

I. Over the last month we've been thinking about Christmas Carols. Mining them for insights on life and God and related topics.

A. Of course, we have been a bit selective. We did not do *Santa Claus is Coming Town* by Springsteen or *Jingle Bell Rock* by Bobby Helms. We didn't do Bing Crosby's *White Christmas* or Elvis's *Blue Christmas*. We didn't sing about Frosty or Rudolph

B. Nor did we do just any religious Christmas song. Some are not worth a lot of analysis. For instance:

1. *Little Drummer Boy?* Really. You've got the whole *Silent Night* motif going, which makes sense given that you have a new born. And then some kid shows up playing a drum and Mary is supposed to be happy about this?
2. Or how about *We Wish You a Merry Christmas?* Rude friends come to your home demanding "figgy pudding," and stating that they are not leaving until they get some." It sounds like time to call the police and get some new friends.

C. Not all songs are worth a deeper dive. But some are. They not only put us in a Christmas mood, they smuggle some powerful spiritual insights into our heart and mind. Over the last month we've looked at a few. Today we look at two.

II. The first is *What Child of This*, which was written by 19th century insurance agent named William Chatterton Dix, and which opens with a question.

A. He imagines that we have stumbled upon a remarkable scene. It's Bethlehem 2,000 years ago. A young woman has just given birth to a child in a barn behind an inn. Shepherds have gathered to look on – as have angels. The later are what make this scene remarkable. They are glorious. Their uncloaked beauty and majesty are so other-worldly that their presence always initially terrifies people.

B. The fact that they are there means something big is happening. But remarkably, the only people there are shepherds – who hardly count. They sit at the bottom of first century social strata. Shepherds were generally so poor, uneducated and untrustworthy that their testimony was not allowed in court.

C. Which means, the birth of this baby is being hailed by heaven, but ignored on earth. Dix asks, "What is going on? What child is this? Who's the baby? Why the choir of angels? Billions of babies have been born, what is so special about this one? And if he is special, where is everybody?"

D. I'd like to suggest that the question Dix asks – What child is this? – is not simply a question, it is THE question. And it's not just THE question at Christmas, it's THE question of all time. One way or the other, the way we answer this question changes everything. What we do with Jesus is what ultimately defines us.

E. While we are here let me note, there are ways to answer THE question that get you partial credit. You could say: 1) He is the most influential person who ever lived; or 2) He is the greatest teacher of all time; or even 3) He's the greatest moral reformer.

F. Some people might push back on some of these answers, but not many. No one credible. Reputable historians acknowledge that Jesus shaped the world more than any other person.¹

G. Of course, the controversy around Jesus don't pivot there. The debates are not over whether he was influential. The debates are over whether He is God. That is what He claimed. He claimed to have existed before time began; to be one with the Father and able to forgive sins; He claimed that He would ultimately rule and judge over everyone; He claimed to be the King of Kings. And this is the answer Dix leads with.

III. What child is this who's sleeping on Mary's lap? This is Christ the King

A. This is the Christ – the Messiah. This is the Savior of the world. **This, this is Christ the King, whom shepherds guard and angels sing: Haste, haste to bring him laud (glory) the babe, the Son of Mary**

IV. So, the first question: Who is Jesus? The answer? He claims to be the Messiah and King. He is the one worthy of our love and honor. I am here because I think He is. The second question – which opens verse 2 – is, well if he is The King, the Messiah, the Son of God, then what is he doing in a stable?

A. **Why lies He in such mean estate, where ox and ass are feeding?** If he is great, what's with the barn?

B. By the way, the focus isn't really on a first century Jewish barn compared to the Four Seasons in downtown Chicago today. Had Jesus been born in the grandest hospital ever, and had the entire world been waiting to worship him – that would still have been a profane and cosmic humiliation compared to the glory he had in heaven.

