albert Schweitzer, a medical missionary in Africa, found joy when those who were plagued with sores had been cleanly bandaged and no longer had to drag their poor, bleeding feet through the mud. Despite working conditions that many would find revolting, Schweitzer longed for his aides to know the joy of sharing those “days set apart for the bandaging of sores.”[[2]](#endnote-2) How is it that one man can find no joy in life, and another finds joy even in the most repulsive of tasks – bandaging the weeping sores of filthy feet? Are you more like Albert Schweitzer finding joy even in the most difficult of circumstances, or are you more like Herbert Hoover, joyless in all times and places – including this time and place?

As Christians, we **should** be joyful people for we have received tidings of great joy in the coming of Jesus and in his Easter resurrection! St. John of the Cross once suggested that “*the soul of one who loves God always swims in joy, always keeps holiday, and is always in the mood for singing*.”[[3]](#endnote-3) We have much for which to be thankful, much for which to praise God with joyful voices, joyful hearts, and joyful lives even when we are not happy! Among the gifts of the Spirit that Paul identifies in his letter to the Galatians, joy is at the top surpassed only by love. So, you might think that joy would be one of those traits that everyone would associate with all of us Christians who profess our love for God. Yet, across the centuries, joy seems to be lacking in the lives, worship, and conduct of a host of those who claim to love God and follow Jesus Christ. If I say “Pilgrim” or “Puritan,” I suspect that joy might not be the first word that leaps to your mind – or perhaps not even the last! While all churches are not puritanical, neither do all of them resound with joy. Words like conflict, judgment, austerity, and dour demeanors have been too often associated with *church* and its leaders, while joy in practice and in worship is too rarely to be found!

At last summer’s Montreat Youth Conference, the theme was joy; joy seems to be bubbling like a fountain at youth conferences at Montreat every year, but last summer’s conference dove a little deeper into that joy and how it might be distinguished from happiness, elation, or to quote the Beach Boys, other “good vibrations.” The joy we hold is not a fleeting feeling, perpetual smile, or constant state of happiness; it is something bigger and bolder – something that colors our view of the world, of life and death, something that makes its home with hope and peace in our hearts. It was joy that Ebeneezer Scrooge found upon waking after the visits of the three Spirits – something that can and should transform a life! As in *A Christmas Carol*, joy can be found in some unexpected places and in unexpected times as God is often found, for true joy is rooted in God and in God’s promises for us. The world may often fleeting happiness, but cannot offer sustained joy. Some have even suggested that the pursuit of happiness or those things we think will make us happy often stands in the way of real joy. In Barbara Brown Taylor’s words:

*Joy doesn’t happen when we get what we want…It is much more likely to happen when we do not get what we want and we find ourselves laughing instead of crying, because God’s ideas are so much better than ours, only we have a hard time seeing that until our own wishes have crashed and burned. It is there, in that wilderness, in that empty-handed, I-give-up surrender that joy is most likely to occur. Don’t ask me why. It just does*.[[4]](#endnote-4)

In Psalm 98 that I read this morning, the psalmist says that it is not just us humans who experience joy; it is all of creation! It is the sea roaring and the rivers clapping hands, and the hills singing together for joy. They are wonderful images, but beyond them is a sense of joy in God’s good creation and God’s continuing presence in it. As those who believe that the Lord made all things and called them good, we should open our eyes and ears to the ways in which the world around us sings and shouts God’s praise and glory. It is there in a bright sunrise and a glorious sunset, there in the songs of birds and the blossoms of trees, there in the gentle breeze but also in the power of a thunderstorm, there in the wonder of the seasons that each bring their own delights. Friday evening as I sat on the patio at home listening to the birds in full-throated song, it seemed as if their praise was particularly joyful, perhaps in anticipation of the long-awaited rain. Faith is the lens that helps us see and hear God in those bird songs and in the wonders all around us. As Alice Walker suggests, it ticks off God when we fail to notice the color purple in our midst; too often we do tick off God by not even seeing, hearing, or appreciating the purple and bird songs and wonder of the world around us. But when we do pause and look and listen, creation sings God’s glory from all corners! To that chorus of joyful praise, we should be adding our voices, day in and day out.

*Sing to the Lord a* ***new*** *song,* sings the psalmist*, for the Lord has done marvelous things.* That list of marvelous things is a long one. It includes the wonder of creation, but also the delivery of God’s people in the Exodus, the inspiration of prophets, the birth of Jesus, the miracles and healings Jesus performed, and his Resurrection which is the most marvelous of those marvelous things! There is the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost and Paul’s Damascus Road experience, and as you heard Luke describe in Acts, the people were astounded that the Holy Spirit came upon Gentiles who heard the good news of Jesus resurrection. The marvelous things do not stop there! Across 2,000 years, our ancestors in faith – some of whom are sitting in these pews with you – confirm that God is still doing marvelous things in our midst day to day!

And so, with gratitude and joy we sing a ***new song*** as the psalmist urged us to do. We find new words, a new tune, a new expression of praise for all those wonderful things God has done and continues to do. Words are never adequate to give full expression to the wonder of God’s creative work – there is always something left unsaid, some metaphor that may reveal yet another aspect of God’s grace, some simile that will open new layers of understanding, some undiscovered tune that will stir our hearts in bold new ways. Sometimes the new thing is the rediscovery of a very old thing: a tradition long lost, a treasured hymn reclaimed, a Gregorian chant that finds a new place in worship. Old songs and hymns give familiar expression to our praise, but there is room for a new song or two in our vocabulary of joyful praise.

Isaac Watts was a bit of an odd character in the 18th century when there were a lot of odd characters! He was a non-conformist preacher who wrote books on geography, astronomy, grammar, and philosophy. He once was invited by one of his parishioners, Thomas Abney, to visit his country house for a week; Watts stayed for 36 years! He is best known for his hymns and has given us treasured words with which to sing our praise. Three hundred years ago he found in the 98th psalm the words for a new song of praise. He reshaped the psalmist’s words in light of the good news of Christ’s coming and wrote a hymn to express our joy as God’s people – joy from the world, to the world, and for the world. At one time it was a new song, yet for us, his words are now an old song of praise and joy – words that should bring a smile to our faces and joyful noise from our lips 365 days a year! It is a song which we associate with Christmas – *Joy to the World* – yet the hymn was never intended only for Christmas. It is a song for all seasons of the year! So, when we sing it in a few minutes, sing it with joy or make a joyful noise or at least let joy well up in your heart as you hear the familiar notes and words. For, the joy is not in the song, but in the God of whom we sing, the God who still does marvelous things! Amen

1. Bill Bryson, *One Summer: America, 1927*, Doubleday: New York, 2013, p.54 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. William J. Carl, “Reflections on Joy”, *The Living Pulpit*: Vol 5 No.4, 1996, p.41 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. St. John of the Cross, *The Living Pulpit*, October-December 1996, p.35 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Living Pulpit*, October-December 1996, p.17 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)