

Sermon for December 25, 2015 – Christmas Day

Psalm 98:1-3 (NIV84)

Theme: Celebrate a Better Christmas with a Better Christmas Song

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. (Psalm 98:1-3 NIV84)

One of the joys of Christmas is singing all the beautiful carols of the season. And there are so many of them!

Think about the Christmas songs you like: what are they about? I know: this might seem like a silly question, but there are a lot of different Christmas songs about a lot of different things - ranging from Santa and snow to songs about Christ and his birth.

Even songs about Jesus are not all the same. Some seem to exclusively describe the nativity with very little mention of why Jesus' birth was important. Other famous carols seem to exclusively talk about the gifts we should bring baby Jesus. And then there are those hymns that speak about the spiritual meaning of Jesus' birth.

It is certainly important to sing on Christmas, but even more important than that is the choice of songs we sing. Let us consider this truth, under the theme: **Celebrate a Better Christmas with a Better Christmas Song.**

Our Psalm begins: *Sing*

What does the Bible mean when it calls Christians to sing? At first glance this might seem like a dumb question, but it really isn't. You see, the singing Scripture encourages means more than just carrying a tune. It is akin, rather, to telling a story - proclaiming the marvelous things God has done!

Songs have a way of communicating that mere story telling can't accomplish. Music stirs the emotions. For example, who doesn't get excited singing "Joy to the World," or feel at peace when singing "Silent Night." Music communicates those feelings in a way that words cannot.

God doesn't just want us to read His Gospel as if we were reading a newspaper about world events – detached from the story. No, he wants His Gospel to take hold of our emotions, intellect and will. This is why he uses the word "sing."

Sing to the LORD a new song.

What is the song God wants us to sing and why is it called new? Replace the word "song" with "religion" or "theology" and you will soon understand.

The "old song" is the theology of natural, fallen man who thinks that he can earn God's love and salvation through his own works. The "lyrics" of the old song are very familiar. They go like this: "Always do what feels right to you. It's up to you to get right with God. How can you expect God to love you if you don't love him first? Just live a good life and you too will get to heaven."

Other than true, biblical Christianity, every religion and non-religion in this world is a variation of the same old song: “Do good and you will be fine.” The problem with this theology is that it is simply not true. God’s law does not ask us to try hard, it demands perfection. And can any of us be perfect? Consider the words of Scripture: *whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.*ⁱ And again, “*If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.*”ⁱⁱ

You see, then, the “old song” of praising man’s ability to earn favor with God is a wretched song – regardless of how attractive the melody is to the human heart. Singing this song either leaves us puffed up in arrogance, or in the depths of despair because of our total inability to live the perfect life God’s law demands of us. It always directs us away from our salvation and ultimately leads us to hell.

This is why the LORD encourages us to sing a *new song*. What is this song and why is it called new? The very next words of our text explains that this song is the story of the *marvelous things* God did to save us. It is called new because mankind can’t know what God did unless He himself explains it.

Think of the nativity, for example. When the world looks at a manger scene, all it sees is a poor mother, father and baby surrounded by animals. They should be pitied. God’s Word, however, reveals there is much more to the scene than what the human eye can see. There, wrapped in swaddling clothes and laying in a bed of hay, is the almighty Son of God who has been born to die on the cross for our sins. We can’t know this unless God reveals it to us and this is exactly why our song is called new.

Yes, sing to the LORD a new song, that is joyfully live your life to the glory of God – proclaiming through your words, actions and attitude the marvelous things God has done.