C. The real question isn't, "Why the barn?" But, "What's He doing on earth?" Dix says: **Good Christians, fear, for sinners here (on earth) the silent Word (Jesus) is pleading.**²

D. Jesus has showed up for us. For you. He showed up to plead our case! He is our defense attorney. He left heaven to become one of us in order to die for us, and to provide us with a chance to be reconciled to God.

V. There is more to the song: A description of his death; A plea to honor Him

A. You could also argue that there is a third, implied question: what are you going to do with Jesus? The implication – from the hymn, from Christ's words, from the Bible – is that we are supposed to follow. But let's put that on hold for just a moment and sing this song.

VI. The second song I want us to think about is *Joy to the World*, which we will sing at the end of the service.

A. This carol was written in the early 1700s by a British poet named Isaac Watts.³ Whereas Dix was an insurance agent, Watts was a brilliant mathematician and physicist who tried to make a living as a poet, which is hard to do.^{4,5}

B. This particular poem is based on a few Biblical passages. Some of his inspiration came from the Book of Isaiah, which was written by a prophet who lived around 700 BC.

1. Isaiah is the most famous of the Old Testament prophets. He was brilliant; he had a forty-year run; he spent most of that time living in the palace and he wrote a long, weighty book.

2. If that sounds good, let me note that prophets had hard jobs. During the Old Testament era, God used three types of people to guide the Jews: prophets, priests and kings. Prophets spoke from God to the people; priests represented the people to God and kings ran civic affairs. If things were going well, the priests and kings could manage well enough. It's when things were bad that the prophets got called in.

C. Isaiah was a prophet who lived during a time when many people were spiritually lax, which meant he had some unpopular messages to deliver. And that meant he got sideways with more than a few people, and tradition holds that he was eventually sawn in two. But he got to make some happy announcements – and one of them, found in Isaiah 9, is that one day a child would be born who would fix things.

1. This was not new news. This promise had been made before. But Isaiah assured them that God was going to keep his promise. He assured them that God would send someone to rescue them. And he went on to say that this child – who would be called “wonderful counselor, Mighty God and Prince of Peace” - would be so special that: his life and death would be the focal point of all history. And the sign that He had arrived is that He would be born to a Virgin.

D. Other prophets gave other prophecies about this special King.

1. Micah spoke about where he would be born. Moses noted that he would be a sacrificial lamb. Samuel said he'd be a descendant of David. Hosea talked about the fact that he's spend time in Egypt. Zechariah had some things to say about how he'd die, as did Isaiah himself. In fact, Isaiah describes Christ's death by crucifixion about seven hundred years before crucifixion is invented.

E. But Watts is focused on what Isaiah shares in chapter 9. And he got other inspiration from Psalm 98,⁶ which is a Psalm that talks about the great joy that comes our way because of his love for us.

VII. Joy to the Word, the Lord is come! Let earth receive her King;

A. Watts knew the Greek language well, and in Greek, the word “joy” carries a hint of surprise with it. It comes from the Greek word *chara*, the root of which gives us another very important Greek word, *charis*, which means grace.

1. Justice is getting what we deserve, mercy is not getting what we deserve; and grace is getting a good thing that we do not deserve. And when that happens that's

a surprise, because we expect to get what we deserve, or less. We don't expect more. So we are surprised by grace. And surprised by joy as well.

2. Some have suggested that we could sing: "Surprise to the world, the Lord is come." Good things are finally happening.

B. Let earth receive her king. Which, of course, is what you do with a king. When a king appears, you receive them right away. You do not keep them waiting.

C. Let every heart prepare Him room. A couple allusions going on here. There was no room at the inn and so Jesus was born out back in the stable. We don't want that to happen again. We want to prepare him room. And at the same time, this verse hints that we each need to invite him into our heart. To make Him the Lord of our life.

D. Let every heart prepare Him room, and heaven and nature sing, And heaven and nature sing, And heaven, and heaven, and nature sing. Here we see the influence of Psalm 98, which is about all of creation celebrating God and His goodness.

