

## ***“Sing With Joy”***

**Dr. Keith D. Herron, Senior Pastor  
Holmeswood Baptist Church, KCMO  
Christmas Day**

**Psalm 98**

**December 25, 2011**

**2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16; Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26; Romans 16:25-27**

Advent and Christmas must have been created for the sake of the artists. Poets, painters, writers, composers, sculptors and every other artist has seemingly been moved to create art in order to capture the beauty of the story of the birth of Jesus. Running beneath the ground of the artist's creative impulse is a river of joy. That river of joy is the heart's response to what the soul recognizes as the work of God in the world moving through the birth of a baby the salvation of the world.

The river of joy is found in the psalms as the psalmist beckons the worshiper to express what's in the heart. That joy is the basis for songs of praise and gratitude for what God is doing in the world.

### **I**

The psalms are not the first texts that come to mind when we think of Christmas, but neither is it a bad place to explore the poetry and the beauty of God entering human history in the form of a baby as promised by the prophets in the days of old. The psalms give our songs an expansive mood of joy and celebration. It's an exclamation of praise that's perfect for Christmas Day.

Scholars have argued whether these psalms were originally used as enthronement songs for ancient Judean kings, or as others think, they were used as a part of the celebration of the Ark of the Covenant. No matter. It takes a big song to mark a big moment and so it's perfect for this day when we can sing with absolute clarity of how God has moved in history in bringing this child to the day of his birth.

*Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth;  
Break forth into joyous song and sing praises,  
Sing praises to the LORD with the lyre,  
With the lyre and the sound of melody.*

*With trumpets and the sound of the horn make a joyful noise before the King, the LORD.*

**Psalm 98:4-6, NRSV**

Besides that, any psalm that inspired *Joy to the World*, that great hymn of Christmas, can't be all bad. *Joy to the World* was Isaac Watts' attempt to put Scripture to music and the hymn is thus based on Psalm 98. It was this psalm that inspired him to call us to rejoice in the Savior's birth. Neither can we miss the connection between this psalm to the Magnificat, the

song of praise offered by Mary upon meeting her cousin Elizabeth when arriving at the home of Zechariah and Elizabeth.

## II

At every birthday celebration I've ever attended there was music and singing and today is no different. This is a holy season with its own sound track. Read Luke's gospel closely and pay attention to the music. Luke's gospel is a Christmas pageant with arias that proclaim beautifully about the God who was acting in history in bringing forward the long-awaited Messiah

This past week a K-State music professor was interviewed on NPR to reflect upon how music affects the brain. She described how researchers have utilized the popularity of Christmas music to measure the effects on brain activity noting that Christmas music has been the focus of a great deal of research on the effects of music on the brain. Christmas music is a body of music universally understood and enjoyed and so it is an adequate research tool for scientists to study how the brain works as it hears music.

In summarizing their findings, the professor noted that music is the most highly stimulating discipline for setting the brain in motion and she noted that when the researchers utilized Christmas music for these brain studies, they remarked that brain activity lit up like ... yes, you guessed it ... like a Christmas tree!

The brain is stimulated by the combined and powerful forces of tradition & sentimentality, emotion & memory, when it hears Christmas music. All of us have memories that are attached to these songs we've been singing since before we can remember. Those memories are likely ways to emotionally describe our homes of origin and our families. Our Christmas memories carry with them powerful emotional forces and the brain can't help itself by being highly stimulated in multiple areas of the brain.

## III

But the Psalms are clear in tying our gratitude through song to God's Shalom, God's peace and it's hard to read the psalm and wonder why there is no peace. The irony is obvious because we're celebrating today the birth of the Prince of Peace and yet we're inexplicably mired in our lust for conquest and control. We've spent the last two decades at war in Iraq and have finally begun to extract our troops from that land. We're also approaching a decade of fighting in Afghanistan and some of presidential candidates have even bounced around the idea of bombing Iran. We may be leaving Iraq but we're still consumed with the urge for war.

My writer friend, novelist Robert Flynn posted on his blog this past Friday a cryptic reminder of just how mixed up we are in our attempt to follow the One who calls us to work for peace: "Jesus is the Prince of Peace. And we are his warriors."

The words of the hymn, *I Heard The Bells On Christmas Day*, admit honestly there is no peace on earth. Certainly, these words were true as Christmas Eve 1914 turned to Christmas Day. “The Guns of August” that ignited the World War I spread death and ruin across Western Europe. A snaking band of trenches that varied from 200 to 1200 yards apart extended across Central Europe from the North Sea to the Swiss Border and defined the Western Front. Along this line the wreck and rubble of war was everywhere.

The idealism of late summer had turned to the despair of winter spent in the trenches. It would become the first of four winters experienced by the armies as the bleak misery of war. It would be hard to imagine a time when there was less peace on earth or more despair in the hearts of men. The six infantry divisions of the British Expeditionary Force suffered a 90% casualty rate in the first five months of World War I. Between August and Christmas of that first year of war, over a million men lost their lives in the fighting engendered by the outbreak of hostilities.

As Christmas morning dawned, a strange stillness fell across the British sector of the Western Front. Spontaneously and certainly without any governmental approval a Christmas truce developed. The author Winston Groom described this event as “one of the most remarkable episodes in the history of warfare.” Christmas trees were variously posted atop the front line trenches. Quietly the troops began singing Christmas songs they had learned as children. But the songs of Christmas bridge from one culture and language to another and so when the Germans sang “*Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht*,” the Brits responded and sang “*Silent Night, Holy Night*.”

That’s how it began because soldiers from both the German and British armies emerged from their trenches to exchange food, trinkets, and uniform items. Joint burial parties were formed and many of the dead of No Man’s Land were buried. Music drifted across the battlefield as Christmas carols were sung and the 23rd Psalm was read by troops from both sides of the line. Somehow for just those few hours peace reigned. It was a strange spectacle for these bitter enemies, those that one writer described as “death’s men,” to fraternize and celebrate Christmas together.

There is wonder and mystery in this story as there is always wonder and mystery at Christmas. God is incarnated. The least of us are chosen to witness God’s miracle of love and grace. If only for a little while, hate and despair are put away. In spite of all that men can do God’s peace breaks into the valley of the shadow of death to divert us from our worldly and deadly ways. As we approach the manger again on Christmas Day 2011 we would do well to remember the mysterious Peace of God that was manifested long ago amid the horror, squalor, and death of Christmas 1914. God was at work then and God is at work now in the most unlikely of places when we seek this Prince of Peace and seek to follow Him. The work of salvation was birthed in Bethlehem but the work of salvation goes on all around us and in us as we seek the transforming power of peace.