

Call to Worship

Psalm 98

Sing to the LORD a new song because he has done wonderful things! His own strong hand and his own holy arm have won the victory!

The LORD has made his salvation widely known; he has revealed his righteousness in the eyes of all the nations.

God has remembered his loyal love and faithfulness to the house of Israel; every corner of the earth has seen our God's salvation.

Let all the rivers clap their hands; let the mountains rejoice out loud altogether before the LORD because he is coming to establish justice on the earth!

He will establish justice in the world rightly; he will establish justice among all people fairly.

Prayer of Invocation

Lord Jesus, in you God has become one of us. In your coming, God's love was made known. Today the call is upon us. God's intention to have a people continue the work of Christ has been announced to ordinary people like us. By your Holy Spirit, dissolve our fears of what this might mean, and strengthen us to respond, that our lives may be part of God's incarnation story on earth. Amen.

The Word

Colossians 3:12-17 (Common English Version)

Therefore, as God's choice, holy and loved, put on compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience.

Be tolerant with each other and, if someone has a complaint against anyone, forgive each other. As the Lord forgave you, so also forgive each other.

And over all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity. The peace of Christ must control your hearts—a peace into which you were called in one body. And be thankful people. The word of Christ must live in you richly. Teach and warn each other with all wisdom by singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs.

Sing to God with gratitude in your hearts. Whatever you do, whether in speech or action, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus and give thanks to God the Father through him.

Living the Word

Today is December 30, the sixth day of the twelve days of Christmas. We have been singing Christmas Songs for weeks, but we still haven't sung them all. The words that we sing tell a story of who we are. Our faith is printed before us so we can express it to God and to each other. Anyone can just sing the words, but how we express the emotion of the song, tells how we really feel about our faith.

Last night, Christmas Eve, while juggling lit candles, we sang together Silent Night. The Spirit in this room was mesmerizing. It is for me the Christmas gift that I wait for each year; to sing with love and passion about a quiet night in Bethlehem when our Lord was born. Silence, until the Angels sing 'Alleluia to our King' and we can 'lend our voices' to theirs to announce the birth.

Years ago, it was mentioned that though those moments are wondrous each year, it is difficult if we end the festive Christmas evening on a quiet note. I agreed, so we ended the Christmas Eve service by singing 'Joy to the World.' We began today with 'Joy to the World' because the festivities are still continuing for the twelve days. But alas, the joy seems to already be fading as the sound of this song today was different than the jubilation that I heard on Christmas Eve.

Even so, Christmas is not over yet, and we try to celebrate the joys along with our concerns every week. And I will confess: I sing 'Joy to the World' all year round – when I see 'heaven and nature sing' or 'the wonders of His love.' The words of that hymn tell of the power of God all year, not just during the Christmas season.

One year, the week before Christmas, I was blessed by a trip to the movies with my siblings. We saw the musical *Les Miserables*, a movie which shares that to understand God's call can be confused. It is not a religious movie as much as a commentary on the events of life, how they make us who we are, blessed or bitter, according to how we live out of those experiences.

In the film the human passion is expressed through close-in filming of each person's face and you can feel what they are feeling as they share the words. It is told in song, yet the music doesn't get in the way of the message or the film, but instead feeds the mood of the moment and allows for the crying out: in pain, in justice, in loss and in love. Yes, this is another one of my commercials, but just like recommending a good book, if you ever have a chance to see it, this will be worth your time.

219 What Child is This

"What Child Is This?" is a popular Christmas carol written in 1865. English writer William Dix spent most of his life as manager of a Maritime Insurance Company in Glasgow. At the age of twenty-nine, Dix was struck with a sudden near-fatal illness and confined to bed rest for several months, during which he went into a deep depression. Yet out of his near-death experience, Dix wrote many hymns, including a poem entitled, "The Manger Throne," set to the traditional English tune "Greensleeves," and re-titled as "What Child Is This?"

Originally a ballad entitled "A Newe Northen Dittye of ye Ladye Greene Sleves" dating back to the sixteenth century. There has been considerable debate regarding the identity of the composer of the lyrics and melody of the song Greensleeves. The most popular belief about the identity of the composer relates to the legend that the words and lyrics of the song were written for Anne Boleyn by King Henry VIII during their turbulent courtship.

King Henry VIII was an extremely accomplished Musician and Composer. Music and the ability to play musical instruments was essential during the Tudor era and the education of King Henry VIII included great attention to the development of musical skills. The obsession of King Henry VIII with Anne Boleyn started in 1526 and the ballad clearly illustrates the unfamiliar position of apparent unrequited love that King Henry had found himself in during his early courtship of Anne Boleyn.

King Henry's courtship led to an ill-fated marriage to Boleyn, which ended in her death. Still, we are blessed with a beautiful tune with which to sing to the words 'What Child is this,' words that Dix wrote almost 350 years later.

If we take a look at the words we find that the first two verses begin with a question, which are then answered in the refrain. 'What child is this...?' 'Why lies he in such mean estate...?' (mean estate alluding to the roughness of the stable.) Then the answer: 'This, this is Christ the King...haste, haste to bring him laud' (Laud would be high praise.) Verse three, the questioner agrees with the refrain, but listing some ways to bring laud – the Wise men's three gifts are listed along with our loving hearts.

