

Joy to the World

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Ravensworth Baptist Church
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Matthew 2:13–23

Merry Christmas!

I know that for most of us we love the carols and the hymns of the season. It's such a short window when we sing these beautiful carols, that I figured we might as well talk about them too. This year, one my favorite hymns, "Joy to the World," celebrated its 300th anniversary! Christmas seems like the appropriate time to celebrate that, but did you know, legend has it that he wrote it as an Easter hymn? Don't be surprised if we sing it alongside "Christ the Lord is Risen Today" in April.

"English writer Isaac Watts (1674–1748) was the creator of the English hymn; he was perhaps second only to Martin Luther in importance among the creative figures who forged a devotional musical language in European Protestantism. In the words of an essay on Watts, appearing on the website of the United Reformed Church of the United Kingdom, "Isaac Watts was the man who, virtually single-handed, introduced, developed, invented the hymn as we know it today, as before him, the songs being sung with psalms, not hymns.

Isaac Watts was born in Southampton, England, on July 17, 1674. His parents were Dissenters—that is, they were not members of the Church of England. They adhered to the Congregational faith. That was a serious matter at the time; Dissenters, depending on the tolerance of the monarch on the English throne, might be allowed to worship freely but were always denied some measure of civil rights and suffered frequent harassment. Watts, the oldest of nine children, was born while his father, also named Isaac, was in prison. His mother nursed him while sitting on a large stone outside the prison gate, carrying on a silent protest against the unjust treatment meted out to her husband."¹

Watts knew about injustice and he knew about creating hymns that pointed to the steadfastness of God in the midst of oppression. I imagine his mother sitting out there in protest, one who could be arrested herself at any moment and shipped away with her children. She wanted a better life for her children, wishing for justice, equal rights, and religious liberty.

Seems like Mary might have been just like Isaac Watts' mother a bit. This passage is not one that sparks joy among us, but it is the Christmas story. It's a story of resistance, of Mary and Joseph fleeing with Jesus because of a despotic ruler. It's an image we don't have to imagine because we know that this is still a reality in our world.

It's a passage and a day known in the church calendar as the slaughter of the innocents. It feels abrupt and head spinning after our Advent and Christmas Eve.

As one commentator said this week, "There can be a gauzy, candlelit coziness to Christmas Eve and Day - and that's all well and good, as far as it goes. Coziness in the

¹ Isaac Watts, [encyclopedia.com](https://www.encyclopedia.com)

midst of December is a fine thing, and no Christmas season would be complete without the warm, wondrous enchantment it inspires.

But at the same time, there's a gritty, down-to-earth, even political side to the Christmas stories in scripture ("political" not in the partisan sense (God help us!), but rather in the deeply human, communal, what-kind-of-world-shall-we-build-together sense) - and sometimes the season's gauziness can obscure it. The best Advent and Christmas seasons honor both wonder and justice, coziness and the beloved community.

Far from a sentimental, romantic tale "in olden days of yore," the story is actually a subversive, high-stakes thriller - and a startlingly contemporary one at that, in this age of bitter controversy over immigration and authoritarianism all over the world.

Consider how Luke begins the story, right out of the gates, with a sentence that should take our breath away: "In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered"

All the world! Think of the sheer ambition in that decree, the totalitarian appetite. A single, comprehensive grid meant to fall across the whole creation, fixing its coordinates, seizing everything in a single grasp, capturing everyone the way a hidden net, camouflaged in the leaves, suddenly springs up and around its prey.

And for what? Luke's early listeners would know right away, of course: for taxes, for tribute to the empire, for extracting value in order to build palaces and armies - in short, for strengthening the imperial grip. And those listeners would know, too, the implicit threat of force in such a decree, the unsaid "or else," the chill in the air as the news spread far and wide.

But even in Bethlehem, God will be born beyond the coordinates of imperial control. No address, no trackable trail - this is the deep meaning of "no room in the inn." God arrives, but beyond the reach of the emperor's grasp. God is off the grid, hidden with the animals, as yet unnamed (the child isn't named until the 8th day ([Luke 2:21](#))). In brief, God is homeless, anonymous, incognito - that is: unregistered! Undocumented!

As Luke tells it, this is the story's most conspicuous dramatic tension. On one side, the emperor's attempt to control the world through registration - and on the other, God's unregistered arrival." ²

And back in Matthew, in our passage from today, Mary, Joseph, and Jesus are forced to flee, forced to go to Egypt for survival because Herod was afraid of a two year old. Herod wanted to steal whatever joy he could from as many as he could and replace with fear. And Jesus became a refugee. Eventually they learned they could return home. But joy in returning home was still an act of resistance.

"This Christmas season and beyond, let's recall the world-turning, subversive promises of Christmas, the radiant good news that God comes to lift up the lowly, to honor the

² SALT Project, "[Rethinking Christmas Eve](#)," December 23, 2019.

unregistered, to privilege the underprivileged - and to oppose every imperial attempt, yesterday and today, to control, extract, and hoard the blessings of creation.”³

Let’s remember Isaac Watts’ mother who nursed him in protest on the steps of a jail, raising him with the kind of deep faith that would inspire a creation like “Joy to the World.”

We sing *Joy to the World* because it is a song of resurrection and incarnation. We sing it because we know that the world as it is, is not the world as it ought to be.

Just like Isaac Watts’ mother sat on those steps in protest, and Mary and Joseph raised their child to know the truth of God’s love, so we do the same.

Christmas is dangerous business. Remember what we proclaimed on Christmas Eve—that God had come and there’s a new king in town. That’s radical and it’s threatening to anyone who is seeking to control the world.

“Rather than “joy” being yet another word for “happiness,” we will discover that the depths of joy can be found especially in the midst of suffering, the work of justice, and the presence of compassion—all part of the coming of Jesus to this world and a message the world still so desperately needs.”⁴

Christmas is breaking in all around us and we’ll keep singing about it.

Joy to the World, the Lord has Come.

Thanks be to God. Amen!

³ Ibid.

⁴ St. Paul UCC Pekin.