VIII. But let's jump to verse 2. Joy to the world, the Savior reigns! Let men their songs employ;

A. The first verse celebrated Christ as King. Verse two celebrates Christ as our savior – our rescuer. Savior is a big term.

B. One of the most important words in the Old Testament is *shalom*. Which means "peace." It means health and wholeness. It means thriving. Well, in 100 BC, the Jewish rabbis got together to translate the Old Testament into Greek.

1. Alexander the Great had conquered the Middle East and had imposed the Greek language on everyone. As a result, the only Jews that could read the Bible were the scholars. So, they were translating the Hebrew into Greek so everyone else could read it. But when they got to the word *Shalom* they had a problem because there wasn't a single Greek word that carried all the gravitas of the Hebrew word *shalom*.

a) There is a Greek word for "peace" - *irene* – from which we get the word "irenic." Irenic means peaceful, but it's a weak word. It really only means "lack of war." And that's not enough. *Shalom* means a lot more than lack of war. It's health and wholeness and inner peace.

b) So the word they used was the same word for salvation. And what that implies is that the word Savior means a lot more than when we die we go to heaven. It implies a relationship today that brings peace and wholeness and direction. It means that we are secure and safe. All of that gets wrapped up in the term savior. Jesus is the one who brings us both eternal safety and wholeness.

C. I don't know if you read this Friday's *Wall Street Journal* or not. If you did, you may have noticed an article entitled, "The Salvation of the Napalm Girl." Kim Phuc Phan Thi opens the piece stating, "You may not recognize me today, but you almost certainly know

who I am.” She goes on to say that she has spent a life-time trying to escape the name “Napalm Girl.”

1. Kim Phuc Phan Thi is the woman who, 45 years ago as a 9 year old, was photographed with her “arms outstretched, naked and shrieking in pain and fear, with the dark contour of a napalm cloud billowing in the distance.”

2. In the article she notes that, 45 years later she still receives treatment for the burns that cover her arms, back and neck. But she no longer suffers from the emotional and spiritual pain was worse. For years she struggled with anger, bitterness and resentment. But on Christmas Eve of 1982, while attending a small church in Vietnam, she heard the Gospel – she realized that the most important present was not the ones under a tree, but “the gift of Jesus Christ, who was wrapped in human flesh and given to us by God.” She says that on that night she felt her heart shift, that she was born again and found peace and joy.”

D. Have you found that joy? A sense of peace that transcends circumstances. A sense of well-being that comes from knowing you are forgiven, loved by God and promised eternity with him. That is the Christmas gift you are after.

E. **Joy to the World, the Savior is born. Let men their songs employ.** In other words, “get singing.”

F. **While fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains** – this is right out of Psalm 98, where the rivers are clapping their hands in joy. Let everything everywhere, **Repeat the sounding joy, Repeat the sounding joy, Repeat, repeat, the sounding joy.**

IX. Verse 3 – which, as a rule is where the most profound points are made or where the crisis is most evident. Because the ending is in the next verse.

A. **No more let sins and sorrows grow, Nor thorns infest the ground;
He comes to make His blessings flow; Far as the curse is found,**

B. This stanza is inspired by Is. 9: **The people who have walked in the darkness, have seen a great light.** There is plenty of darkness in this fallen world. But Jesus is Light and we need to embrace Him. Maybe Rembrandt’s take will help you appreciate this.

C. Three hundred years ago, Rembrandt painted a picture of the night we are celebrating. **(PICTURE HERE)**

1. What we see here is a dark, dingy, stable with the shepherds kneeling before the child and his mother. And, the source of light in the painting is not the sun or moon or a lamp or a fire. Instead, the light radiates from Jesus – the babe. It is a light with no natural source—a supernatural, heavenly light that pierces the darkness and illuminates all who come near.

2. Rembrandt's point is clear—the child is the Light promised by Micah, the Light prophesied by Isaiah, the Light foreshadowed by Jeremiah. With the arrival of Christ, the dawn has broken, the light has come. Our hope has been born.

