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Sermon 2 January 2022

Title: Let Heaven and Nature Sing

- Good morning church family and once again, Merry Christmas! This is of course the second Sunday of the Christmas season, but also, Happy New Year—2022. I hope that you had a great Hogmanay and New Years---that you got your steak pie or kept whatever your traditions are—Pastor Tasha and our had our traditional shrimp and grits for breakfast and then pork and Hoppin’ John and greens and hoe cakes for dinner—and we have scheduled our annual future planning meeting for the coming year—I know many of you have made resolutions and set goals for the New Year—you know, that’s one of the things that I love most about New Years—the Year ahead is so full of potential—anything could happen and so many people are so full of hope and motivation—they’re ready to put away the old and take up the new—folks want to break bad habits and change their behaviours—to transform themselves and make the new year better than the old one—and I know that in just a few weeks a lot of people are going to be disappointed in themselves and they’ll feel guilty because they didn’t follow through with what they wanted to do—but I’ll tell you something else I know and that is that God is able and you can be assured that God can do more than we can ask or even imagine—He always has and He always will. So let’s go into 2022 expectantly—expecting that God will do great things—marvellous things—because He’s going to.
- Now, over the past 5 Sundays, we have been using Isaac Watt’s beloved Christmas hymn, “Joy to the World” for our theme. We began by considering how the lyrics

“Joy to the World, the Lord is come,” remind us of the way that Jesus DID come—to Bethlehem and Nazareth and Galilee—the way he came to a very specific place and time in history—but then “the Lord IS come” also reminds us of the way that He IS here today—in the hearts and lives of his people, in his church ---but those words also reminded us of the way that He IS coming, in the future, and so we await a Kingdom that will be and look forward to his coming again as we work to prepare the way.

- On Gaudete Sunday, the third Sunday in Advent, “Let Earth Receive Her King” was our theme and we considered the joy that comes from receiving the gift that God has provided in Christ and how we are not to over-analyse and impose our own standards upon our situations—how we are called to be expectors and not inspectors—to live in hope-- expecting God to act and to provide for us
- The next week we learned about the way that John the Baptist prepared the way for Jesus, and we heard the instructions that he gave those who came to be baptised by him—instructions that are just as relevant for us today—instructions to “clean up and do the work that needs to be done”—to not only repent and be forgiven but also to bear fruit worthy of repentance. “Let Every Heart Prepare Him Room” was our title that week.
- And then last week we skipped ahead to the second verse of Joy to the world, the one that begins with this line: Joy to the World, the Saviour reigns. And we saw how very different the reign of Jesus was from that of Caesar, even though he was called Lord and Saviour. We learned that the Emperors Augustus and Tiberius had made it a crime to predict their deaths, the end of their reigns, but that the sign the angels gave to the shepherds did precisely that, foreshadowed Jesus’ crucifixion and death,

but that unlike those earthly rulers, Jesus' reign was just beginning when he rose from the dead by the power of the Holy Spirit.

- Now this morning we are going back to the first verse of "Joy to the World," and we've covered all of the lines except one, the last one—the song says "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 we sing that 3 times—so let's replace that and with the "let" that's implied, and so Isaac Watts says here, "Let Heaven and Nature Sing."
- We mentioned during our first sermon in this series that Watts had based "Joy to the World" on a few passages of scripture—and the scripture that it draws most clearly from is Psalm 98. And as you probably noticed as Pastor Tasha read it for us this morning, letting heaven and nature sing is one of the things that Psalm 98 is all about.
- Beginning in the middle stanza, verse 4, the psalmist declares "Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth"—and I know that for many of us, myself included, a joyful noise is about the best we can do—well maybe it's noise but at least it's joyful—the psalmist says it again in verse 6—make a joyful noise before the King, the Lord—isn't that a good reminder of what we're doing when we worship? We're not simply being entertained, we're not just after some emotional or even spiritual experience, although we may find that we do most certainly get something out of worshipping—but that experience is not the primary goal of the activity of worship—when we break forth into glorious song and sing praises, as the psalmist says in verse 4, and as the psalmist goes on, when we sing praises to the Lord with the lyre—that's L-Y-R-E not L-I-A-R--

