

Sometimes it's important to look at things with different eyes. Sometimes you need to step back, to look again, to consider things from a different angle.

Because it's all too easy to get locked into one pattern or one mindset and miss things. We sometimes get so used to what is "normal" or "usual" that we miss out on something else. Sometimes it's important to step back, to reflect, to think, to reexamine.

We just celebrated a national holiday that's all about stepping back, reflecting, thinking about the blessings in our lives. Thanksgiving is our annual celebration of pausing and being thankful for all the blessings we might take for granted the other 364 days of the year. God provides us all we need, and it's vitally important to our spiritual health to recognize and acknowledge that fact. Thanksgiving can be an important spiritual reset button for us.

Ironically, as a culture, we make a quick and abrupt shift. It's become so natural we might not even think about it.

On Thanksgiving we say that we are thankful for all we have. And yet, the next day, Black Friday, we proclaim we don't have enough—we need more. It's time to go out and get it. It's time to fight the crowds in order to acquire the perfect deal, to indulge in the great sale, to get more, more, more.

Now, to be fair, our buying patterns following Thanksgiving are often about others. I need to go out and get gifts for those I love.

Nevertheless, it's a pretty abrupt transition. I'm thankful for all I have on Thursday. But I need to get a lot more on Friday.

Maybe we need to pause, to step back, to look at things from a different angle.

This weekend, our culture jumps into Christmas whole hog. But on the calendar, today is November 25<sup>th</sup>. Christmas is still a month away.

We have 5 Sundays between now and Christmas, counting today.

Next Sunday we begin the 4 Sundays of Advent, a time to spiritually prepare for our celebration of Jesus' coming into the world. That gives us the opportunity to look at Christmas from a different angle, from a different viewpoint compared to the culture around us.

But today, we are offered yet another perspective. This is Christ the King Sunday. We pause to look at Jesus, and acclaim him as King of kings and Lord of lords.

And this morning (at 10:30) we (will sing/just sang), "Joy to the world, the Lord is come: let earth receive her King."

We assume this is a Christmas song. That's the way it's used in our culture and even in our hymnal. You open the hymnal up to Hymn 100 and there it is, in the section marked "Christmas."

Interestingly though, in the hymnal of my childhood "Joy to the world" appears in a different location, with an older tune. It wasn't in the Christmas section. It was in the section marked "General Hymns." That's because "Joy to the world" was never written to be a Christmas carol.

Sure, it makes a fine Christmas carol. Sure, in a month we'll sing it at our Christmas Eve services. Yes, I love it when Dr. Hollins starts playing (the introduction).

But today, I want to take a moment and step back, and look at this 300-year-old song<sup>1</sup> with different eyes. Is there a message here that we miss because we sing it only as a Christmas Carol?

"Joy to the world" was written by the great Isaac Watts. Watts is often called the Father of English Hymnody. And Watts was all about looking at things from a different perspective.

In his time, most English Church music consisted of singing various translations of the Psalms. And some of the translations were extremely awkward. As a teenager, Isaac Watts complained about how bad these lyrics were. His father challenged him to write something better. He did.

Isaac Watts eventually wrote more than 600 songs. And many of them were based on the psalms. But Watts was trying to update the psalms, to write them in a way that sounded as if they had been freshly written in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. He also wanted to add Jesus' message of God's love and forgiveness and grace to the Old Testament texts.

We're singing 3 of Watt's hymns today at (this/the 10:30) service, and two of these are based on Psalms. Our opening hymn, "Jesus shall reign where'er the sun," is Watt's update of Psalm 72. "Joy to the world" is his update of Psalm 98.

And Watts did not write "Joy to the world" with Christmas in mind. He was thinking of Jesus' second coming. In that sense it is more of an Advent text. But he was also thinking of Jesus as King, which makes it appropriate to Christ the King Sunday.

It's funny—if you remove your Christmas preconceptions about "Joy to the world," it actually sounds very similar to another Advent hymn in our hymnal, ironically a hymn sung to the same tune as the original tune to "Joy to the world." And the first verses of these two hymns have a lot of overlap.

Hymn 100 says, "Joy to the world! the Lord is come."

Hymn 72 says, "Hark! the glad sound! the Savior comes."

Hymn 100 says, "let every heart prepare him room, and heaven and nature sing."

Hymn 72 says, "let every heart prepare a throne, and every voice a song."