And what has he done? *His right hand and his holy arm have worked salvation for him.*

When the Bible speaks of God’s hand or arm, it mostly refers to God’s powerful intervention to save his people. The prophet Isaiah once wrote that when God saw how steeped in sin mankind was, that no truth, justice or righteousness could be found on this earth, *he was appalled that there was no one to intervene; so his own arm worked salvation for him, and his own righteousness sustained him.*ⁱⁱⁱ

In other words, because mankind couldn’t save itself, God did it for us. And how did He do it? With his own holy arm of Jesus! He is the one God sent to intervene on our behalf – working out our salvation by living the life of perfect obedience to God’s law that we all failed to live, by suffering and dying in payment for our sins, and by rising from the dead – proving beyond any shadow of a doubt that He has reconciled us to the Father. Our sins need no longer stand against us. Through faith in him we are at peace with the LORD.

This is the salvation Jesus worked out to the glory of God's saving name. He has broken the devil’s power over us. Through faith, we belong to him.

Our psalm continues: *The LORD has made his salvation known and revealed his righteousness to the nations.* Jesus wasn’t just born into this world as the Savior of the Jews. No, the heavenly angels told the shepherds that the birth of Jesus *is good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.*^{iv}

The songs the angels sang, Simeon’s prophecy over baby Jesus at the temple, the worship of the magi – all these things reveal baby Jesus as the one who would bring true righteousness and salvation to every tribe, people, language and nation on this earth. Jesus is our “universal Savior” – who continues to make himself known in the world through the preaching of the Gospel.

And what does the Gospel say about Him? That *He has remembered his love and his faithfulness to the house of Israel.*

When God called Abraham to faith, he made him a promise: that through a special descendant of his all nations would be blessed. And, in spite of the depravity of man, the perverse nature of his people and their rebellious ways, the LORD never forgot his covenant with Abraham. Throughout the centuries He patiently and repeatedly called his people to repentance - lovingly reminding them of his promise until the time came for Jesus to be born.

And when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons.^v “That we might receive the full rights of sons? Sons of whom?” someone might ask. Sons of God; as the Scriptures say: How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And (because of the salvation God sent His Son to accomplish) that is what we are!^{vi}

Our psalm continues: *all the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God.* That is to say: God so desires all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth^{vii} that he commissioned us to share the good news of Jesus with every one we can. He considers the worldwide spread of the Gospel as so important that he already calls it as a done deal.

And how does the Gospel spread? Through our singing of this new song – that is to say, through our joyful sharing of God’s holy Gospel, as the Scriptures say: *“Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? . . . As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!”^{viii}*

And so, dear brothers and sisters in Christ, God wants you to celebrate a better Christmas by singing a better Christmas song. Don’t worry – all you non-singers – this does not mean actually carrying a tune. Rather, it means that we rejoice in the Christmas Gospel so much ourselves that our confession of it will be “song like” in the ears of others.

But how can we attain such joy in the Gospel that our words and actions become a song before the world? We get it by basking in the Gospel ourselves – not just by coming to Church on Christmas and Easter, but every Sunday of the year. The more we, by meditating on God’s Law, realize our need for a Savior, the greater we will appreciate him. Not only that, but the more we study the Gospel, the more we will stand in awe of what lengths the LORD went to in order to save us. Through constant contact with the Means of Grace, the Holy Spirit strengthens both your faith and love for him to such a degree that you can’t help but be like the Shepherds who, after seeing the Savior, *spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child. . . glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.^{ix}*

Today is Christmas: the day our God was born as a human baby in order to enter our story to win our salvation. Celebrate a better Christmas by singing the better Christmas song of the marvelous things God has done for you in Christ. May the LORD grant that your words and actions loudly proclaim this song among your family, friends and neighbors so that they don’t remain stuck – singing the same old tune of trying to save themselves, but learn to rejoice with you in everything the LORD has done for them. Amen.

ⁱ James 2:10 NIV84

ⁱⁱ 1 John 1:8 NIV84

ⁱⁱⁱ Isaiah 59:16 NIV84

^{iv} Luke 2:10 KJV

^v Galatians 4:4-5 NIV84

^{vi} 1 John 3:1 NIV84

^{vii} 1 Timothy 2:4 NIV84

^{viii} Romans 10:13-15 NIV84

^{ix} Luke 2:17,20 NIV84