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Young Isaac began his life in July 1674 in chaos, for his parents were “Dissent-ers,” non-Anglicans—in those days considered treasonous. Isaac, Sr. was a deacon in a Congregation Church in Southampton, England, for which he was arrested for being part of this non-Anglican radical religion. After the birth of their son, wife Sarah nursed young Isaac while sitting on a rock outside the prison where her husband was confined. When Isaac, Sr. was finally released from prison, he and his wife watched young Isaac grow and discovered they had a very talented child, who learned many languages and enjoyed writing poetry.

After graduating from college at the age of 19, Isaac, Jr. complained to his father about the dismal singing at church, so his father challenged him to write something better. He wrote what was considered the first English hymn composed for congregational use, first published in 1707. The congregation he and his family attended liked the hymn so much that they asked him to prepare a new song each week, which he did.

You may recognize his name, Isaac Watts, known as the “Father of English Hymnody,” for his over 400 hymns have been sung for the past 300 years. He eventually became the pastor of a church and continue composing hymns, which got him into trouble, for the growing popularity of his hymns was causing a tempest. “Christian congregations have shut out divinely inspired Psalms,” one man complained, “and taken in Watts’ flights of fancy.” The issue of singing hymns versus Psalms split churches¹

In response Isaac had a breakdown, so the church hired an associate minister to help with pastoral duties, though Isaac continued writing hymns. Three hundred years ago this year, in 1719 he published a massive project based on most of the 150 Psalms from the Bible. This collection included many songs we cherish today, including “O God, Our Help in Ages Past.”

Isaac Watts took imagery from Psalm 98 and created a Christmas carol we especially enjoy singing this time of year. The Psalm invites us to: “Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth; break

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forth into joyous song and sing praises.” The song that Isaac Watts wrote about joy? “Joy to the World.”

Over the next four weeks we celebrate the 300th anniversary of this joyous Christmas carol. In the midst of the struggles of his life, it’s amazing that Isaac Watts could produce so much wonderful music, especially this one Christmas carol that celebrates joy and warms our hearts during the holiday season.

Over the next several weeks, we will honor and celebrate Joy to the World, but it’s more than the music he wrote that brings us joy, for we also celebrate the joy of the world that entered in the birth of the baby Jesus, born in a manger in a cave.

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines joy as “the emotion evoked by well-being, success, or good fortune or by the prospect of possessing what one desires,”² though I’m not sure Mary and Joseph would have defined joy in such a way. They had no place to stay as they traveled to their hometown for a census count of the people—that’s certainly not much well-being—and yet, something joyful

happened in their lives. Even though they had to sneak home by a covert route to avoid being hunted down by a jealous king who thought the baby would one day overthrow his leadership, the couple still found joy as visitors came to see this new baby.

I’m also not sure that Isaac Watts would have agreed that joy comes only from well-being, for his life began in turmoil and his new-style music was controversial.

But can you imagine a world without Joy to the World? Without heaven and nature sing? Without repeat the sounding joy and wonders of his love? Our Advent and Christmas season would just not be the same.

Throughout history God’s people have faced times when others have tried to take joy out of the world. The prophet Jeremiah spoke to God’s people during one of those times, 600 years before Jesus was born. Many of the people had been forcibly removed from their homes and carried away into exile to Babylon, a foreign land that was *not* a home away from home. In the midst of the chaos when

their captors tried to suck the joy out of their lives, Jeremiah offered some joyful words from God:

¹⁵I promise that the time will come
when I will appoint a king
from the family of David,
a king who will be honest
and rule with justice.

¹⁶In those days,
Judah will be safe;
Jerusalem will have peace

What a joyful vision! A time when God's peace would fill the land, when God's presence would give them joy. Even though they had been captured and carried away, Jeremiah saw some possibility of joy in their future.

Sometimes we think we can only find joy when life is easy, when all our problems have been solved, but as Archbishop Tutu from South Africa reminds us:

“Discovering more joy does not, I’m sorry to say...save us from the inevitability of hardship and heartbreak. In fact, we may cry more easily, but we will laugh more easily, too. Perhaps we are just more alive. Yet as we discover more joy, we can face suffering in a way that ennobles

rather than embitters. We have hardship without becoming hard. We have heartbreak without being broken.”³

Archbishop Tutu and the Dalai Lama met several years ago to explore the topic of joy. The Dalai Lama said before the trip:

One great question underlies our existence... “What is the purpose of life? After much consideration, I believe that the purpose of life is to find happiness.

“It does not matter whether one is a Buddhist like me, or a Christian like the Archbishop, or any other religion, or no religion at all. From the moment of birth, every human being wants to discover happiness and avoid suffering. No differences in our culture or our education or our religion affect this. From the very core of our being, we simply desire joy and contentment. But so often these feelings are fleeting and hard to find, like a butterfly that lands on us and then flutters away.

“The ultimate source of happiness is within us. Not money, not power, not status. Some of my friends are billionaires, but they are very unhappy people. Power and money fail to bring inner peace. Outward attainment will not bring real inner joyfulness. We must look inside.”⁴

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Sometimes we get caught up thinking that external things will bring us joy, as was the case with a Sunday school teacher telling four- and five-year-old children about the building of the temple.

She explained to the students that when the temple was finished, the *presence* of the Lord filled the temple. Instantly the eyes of each child got wide and full of excitement. She soon discovered, however, that the source of their excitement was not joy that God had come to dwell in the temple, but rather, delight at imagining that huge building filled with *presents* from God!⁵

This time of year, it's very easy to get overly focused on the presents—PRESENTS—that we might

miss God's presence—PRESENCE. I know that joy comes to the world in both ways, for a gift well given and well received can bring joy to the giver and the receiver, but it's God's presence through Jesus Christ that became the greatest present ever given.

During the next four weeks of Advent, we prepare our hearts for the birth of Jesus. We wait. We anticipate. In this time of waiting, may you find Joy to the World, a gift given to us in music 300 years ago, inspired by the gift of Jesus thousands of years before, reminding us of the presence of God.

¹ Morgan, Robert J. *Then Sings My Soul Special Edition*. Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

² <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/joy>

³ Lama, Dalai. *The Book of Joy* (p. 12). Penguin Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

⁴ Lama, Dalai. *The Book of Joy* (p. 14). Penguin Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

⁵ Hodgins, Michael. *1001 Humorous Illustrations for Public Speaking: Fresh, Timely, and Compelling Illustrations for Preachers, Teachers, and Speakers* (Kindle Locations 5367-5370). Zondervan. Kindle Edition, #1001.