

Christmas Day
December 25, 2020
Lincoln Heights Lutheran Church
The Lord Has Made His Salvation Known

Dear Friends in Christ,

Our opening hymn for this Christmas morning is a paraphrase of Psalm 98. Isaac Watts wrote many such hymns and in one of his collections, he put “Joy to the World” under the heading “The Messiah’s Second Coming and Kingdom.”¹ How silly of Isaac Watts to think Psalm 98 was about the second coming of Christ when it is clearly about the birth of Christ into this world. Or maybe not. Actually, Watts is correct. Psalm 98 is about Christ’s return for judgment. But it also applies to Christ’s birth. For the Lord has made his salvation known. It begins with the Baby in a manger. It ends when Christ judges all the earth. Let us rejoice in God’s salvation as the psalmist does in Psalm 98:

Psalm 98 (NIV84)

A psalm. Sing to the LORD a new song, for he has done marvelous things; his right hand and his holy arm have worked salvation for him. ² The LORD has made his salvation known and revealed his righteousness to the nations. ³ He has remembered his love and his faithfulness to the house of Israel; all the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God. ⁴ Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth, burst into jubilant song with music; ⁵ make music to the LORD with the harp, with the harp and the sound of singing, ⁶ with trumpets and the blast of the ram’s horn— shout for joy before the LORD, the King. ⁷ Let the sea resound, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it. ⁸ Let the rivers clap their hands, let the mountains sing together for joy; ⁹ let them sing before the LORD, for he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples with equity.

Salvation is Shown When Christ Judges All the Earth

This morning we start at the end and work our way to the beginning. We start with the second coming of Christ in judgment and we will end with his birth at Christmas.

Psalm 98 has images that portray power and might. God’s right hand and holy arm. Shouting and bursting into song. Rivers clap. Mountains sing. And the Lord judges in righteousness and equity. Are all these joyful and powerful images what you picture when the Lord returns to judge the earth? Do we fully rejoice and look forward to being judged by the holy Lord God on that day? He will not show favoritism or give us a break for special circumstances. He judges with equity. He will not overlook even one sin. He judges with righteousness.

That does not sound like a reason for everything in the world to rejoice. Maybe we would rejoice because all the bad people will get what is coming to them. All the criminals and murders will be judged by the righteous Lord. Every cruel tyrant and everyone who has ever hurt your family will be judged by the impartial Lord. We might even think at times that God could begin the judgment early to make this world a better place.

One of my catechism students tried to trick me with a question last week. I encourage anyone to

try to stump the pastor. It makes us both dig into God's Word for the answer if we don't know. She asked me what would happen if God took everything bad out of the world. It wasn't fair to her because I've heard that one before and used it myself. If God took everything bad out of the world, I wouldn't be here either. No one would be left because all have sinned and deserve God's eternal condemnation. When I recognize my sins, I might not be as eager to go before the Lord in judgment.

But the inspired author of Psalm 98 writes:

Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth, burst into jubilant song with music; ⁵ make music to the LORD with the harp, with the harp and the sound of singing, ⁶ with trumpets and the blast of the ram's horn— shout for joy before the LORD, the King. ⁷ Let the sea resound, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it. ⁸ Let the rivers clap their hands, let the mountains sing together for joy; ⁹ let them sing before the LORD, for he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples with equity.

Salvation Begins With the Baby in a Manger

The only way to rejoice like this when judgment day arrives is to know that the Judge of all the earth is the One who was born of Mary and placed in a manger for his first bed. It is not only at judgment day but also at the birth of Christ that the Lord has made his salvation known. The birth of Christ takes away our fears. I mean, how could anyone be scared of judgment day when singing "Away in a Manger" or "O Little Town of Bethlehem"?

The psalmist sings: *The LORD has made his salvation known and revealed his righteousness to the nations. ³ He has remembered his love and his faithfulness to the house of Israel; all the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God.*

Salvation comes in the form of a baby born to a virgin near Bethlehem. When we think that the Lord has forgotten us or stopped loving us, we see God's love demonstrated in the birth of his Son. We may sometimes think that we want to see the Lord arrive in power and might, but what we sinners needed was the Lord of the universe to arrive as a baby. For God in all his power and glory would terrify us. But when the Son of God appears as a child, we can relate to him. We do not need to be scared.

But Jesus is more than the Son of God appearing as a human child. The Son of God is also truly human and will always be true God and true Man in one person. Jesus is truly one of us. He needs to be wrapping in cloths to keep warm. He needs his mother to feed him. He will grow and experience life as a child and adolescent and adult. He will go through all that we go through, even being tempted to sin. Of course, he will never sin. But in every other way, Jesus is one of us. We could not approach the holy and mighty God. We could not bear to have the holy and mighty God approach us directly. So God has made his salvation known to us through Jesus Christ, the Son of God and Son of Mary.

This same Jesus will demonstrate God's love for us by giving up his life for sinners, only to take it up again on Easter morning. This same Jesus now sits at the right hand of God and will return one day to be Judge of all the earth. Far from being a day of fear, that day will be a day of rejoicing as this psalm shows. For we know the Judge. He is the Son of God born for us at Christmas. He is the Savior who loves us and forgives all our sins. And more importantly, the

Judge knows us. He is the one who chose to become our brother. He is the one who chose us to be his own. He is the one who lived and died so that we might live with him forever.

Isaac Watts hymn based on Psalm 98, "Joy to the World" combines the joy we have because Christ is born with the joy we will have on the last day when Christ returns to bring us to heaven. But so do many of our favorite Christmas hymns.

"Come, Your Hearts and Voices Raising" gives us this beautiful image in stanza 5:

*Gracious Child, we pray you, hear us;
From your lowly manger cheer us.
Gently lead us and be near us
Till we join th' angelic choir.*

Or the third stanza of "Once in Royal David's City":

*But our eyes at last shall see him Through his own redeeming love,
For that child, so dear and gentle, Is our Lord in heav'n above,
As he leads his children on To the place where he is gone.*

And the wonderful third stanza of "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing":

*Hail, the heav'nly Prince of Peace! Hail, the Sun of Righteousness!
Light and life to all he brings, Ris'n with healing in his wings.
Mild he lays his glory by, Born that we no more may die,
Born to raise us from the earth, Born to give us second birth.*

We usually sing this next one on Wednesdays before the Advent services begin. But since we didn't have the Christmas carols before the service this year, we didn't sing, "Mary's Little Boy Child" with its wonderful refrain:

*And we will live forevermore
Because of Christmas Day.*

And even what some would consider a children's song points us to the wonderful fact that the birth of Jesus means we get to be in heaven one day. The third verse of "Away in a Manger":

*Be near me, Lord Jesus; I ask you to stay
Close by me forever and love me, I pray.
Bless all the dear children in your tender care,
And take us to heaven to live with you there.*

The Lord has made his salvation known. A blessed Christmas Day to all in Christ.

Amen.