

"What Gift Can We Bring?"
December 27, 2020

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Call to Worship

The time to celebrate is Now! **"For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders;**

And he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace"
"From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace"
The time for rejoicing is now! Let us praise God!

Prayer of Invocation

Gracious God, you have come once again into our 'here and now' with saving love in Jesus Christ. Help us to come to you just as we are. Open us to receiving the blessing of your being here. Move us to a time of heartfelt celebration and praise in recognition of your love among us. Amen.

The Word **Psalm 148**

Praise the LORD! Praise the LORD from heaven! Praise God on the heights! **Praise God, all of you who are his messengers! Praise God, all of you who comprise his heavenly forces!**

Sun and moon, praise God! All of you bright stars, praise God! You highest heaven, praise God! Do the same, you waters that are above the sky! **Let all of these praise the LORD's name because God gave the command and they were created! God set them in place always and forever. God made a law that will not be broken.**

Praise the LORD from the earth, you sea monsters and all you ocean depths! **Do the same, fire and hail, snow and smoke, stormy wind that does what God says! Do the same, you mountains, every single hill, fruit trees, and every single cedar!**

Do the same, you animals - wild or tame - you creatures that creep along and you birds that fly! **Do the same, you kings of the earth and every single person, you princes and every single ruler on earth! Do the same, you young men—young women too!— you who are old together with you who are young!**

Let all of these praise the LORD's name because only God's name is high over all. Only God's majesty is over earth and heaven. **God raised the strength of his people, the praise of all his faithful ones you people who are close to him. Praise the LORD!**

Living the Word

What gift can we bring, what present, what token? What words can convey it, the joy of this day? When grateful we come, remembering, rejoicing, what song can we offer in honor and praise?

Give thanks for the past, for those who had vision, who planted and watered so dreams could come true.

Give thanks for the now, for study, for worship, for mission that bids us turn prayer into deed.

Give thanks for tomorrow, full of surprises, for knowing whatever tomorrow may bring, The Word is our promise always, forever; we rest in God's keeping and live in God's love.

It is the third Day of Christmas, what gifts have you received? What gifts have you given? We are all given gifts, talents, passions, callings that come from God, and are confirmed by Christ, and helped along by the Holy Spirit. When shared they inspire others and contribute to the further of God's kingdom on earth for the betterment of all people.

Some people acquire great wealth for their fruits, but many receive only the rewards of knowing that they have lived into the plan that God desired for them in their lives. Some know early on what it is they must do; some run away from their calling, afraid of what it might mean for them if they give in to it; and some search many years to find it while God is already building the skills, experiences and teachings that they will need to fulfill the calling when the time is right.

Artists, poets and musicians are often times caught in the creativity of an unappreciated craft until it has been struggled with for a long time. Here are some Christmas Hymn stories for you to contemplate during these 12 days of Christmas...

John Montgomery had a burden for world outreach. He was the only Moravian Pastor in Scotland, but he and his wife felt God's call to be missionaries to the island of Barbados. Tearfully placing their 6-year-old son, James, in a Moravian settlement in Ireland, they sailed away. James never saw them again, for they perished in Barbados.

Left with nothing James was enrolled in a school in England. When he didn't do well, he was given as an apprentice by school authorities to a baker. Baking wasn't for James. He ran away and spent his teenage years drifting, writing poetry and trying his hand at one thing then another. He eventually settled down in Sheffield, England, and for a period, lived a life of aimless discouragement.

In his early twenties, James began working for the local newspaper and there he found his niche. He loved writing. It was a politically active newspaper, and when its owner had to suddenly flee the country to avoid persecution and imprisonment, James purchased the paper. As editor of this paper James championed many different causes, such as the abolition of slavery.

He was ever ready to assist the poor and defend the rights of the down-trodden. His editorials also proved to be unpopular with the local officials. On two separate occasions he was thrown into jail. But he emerged from prison a celebrity, and he used his newly acquired fame to promote his favorite issues.

Chief among them was the gospel. Despite the loss of his parents, James remained devoted to Christ and to the Scriptures, and he championed the cause of foreign missions. In all he wrote approximately 400 hymns.

As the years passed, he became the most respected leader of Sheffield, and his writings were eagerly read by its citizens. Early on Christmas Eve, 1816, James, age 45, opened his Bible to Luke 2, and was deeply impressed by verse 13: *"And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God..."*

Pondering the story of the heralding angels, he took his pen and started writing. By the end of the day, his new Christmas poem had been read in the pages of his newspaper. It was later set to music and was first sung on Christmas Day 1821, in a Moravian Church in England. His parents would have been proud.

Angels From the Realm of Glory

Angels from the realms of glory, wing your flight over all the earth;

Ye, who sang creations story now proclaim Messiah's birth:

Come and worship, come and worship, worship Christ, the newborn King.

Shepherds in the fields abiding, watching over your flocks by night,

God with man is now residing; yonder shines the Infant light:

Come and worship, come and worship, worship Christ, the newborn King.