And yet, we take Hymn 72 and say "Advent." And we take "Joy to the world" and say "Christmas."

---

<sup>1</sup> Actually 299 this year...

Plus, "Joy to the world" is all about Jesus reigning as king:

V1: "Joy to the world! the Lord is come: let earth receive her King."

V2: "Joy to the world! the Savior reigns."

V4: "He rules the world with truth and grace."

This is not about a baby in a manger. This is not about angels and shepherds. This is about the coming of Jesus Christ, the mighty King of kings and Lord of lords. Which makes it a perfect song for Christ the King Sunday.

We just need to pause, and step back, and look at things from a different angle.

That's the whole purpose of Christ the King Sunday. Unlike many celebrations in the church year, this one is relatively new—it's only about 100 years old. It came from the time of WWI. WWI began as a conflict between Tsars and Kaisers and Kings.

And yet, the Christian church at that time said, 'Take another look. These earthly rulers may claim the titles of kings. But there is only one ultimate King.' And so on the last Sunday of the church year, Christians pause to remember that Jesus is the true King above all kings.

And that can be threatening to earthly kings. We read in our Gospel lesson from John about Jesus' trial. John tells of the exchanges between Pontius Pilate and Jesus.

Pilate serves an earthly king, an earthly Caesar, an emperor with an earthly empire.

And yet Jesus comes with a different kind of authority, a different kind of kingdom. His power operates differently from regular earthly power.

Thus we heard Jesus tell Pilate, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the (Jewish authorities). But as it is, my kingdom is not from here."<sup>2</sup>

Pilate did NOT understand that kind of kingship. Pilate did not understand that kind of authority.

What boils down to is this. Pilate refused to look at Jesus from a different angle. He pigeon-holed Jesus and slotted him into his own categories.

Of course, we have the same dangerous tendency.

We also pigeon-hole Jesus. We often seek to domesticate Jesus. Because a domesticated Jesus won't make any demands upon us.

---

<sup>2</sup> Jn 18:36

A king might make demands. A king might ask us to live in a different way. So maybe we can domesticate Jesus and keep him safe and non-threatening.

My favorite instance of this is from the 2006 comedy movie, *Talladega Nights*. In the movie, Will Farrell plays a NASCAR racer, Ricky Bobby. Ricky Bobby often prays. But he only prays to baby Jesus.

Ricky Bobby doesn't want to deal with Jesus the man, Jesus the savior, Jesus the king. So he focuses on the baby. At one point he addresses his prayer to "dear 8 pounds 6 ounces baby Jesus, new born, not even spoken a word yet."

Like many people in our culture, Ricky Bobby forgets that the infant in the manger will later be the savior on the cross. And he will be the mighty victor who conquers death itself. And he will be the king who returns in glory.

A helpless infant makes no demands on your life.

But an all-powerful king of the universe does ask you to make alterations in your life.

As Isaac Watts reminds us, our king wants to make a change in here (heart). "Let every heart prepare him room."

The world is often a troubled place. And yet, as Isaac Watts reminds us, our King "comes to make his blessings flow far as the curse is found."

We live in a difficult time. We're living through a troubled and divided season in our country's history. Maybe we need "Joy to the world." Not just at Christmas. But all year.

Do we keep baby Jesus in the manger? Or do we allow him to rule over us as King of kings? "Let every heart prepare him room." That doesn't just mean warm fuzzy feelings at Christmas. That means following his commands today, living his way of love today.

That means living according to standards that are sometimes counter-cultural. We just need to pause, and step back, and look at things from a different angle.

Our world says "power." Our king says, "my kingdom is not from this world." In other words, our king is telling us, 'My kingdom does not operate in the ways that earthly kings and rulers operate.'

Our world says, "vengeance." Our king says, "love your enemies."

Our world celebrates Black Friday. Yet we worship a king who died for us on Good Friday. And by doing so, Jesus opens the way of life.

His sacrifice leads to our victory. His death on the cross is the source of our life.

As Isaac Watts also wrote in a different hymn,

"When I survey the wondrous cross where the young Prince of Glory died, my richest gain I count but loss, and pour contempt on all my pride."<sup>3</sup>

And that cross demands something of us. That love demands something of us. As Isaac Watts concludes that hymn,

"Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all."

Jesus Christ is King of kings. Jesus asks us to open our hearts to him. AND Jesus commands us to live in his way of love. "Let every heart prepare him room."

---

<sup>3</sup> Hymn 474