D. No more let sin and sorrow grow

1. It doesn't have to grow in our heart. We do not have to let darkness and bitterness grow in our lives. The rescuer has come and is reclaiming what is His
2. He is showing us how to live and love; He is pushing back the darkness
3. So, do not let the thorns infest the ground; Don't let sin and sorrow grow in your heart
4. Are you? What is growing in your heart today? Is Jesus reigning in your heart – is there room there for Him? There is a solution for fear and hatred. There is nowhere where the curse is found, that it can't be reduced

X. Verse 4. He rules the world with truth and grace, and makes the nations prove, the glories of His righteousness, And wonders of His love,

- A. This is right out of John 1. The law came through Moses but truth and grace from Christ.
- B. This remains a fallen world with more than enough sin and sorrow. And it will be so until his promised return. But Christ has made a way home. And Christ has shown the way. And it rests in the wonders of His love. And we celebrate that tonight
- C. God loves you – and He has made a way home for you. He has sent a rescuer for you.
 1. Joy – a good surprise – has come. Light has come. His name is Jesus
 2. And so, we join with all of the earth, in celebrating his birth

¹ H.G. Wells, who is best remembered for his science fiction, but also wrote much history, states: A historian like myself, who doesn't even call himself a Christian, finds the picture centering irresistibly around the life and character of this most significant man. The historian's test of an individual's greatness is, 'What did he leave to grow?' Did he start men thinking along fresh lines with a vigor that persisted after him? By this test Jesus stands first.

² The silent Word – he can't speak yet, he's just a baby – for sinners here the silent Word is pleading.”

³ It's worth noting a few more things about Isaac Watts: 1) He is regarded today as one of the most important English poets and hymn writers of all time. He didn't write the music. Others did. With *Joy to the World*, it was George Frederick Handel, who also wrote *The Messiah*. But Watts wrote the words. And he wrote many other famous hymns as well, such as: *When I Survey the Wondrous Cross*; *Our God Our Help in Ages Past*; *Jesus Shall Reign Where E'er The Sun*; and about six hundred others; 2) He had a hard life – in part because he suffered from poor health and in part because he was not a member of the State Church – the Church of England. His father was a pastor of a small, non-conforming church.³ This put him on the outs with those in power, and among other things, kept him out of Oxford and Cambridge; 3) But his real problem was that he was writing hymns before hymns were a big deal. Before Watts

blazed the trail, the music you sang in church was all from the Psalms. And it was considered inappropriate – even a bit scandalous – to sing hymns that were based on something other than the Psalms. Watts changed this. But it was easy. Hey, it's never easy to make it as a musician. It was a lot harder for Isaac; 4) There are other things that could be said about him, such as the fact that he was a brilliant man who published articles in math and physics. And that his life was harder than it had to be because he not only didn't get along with the state church, he wasn't able to conform with the non-conforming church he attended.

⁴ This was true on a handful of fronts, but the matters important to us focus on music. They did not want any changes to the music styles and traditions that they embraced. Isaac wanted to write songs that expressed the New Testament realities. Songs that were based not just on the Psalms but on other biblical passages as well.

⁵ FYI, Joy to the World was not written as a Christmas Carol. The non-conformists didn't celebrate Christmas. They did not want to do anything not found in the Bible, so even though the wise men brought Christ gifts and the shepherds had a bit of a party, they did not approve of any Christmas celebrations.

⁶ 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. The LORD has made his salvation known and revealed his righteousness to the nations. 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. Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth, burst into jubilant song with music; make music to the LORD with the harp, with the harp and the sound of singing, with trumpets and the blast of the ram's horn—shout for joy before the LORD, the King. Let the sea resound, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it. Let the rivers clap their hands, Let the mountains sing together for joy; let them sing before the LORD, for he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples with equity.

⁷ This is the word used in the great blessing found in Numbers 6. The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace. (Shalom)