- And when we do these things, sing songs and play instruments like the lyre and trumpets or the guitar and the bass and the keyboard and the box drum and the harmonica—the sound of melody and the sound of the horn—all that is not solely for our entertainment or even to inspire us or lift our spirits or move us emotionally in some way—though we may certainly be entertained and moved—we may enjoy our worship immensely and we may very well find it therapeutic and edifying and encouraging—but in the final analysis, that is not the purpose of worship, and worship is not successful or unsuccessful based on whether or not those things happen. And the psalmist makes this point several times here by saying make a joyful noise TO THE LORD, sing praises TO THE LORD, make a joyful noise before the King, the Lord—God is the recipient of our worship, God is the AUDIENCE, not US—and it's very easy sometimes to forget that because in most churches there is a worship team or a worship leader or a choir and instrumentalists and then there are people “out there” standing or seated and so you might think, well that's the audience, and up at the front those are the performers and if the audience enjoys the experience and gets something out of it, then it's been successful—but that is NOT the measure of success where worship is concerned—because whether you're seated at the back of the sanctuary or standing at the front with a microphone or playing an instrument—God is the audience, God is the one TO WHOM we sing praises—the one TO WHOM we make a joyful noise—even if “noise” is the best we can do, and I'm certainly thankful to have such talented musicians in our church who do so much more than just make noise, but even if noise is the best we can do, we're not doing it for what we get out of it, even though it can be a blessing to us, but the

recipient of our worship, our audience, is the King, the Lord—He is the one who is worshipped—He is the one who is praised.

- And the psalmist tells us why we ought to make a joyful noise to the Lord there in the first verse of psalm 98—we praise and worship Him because of what he has done—and He has done Marvellous things—His right hand and his holy arm have gained him victory. 2 The Lord has made known his victory; he has revealed his vindication in the sight of the nations. 3 He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness to the house of Israel. All the ends of the earth have seen the victory of our God.
- It was God who moved on the surface of the waters and brought forth all of creation—all of heaven and nature in the first place—it was God who brought the children of Israel out of their bondage in Egypt and parted the waters of the Red Sea so they could walk through on dry land, it was God who provided for them in the wilderness and led them to the promised land—he has done marvellous things
- Has God done marvellous things in your life? I know He has in mine—God does marvellous things every day among the people in this church, in this community, in the lives of individuals and in families—and if you can't think of any marvellous things that God's done for you then maybe you ought to ask Him to do some—but don't be surprised if God wants you to be the instrument through which they get done—God may give you the ability to do a marvellous thing because that's how God does marvellous things most of the time--through those who do His will
- Let Heaven and Nature sing praises to the Lord because of the marvellous things He has done—but what God HAS DONE is only half of what the psalmist is talking about here in Psalm 98—he's about to include what God is going to do

- When we move down to the last stanza of the Psalm, the psalmist goes on, and his vision gets bigger—he is no longer addressing only those people who can sing and play instruments in praise—he’s about to get geological, to include all of heaven and nature in his vision of worship--
- The psalmist writes: Let the sea roar, and all that fills it; the world and those who live in it. 8 Let the floods clap their hands; let the hills sing together for joy 9 at the presence of the Lord,
- Even the sea and the floodwaters—those forces of chaos—are commanded by the psalmist—like a worship leader he directs all of creation to offering up praise—let heaven and nature sing-- just as the people of God did in the previous stanza—and what is all of creation offering these praises in response to? The psalmist says in verse 9, let all this worship happen “at the presence of the Lord, for He is coming to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with equity.”
- So this is an apocalyptic vision—about judgment day—the Day of the Lord—that time when the Messiah will appear—that time about which John the Baptist is talking when he calls those who came to hear him a “brood of vipers.” You’ll remember that’s in Luke 3, when John talks about the coming wrath and the way that “Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” John says that the Messiah is coming and he’s got his winnowing fork in his hand to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.’

