

Three Songs

Isaiah 52:7-10 | Psalm 98 | Hebrews 1:1-12 | John 1:1-14

PSALM 98

¹ O sing to the LORD a new song, for 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. ⁴ Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises. ⁵ Sing praises to the LORD with the lyre, with the lyre and the sound of melody. ⁶ With trumpets and the sound of the horn make a joyful noise before the King, the LORD. ⁷ 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, for he is coming to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with equity.

INTRODUCTION

Three songs. Perhaps it's because we've sung together so rarely these last nine months, but music has been on my mind these last five weeks. And so, we will look at Psalm 98 together now, a Psalm that calls us to rejoice—a Psalm that shows us a reason to rejoice—and think of three songs.

1. SALVATION SECURED

We begin in New York in the autumn of 1971. At the Record Plant studio on West 44th, there's a room full of studio musicians. And in the centre of the room, teaching a riff to five rhythm guitarists is John Lennon. The song is called "Happy Xmas," which John wrote "because I was sick of White Christmas."¹ Fair enough—not my favourite tune either. But "Happy Xmas," John and Yoko's unapologetic protest against the Vietnam War, is a song that has an interesting message (sometimes buried in the background vocals).

And so Happy Christmas (war is over).
We hope you had fun (if you want it),
the near and the dear ones (war is over),
the old and the young (now).²

Part of what makes it interesting is the verb tense. War is over. Except that it wasn't. The US wouldn't remove troops for another year and a half and Saigon wouldn't fall until two years after that. But Lennon was able to write about it, grammatically speaking, as a completed action. The war is over. It's already finished, if you want to see it that way.

This oddity of timing should be familiar to Christians. The war is over. It's there in the first stanza—"*Sing to the Lord.*" 'Rejoice,' the Psalmist beckons, 'for God has already won the war.' "*His Right hand and his holy arm have gained him victory. The LORD has made known his victory; he*

¹ This quotation and the information in this paragraph are largely taken from Richard Williams's interview with John Lennon and Yoko Ono, first published as "John Lennon, Yoko Ono: John Lennon: So This Is Christmas..." in *Uncut* in 1998.

² John and Yoko / The Plastic Ono Band, "Happy Xmas (War Is Over)," Apple Records, released December 1, 1971.

has revealed his vindication in the sight of the nations." And indeed, friends, this is true, but much more than the Psalmist could have known. For while this Psalm refers to the earthly battles of the people of God, the Exodus—all those times God showed his mighty arm, it points to the greatest victory of all—that over sin and death.³ Paul asks in 1 Corinthians 15: "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" And he answers: "The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."⁴ Our war with sin and death has already been won.

What's my point here? Whether or not you agree with his politics, John Lennon was right about this: The message of Christmas is that war is over, if you want it. The thing we celebrate today, the Incarnation of Christ Jesus, already happened. Jesus Christ humbled himself to become human, 2000 years ago. That's the what the Incarnation is. But it didn't stop there. He humbled himself to the point of death, even death on a cross.⁵ He died and rose again. That happened. God became man and that man, Jesus Christ, reconciled us to God. War is over. And it may not feel like it, and the battles may even rage on, but God's victory has been won. If you want it.

2. PRAISE IN THE PRESENT

And so, what? Rejoice. The first stanza of the Psalm, focused on that past victory of God, calls us to sing a new song. And the second stanza, firmly focused on the present, does the same. "*Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises.*" Because God's victory has been won, we rejoice. The Psalmist calls on the musicians—the singers, the stringed instruments, and the brass section. Though, it's probably worth noting even the Psalmist doesn't expect the drummer to show up. Rejoice. "*Make a joyful noise before the king.*"

And I know, my friends, this seems like an insane plea at this point. We've watched the American political system slowly unravel over the last few years. The shadow of Brexit still hangs over us. Societies—not just in the west, but across the world—have torn themselves apart over race. And that's not even starting to contemplate the loved ones we've lost to a pandemic, the mental and emotional anguish of spending the holidays without them, for some, the prospect of spending the holidays alone, and frustration of looming lockdowns yet to begin. I'll be honest, there are many days where I do not feel like rejoicing at all. And yet, as a Christian, I have a reason to rejoice that transcends all of this—the confidence that my salvation has been secured by Christ Jesus.

