

A Season of Song
A series of seasonal meditations from John Rackley

Sunday 13 December 2020 (Advent 3)

*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.*

By Isaac Watts. Written in 1719 as a comment on Psalm 98.
(*Singing the Faith*, 330)

This year the news agenda has been dominated by Covid-19, Brexit, Black Lives Matter and the US Presidential election. Each has deeply affected the lives of millions of people. Yet looming over all has been the Climate Crisis.

It seems to be pushed to back of the agenda too often despite the best efforts of Sir David Attenborough and numerous pressure groups. The damage to our planet is making our future fraught with uncertainty anticipating global disorder and chaos. No matter where the news agencies place it, Climate Change must be high on the agenda of God's people. How can we sing of joy to the world without participating in what will bring heaven and nature together? Creation Care is a joint responsibility with the Maker of heaven and earth. It is not just a theme for the season of harvest.

The hymn 'Joy to the World' was not written for Advent but its themes suit this season. It proclaims Jesus the King who will dwell within us but then takes us to the wider horizon of God's salvation.

Let heaven and nature sing.

Isaac Watts is interpreting a psalm which sets the relationship of heaven and nature at the heart of the redemptive work of God. The prophet Isaiah too linked the restoration of disordered nature with God's care for his exiled people in a moving striking set of images which concludes with 'a little child shall lead them' (Isaiah 11:6).

Many carols and hymns explore the image of welcoming the Christ-child as if we were the stable. We are to make room for him in the crowded conditions of our daily life. This is good as long as our understanding of the Advent of the Christ does not end there. If it does then we are guilty of becoming self-absorbed and turning the Gospel into a personal rescue plan just for our benefit. For there is more going on in the arrival of the Messiah – there is a re-balancing of all creation; a re-tuning of nature's song.

While fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains

Repeat the sounding joy.

The fields around Bethlehem echoed to the voice of the angels in anticipation of the Christ who is God's cosmic event. The work of God's righteousness goes far beyond the human heart. It is active in the relationship between nations and peoples. But there is more. It results in a re-ordering of the natural way of things. There will be a new heaven and new earth.

And the bass line is *joy*. A divine song of renewal floods the universe with joy. Joy is not another word for happiness. It is a deep experience of fulfilment. Joy arrives when something is completed. It may be accompanied by smiles but it is a serious delight. Something has been achieved which will make a significant difference.

Rowan Williams recently entitled a tribute to his friend Jonathan Sacks (who died in November) '*The Joy of Jonathan Sacks*'. He commented on a theme of many of his books:

'I suspect that what Jonathan was always seeking to articulate was the sense that Jewish people were called not so much to orthodoxy of doctrine but to sheer fidelity to the task of inviting human beings into covenantal commitment with one another... without that fidelity, no doctrinal utterance was going to make sense, let alone persuade anyone of its truth.'

Sacks was a joy to know but he was also committed to making the joy of God complete through his people. They were people of the Covenant and a sign for all peoples. A sign that came to completion in Christ. Covenantal living is God's design for all of us. We are called to be in covenant with each other and all things.

In the Christian calendar, the third Sunday of Advent is *Gaudete Sunday* whose signature note is '*REJOICE!*'

In the midst of Advent, which is rightly so much about disciplined penitence and preparation, we celebrate the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. It is as if we are called to pause in our imaginary trek to Bethlehem and take in the horizon that God is opening before us. It is time to wonder at the extraordinary nature of God's salvation. It is all the Lord's work and it is wonderful in our eyes.

In the words of John Bell (in *Singing the Faith*, 101):

*All who received the Word
By God were blessed;
Sisters and brothers they
Of earth's fond guest.
So did the word of Grace
Proclaim in time and space
And with a human face,
"I AM FOR YOU"*

Prayer:

O God, the Creator of heaven and earth,
so fill us with joy at the coming of your Son
that we live in harmony
with you and all your creation. Amen.