Saints, before the alter bending, watching long in hope and fear;

Suddenly the Lord, descending, in His temple shall appear:

Come and worship, come and worship, worship Christ, the newborn King.

This popular carol owes its endurance to two men with dark financial woes. The first Nahum Tate, was born in Dublin in 1652 to a preacher who was literally named Faithful – Rev. Faithful Tate. After attending Trinity College, young Nahum migrated to London to be a writer. His success was slow in coming, but he dabbled with plays, adapted the prose of others, and at age 40 was appointed Poet Laureate of England by King William III. Ten years later he was appointed as the royal historian as well.

Unfortunately, he had a reputation as a drunkard and spendthrift and he lived in perpetual financial distress. He died in poverty in an institution for debtors at age 63. The words to "While Shepherds Watched their Flocks" represented a very literal paraphrase of Luke 2:8-14, making this one of our most biblically accurate Christmas carols.

The second man instrumental in the song's success was George Frideric Handel, composer of the music we sing Tate's poem to. Handel was born in Germany with the inborn talent of a Musical Genius. His father pressured the young man to enter law school, but George would not be denied, writing his first composition by age 12 and amazing choirmasters with his ability.

He eventually moved to London, where he enjoyed great success for a season. Then his popularity waned, his income dwindled, and he went bankrupt. It was the remarkable success of Handel's *Messiah* that saved his career...and bank account. Through it all, his commanding personality compelled him on.

How ironic! These two men never met; they both struggled with poverty, faced bankruptcy, and worried about making ends met – yet they enriched the world beyond measure, providing millions of people for scores of generations with the gift of song every Christmas.

While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks

While shepherds watched their flocks by night, All seated on the ground, the angel of the Lord came down, And glory shone around, and glory shone around.

"Fear not!" said he, for mighty dread Had seized their troubled mind. "Glad tidings of great joy I bring To you and all mankind, to you and all mankind."

"To you, in David's town, this day Is born of David's line the Savior' who is Christ the Lord, And this shall be the sign, and this shall be the sign."

Isaac Watts (1674-1748) was born to Dissenting parents (people who refused to accept the authority and practices of the Church of England). As a boy, he sang hymns outside prison walls to encourage his father, who had been arrested for his non-conformist beliefs.

Isaac showed promise as a poet at a very young age. As he grew, he became increasingly unhappy with the hymns that he sang in church each week. In those days, hymns were psalms set to music. Watts saw that the hymns thus reflected little or nothing of the New Testament, and set out to remedy that error by inventing "the English hymn."

He did not, however, neglect the Psalm. His hymns—at least his earlier hymns—reinterpreted the psalms in the light of the Christian faith. In 1719, he published a unique hymnal – one in which he translated, interpreted, and paraphrased the Old Testament Psalms through the eyes of New Testament faith. He called it simply, *The Psalms of David Imitated in the Language of the New Testament*. Taking various psalms, he studied them from the perspective of Jesus and the New Testament, and then formed them into verses for singing.

"I have rather expressed myself as I may suppose David would have done if he lived in the days of Christianity," Watts explained, "and by this means. Perhaps, I have sometimes hit upon the true intent of the Spirit of God in those verses farther and clearer than David himself could ever discover."

Watt's arch-enemy, Thomas Bradbury, was greatly critical of Watt's songs, which he called 'whims' instead of 'hymns.' He accused Watts of thinking he was King David. Watts replied in a letter, "You tell me that I rival it with David, whether he or I be the sweet psalmist of Israel. I abhor the thought; while yet, at the same time, I am fully persuaded that the Jewish Psalm book was never designed to be the only Psalter of the Christian Church.

One of those hymns was "Joy to the World," based loosely on Psalm 98, which says, "Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises" (Psalm 98:4). That psalm looks forward to the day when the Lord will come to judge the world to redeem us. In this hymn, Watts reinterpreted the psalm to rejoice in the coming of the Christ as our Lord and Savior. The result, despite the now-forgotten criticisms of men like Bradbury, has been a timeless carol that has brightened our Christmases for nearly 300 years.

Joy to the World

*Joy to the World , the Lord is come! Let earth receive her King;
Let every heart prepare Him room, and Heaven and nature sing,
And Heaven and nature sing, and Heaven, and Heaven, and nature sing.*

*Joy to the World, the Savior reigns! Let all their songs employ;
While fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains repeat the sounding joy,
Repeat the sounding joy, repeat, repeat, the sounding joy.*

*He rules the world with truth and grace, and makes the nations prove
The glories of His righteousness, and wonders of His love,
And wonders of His love, and wonders, wonders, of His love.*

As I began with, it isn't how many things or how much wealth we accumulate that counts. It is about what we do with what we are given. If you are feeling lonely or sad, I invite you to look for a way to use what you have to help another and then you will feel better. Nine more days of Merry Christmas ahead, go spread some joy...

Prayer: This gift we now bring, this present, this token, these words can convey it, the joy of this day. When grateful we come, remembering, rejoicing, this song we now offer in honor and praise! Amen.