- And you might think that all that talk about wrath and judgement would sound like bad news, but Luke tells us that it's good news—and the writer of the Psalms also seems surprisingly upbeat when he describes the judgement that is coming—the Judge who is coming
- And if the arrival of the Messiah were ONLY about judgement, then that would certainly be bad news, but this is good news and I'll tell you why—this is good news because the one who is the JUDGE is also the one who is the REDEEMER, the one who executes justice is also the one who forgives, the one who demands holiness is also the one who SAVES, the one who gives Himself so that the power of sin might be broken, that death might be defeated, that the world might be transformed and harmony restored.
- Harmony is what was present before the Fall, when God created the Heavens and the Earth and called it good—everything worked together as it should, harmoniously—that's what the Old Testament writers understood as “shalom” or peace—that harmony that is present when heaven and earth are in sync, when they work together—but the Fall, when sin came into the world, shattered that harmony, broken the relationships between humans and each other, and humanity and God, and humanity and the rest of creation—and so humanity, and all of creation, are in need of redemption, are in need of transformation, so that harmony might be restored—
- you know harmony is what we call it when more than one parts are singing together—they're not the same, but they harmonize as they sing, they complement each other—and when Jesus arrives, harmony between the Creator and the creation

is made possible once again--- Jesus' arrival allows us to say "Let heaven and Nature sing" in harmony—"shalom"—

- Now, the Greek equivalent of "shalom" is "eirene" and the Apostle Paul says in Ephesians Chapter 2 that Jesus is our eirene, our peace, our shalom, our harmony-- and that he has broken down the dividing wall and proclaimed peace and harmony— now Paul is talking about the dividing wall between the Jews and the Gentiles but I want to suggest this morning that there's another dividing wall that Jesus breaks down and that's the wall between heaven and nature—that disharmony that sin and death and the Fall brought into the world—and it's because of Jesus, because of the power of the cross and the resurrection that we can be redeemed, that we can be transformed
- And when Jesus teaches his followers to pray to God the Father "your will be done on earth as it is in Heaven," he is reminding us of the divine creative and transforming power to bring harmony and holiness and life and to defeat sin and death and despair. And not only are we called to pray that prayer, but we can participate in that redemption and transformation—we are called to do just that— through repentance we can experience forgiveness and be transformed, and become a brand new creation—through God's transforming power we can see situations changed, we can see relationships restored and lives renewed.
- I want to share something with you because someone needs to hear this today—I want to remind you of something that the devil does—the devil, Satan, the Enemy, is a consistent denier of the transformative power of God—in the world, in your home, in your family, in your heart—the devil will tell you that things are bad and they're never going to get any better, that you're bad and never going to get any better—

the devil will bring up the worst things in your past and remind you of them, and distort them, and lie about them and try to make you and other people feel like you're no different than you ever were, that you could never be forgiven for the things you've done—the devil will make sure that neither you nor anyone else forgets all the terrible things you once did, and how terrible they were, and will burden you with guilt and shame and make you feel worthless—that's what the devil does and anyone who does that is doing the work of the devil—but I want to remind you this morning that when you're forgiven, God forgets—God doesn't see your sin when He looks at you, God sees a new creation, a transformed life, a redeemed situation—and just as God through the Living Word created the cosmos from the chaos in the beginning, He's still redeeming lives and families and communities through the creative and transforming power of His Son—bringing harmony where there was none, doing His will on earth as it is in Heaven. That's the good news of the gospel. Let Heaven and Nature sing.

- The South African Anglican theologian Archbishop Desmond Tutu died this past week at the age of 90. His funeral took place yesterday. He was the Archbishop of Cape Town and of Johannesburg before that—and I've seen a lot of memorials and quotes from him in the news and on social media, and I came across one particularly pertinent quote that I want to leave with you today—it's from his book *God has a Dream: a vision of Hope for our Time*, and the Archbishop writes:
 - “Dear Child of God, I write these words because we all experience sadness, we all come at times to despair, and we all lose hope that the suffering in our lives and in the world will ever end. I want to share with you my faith and my understanding that this suffering can be transformed and redeemed. There is

no such thing as a totally hopeless case. Our God is an expert at dealing with chaos, with brokenness, with all the worst that we can imagine. God created order out of disorder, cosmos out of chaos, and God can do so always, can do so now--in our personal lives and in our lives as nations, globally. ... Indeed, God is transforming the world now--through us--because God loves us.”

- As we take communion together this morning, let’s remember the transforming creative power of God, and be thankful.