The song tells that 'long ago story' in a slow flowing pace so we can let the questions, answers and responses sink in far enough for us to hear that we are still called to find ways to 'laud' God with our highest praise. I invite you to sing it with me now. You may remain seated. #219 *What Child is This*

We read in Colossians 3 "The word of Christ must live in you richly. Teach and warn each other with all wisdom by singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs." If you can sing from your heart, with passion these songs, both slow ones and fast ones. They will live in you richly...

224 Good Christian Friends Rejoice

Or (*in dulci jubilo*) In Dulci Jubilo, which is its' original Latin title, is a fourteenth century German carol. It is an example of a macaronic carol, as the original lyric combined two languages: Latin and German. Like 'Joy to the World' this is a more upbeat tune.

It is thought to have been written by the German mystic Heinrich Seuse(Suso) around the year 1328. According to folklore, Seuse heard angels sing these words and joined them in a dance of worship. In his autobiography, it was written: "*Now this same angel came up to the Servant brightly, and said that God had sent him down to him, to bring him heavenly joys amid his sufferings; adding that he must cast off all his sorrows from his mind and bear them company, and that he must also dance with them in heavenly fashion. Then they drew the Servant by the hand into the dance, and the youth began a joyous song about the infant Jesus...*"

At thirteen years of age he entered the Dominican convent at Constance, where he made his preparatory, philosophical, and theological studies. As a lyric poet and troubadour of divine wisdom, Suso explored with psychological intensity the spiritual truths of mystical philosophy.

In some of his devotional works Suso speaks as a contemplative and to the intellect, then in his next, he is very practical and speaks out of the fullness of his heart to "simple men who still have imperfections to be put off". He was extremely popular in the later Middle Ages.

The song begins with words of greeting: 'Good Christian Friends' addressing all who will listen. It then reminds us to give heed to the announcement – Jesus is born; hear of endless bliss (or joy) – Jesus is born for this; no more fear of the grave, Jesus is born to save. The message of Christ comes to us once again and through us, when we sing, for others to hear.

It is a bit awkward that we sing in our pews to the backs of those people in front of us. But if I asked you to sing to the person next to you, that might be too close and personal. So I ask you to sing as if we are a choir sharing this news with the world. Please remain seated and join me in singing #224 *Good Christian Friends, Rejoice*.

This next week, which is still a part of Christmas, I invite you to be ready for those who may come to you with complains or frowns and address them with this greeting from the middle ages: 'Good Christian friend, rejoice.' It would be interesting what kind of reaction you might receive back...

238 Angels We Have Heard on High

"Angels We Have Heard on High" is a Christmas carol. The song commemorates the story of the birth of Jesus Christ found in the Gospel of Luke, in which shepherds outside Bethlehem encounter a multitude of angels singing and praising the newborn child.

The words of the song are based on a traditional French carol known as "Angels in our countryside" composed by an unknown author in France. That song has received many adjustments or alignments including its most common English version that was translated in 1862 by James Chadwick, the Roman Catholic Bishop of Hexham and Newcastle, northeast England.

"Angels We Have Heard on High" is most commonly sung to the hymn tune "Gloria", as arranged by Edward Barnes. Its most memorable feature is its chorus: *Gloria in Excelsis Deo!* (Pronounced – egg shell cease day-o) which is a doxology of Latin origin. A doxology is a song of praise sung to worship God.

The word Gloria stands for glory. Excelsis means lofty. It could also mean high, elevated or lifted or soaring tall. The word Deo is actually of Greek origin. Deo means 'God' or 'the divine one' or the 'Godly one'.

Thus, the words 'Gloria in Excelsis Deo' means 'Glory in the heights for the Lord'. The sung vowel sound "o" of "Gloria" is fluidly sustained through a lengthy sequence: *Glo-o-o-o-o-O-o-o-o-o-O-o-o-o-o-O-ri-a in Ex-cel-sis De-o!* It sounds better when sung as the rising and falling melodic hymn.

Though most adults enjoy singing the 'O's, I once saw a children's Christmas Program where some of the younger ones visibly let us know that the 'O's were way too long. A couple began to yawn in the midst and a couple just gave the 'let's get on with this' slightly disgusted look. And then to think we sing it twice each verse for four verses. Others of us revel in the opportunity to try and hold our breath all of the way through the sequence or even perhaps attempt the alto line of notes.

Also in Colossians 3, we read, "*Sing to God with gratitude in your hearts.*" Verse four of this hymn reminds us to what we should be about: '*while our hearts to love we raise*' followed by Glorias to God. These songs help lead us in the directions we may go, making the lyrics more than a series of words that we share with a lukewarm heart, but instead opportunities to experience through thought and human passion, ways we can 'Think Greater' about God.

These are the songs of our faith, what we sing tells who we are. Today we sing the songs of Christmas: God has come as Jesus for our benefit, which is the greatest gift. Psalm 98 – "*Let all the rivers clap their hands; let the mountains rejoice out loud altogether before the LORD because he is coming to establish justice on the earth!*" Please stand and join me in singing #238 *Angels We Have Heard on High*