Let's take a step back, this time to 1843 and southern France. The wine merchant, Placide Cappeau, inspired by the renovation of his church and the restoration of a stained-glass window, composed a poem that begins this way:

Midnight, Christians, is the solemn hour when the Human God descended to us, to erase original sin and cease the wrath of his Father.

This poem makes clear, from its very first line, we have all the reason in the world to rejoice. This thing we celebrate today is that God sent his Son to put an end to the turmoil between God

³ See, for example, Exod 6:6 and 15:16 or Deut 4:34.

⁴ 1 Cor 15:55-57.

⁵ Phil 2:8.

and us caused by our sin. This poem was set to music by Adolphe Adam that same year, or in 1847—depending on which historical account you follow. And the text was translated into English in 1855 by a Unitarian minister, John Sullivan Dwight, just outside of Boston. Dwight’s text and Adam’s music are still frequently sung today as the carol, *O Holy Night*. And in the middle of the first verse, these lines appear:

A thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices,
for yonder breaks a new and glorious morn.⁶

A weary world. This sounds like the present you and I are in. From pandemics to politics to just the normal problems of a stressful time of year, *weary* is entirely accurate. And yet, the weary world rejoices? Why? Because there is a new and glorious morning around the corner. “*Weeping may endure for a night,*” so the Psalmist says, “*but joy cometh in the morning.*”⁷

3. FORGIVENESS FOR THE FUTURE

And this brings us to the final stanza of the Psalm. Rejoice because of what the Lord has done in the past. Rejoice because of what the Lord has done in the present. And in the final few verses, rejoice because of what the Lord will do in the future. “*Let the floods clap their hands; let the hills sing together for joy.*” Let all creation sing for joy because the Lord is coming to bring justice, to judge with righteousness and equity. Wait, clapping. The drummer finally did show up. But if we’re honest, this stanza should terrify us a little. God is going to come—and bring justice? I know myself well enough—my sinful thoughts and actions, my evil and rebellious ways—to know that if God is bringing justice and equity, this is not a good thing for me. God’s righteousness is actually the last thing I want, because it will necessarily exclude me. Except this: God already provided the way of salvation. As a Christian, I have no need to fear the coming righteous judgment of God because victory over sin and death has been secured by Christ Jesus and graciously given to me—to all of us—in the form of forgiveness. And if that isn’t a reason to rejoice, I don’t know what is.

CONCLUSION

And so, let me conclude: As Christians, we don’t live merely in the present. We also live unashamedly in the past and fearlessly in the future. Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.⁸ Perhaps you do not yet believe in Jesus Christ and what his birth means for humankind, then let me tell you: War is over—war with God, or on the other side of the coin, the struggle with sin—war is over, if you want it. Believe, my brothers and sisters, my near ones and dear ones, accept the gift of faith. And then, even though we probably don’t feel like it in this miserable year, the salvation secured by Christ, this is all the reason a weary world could need to rejoice. And so, sing to the Lord a new song. “Joy to the world, the Lord is come.”⁹

Let me pray: *Heavenly Father, we thank you for sending your Son, that we might rejoice in the salvation he brings. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

⁶ The history and lyrics of *O Holy Night* cited here can be found in Benjamin Irvy, “A brief history of ‘O Holy Night,’ the rousing Christmas hymn that garnered mixed reviews,” *American Magazine*, November 19, 2020. See: americamagazine.org/arts-culture/2020/11/19/brief-history-o-holy-night-christmas-hymn-review

⁷ Psa 30:5 (KJV).

⁸ The Archbishop’s Council 2000, *Common Worship* (London: Church House Publishing, 2000), 170, 232.

⁹ Isaac Watts, “Joy to the World”, 1719.