***Rejoice***

Psalm 96; Luke 2:1-20

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Joy to the world! the Lord is come:  
Let earth receive her King;  
Let ev-ery heart prepare Him room,  
And Heaven and na-ture sing, . . . .

Joy to the World! the Sav-ior reigns:  
Let us our songs em-ploy;  
While fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains  
Re-peat the sound-ing joy, . . . .

No more let sins and sor-rows grow,  
Nor thorns infest the ground;  
He comes to make His bless-ings flow  
Far as the curse is found, . . . .

He rules the world with truth and grace,  
And makes the na-tions prove  
The glo-ries of His righ-teous-ness,  
And won-ders of His love, . . . .[[1]](#endnote-1)

Every year, Christian churches proclaim the joyful message of Christmas by singing this hymn. The lyrics paraphrase Psalm 96,[[2]](#endnote-2) which is a lectionary text for Christmas with a Christological interpretation. Verses 1 and 2 announce the coming of the Lord as the King and Savior, and exhort all creatures in heaven and on earth to rejoice before the Lord (Ps. 96: 1-2a, 11-12; Lk. 2:11-14). Verse 3 sings with joy at the salvation that accompanies the arrival of the Lord, which means a state on earth of no more curses, (cf., Gen. 3:27; Lk. 2:14b). And the last verse declares the sovereignty of God who rules the world with truth and grace, and also praises the glory of God’s righteousness and love (Ps. 96: 2b-4, 7-10, 13; Lk. 2:20).

As it is used in the hymn, the word “rejoice” is an action verb that denotes heightened happiness or gladness over an unanticipated good. Along with the words, the melody of the hymn conveys a great mood of rejoicing. As with Psalm 96, the hymn exhorts us to rejoice. Why are we to rejoice? The psalmist recites the reasons in relation to the three images of God: the Creator, King, and Judge. Verses 4-6 proclaim that God is not one of the man-made gods, i.e., an idol, but the Creator of the heavens, who reveals strength, beauty, majesty, and deserves honor and praise. Thus, verses 7-9 call on all the earth to “worship the Lord in holy splendor” (v. 9a). Verse 10 proclaims that God is not only the Creator, but also the King, and the righteous Judge. The Lord is not like a worldly king who oppresses his people for his vested interests, but the real King who, not only establishes the world firmly, but who will also “judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with his truth” (v. 13). With the eschatological anticipation of the fulfillment of justice and peace on the earth, the psalmist exhorts all the creatures in the universe—the heavens, the earth, the sea, all the creatures in the sea, everything in the fields, and all the trees of the forest—to rejoice before the Lord (vv. 11-12a).

While the three images of God explain why believers should rejoice always, the season of Christmas is a particularly appropriate time of year for Christians to rejoice in God’s promise of salvation in Jesus Christ. When we recite Psalm 96 in conjunction with the concrete historical context of the nativity story in Luke 2, the proclamation of the psalmist that the Lord is coming to bring justice and peace into the world sounds more real and urgent. The world in which the original readers of the Gospel of Luke lived was a destitute colonized region of the Roman Empire, where injustice and violence ruled, depriving people of their human rights and dignity. It was barely possible to find reasons for rejoicing in their daily lives. For those in such hopeless circumstances, Luke echoes Psalm 96 through the voice of an angel. An angel appears to the shepherds, who were the poorest and lowest in society, and says, “I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord” (2:10b-11). Luke describes the shepherds, who are at first terrified by the divine glory surrounding them and by the voices of the heavenly hosts attesting to the manifestation of the power and sovereignty of God. They visit Bethlehem, are witness to the birth of Jesus, and eventually rejoice in the good news by “glorifying and praising God” (2:20).

Do we hear the angel’s announcement of “good news of great joy for all the people” this season? Are we ready to rejoice by singing the Christmas hymn, “Joy to the World!” from the bottom of our hearts? Even though we may have sung the song with joy and gladness in the past, many of us feel differently this year. We are living in a time of ambiguity and uncertainty, in which the man-made ecological crisis is denied, and in which many of us are in danger of losing our human rights—voting rights, women’s rights, immigrant rights, refugee rights, LGBTQ rights, etc. In pitching the slogan, “Make America Great Again,” political leaders have created new policies and laws that neglect environmental protection, and exclude the poor and those marginalized by race, gender, sexuality, religion, or immigrant status. These circumstances make it hard for us to rejoice. Instead, we feel it is time to lament our predicament and powerlessness to effect change. Like the Jewish people in exile who bewailed by the rivers of Babylon, refusing to sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land (Ps. 137), many of us want to refrain from singing the Christmas hymn at a time such as this, when there are so many tears to be wiped away.

Yet, Psalm 96 and Luke 2:1-20 remind us that lamenting should not be the final response of Christians. Instead, the final response should be rejoicing. As the psalmist states, we rejoice not because we are happy or hopeful in the present, but because God is the real source of hope, i.e., the true ruler of the world—the Creator, King, and Judge. We rejoice in the promise that God will come to judge the world with righteousness. Believing that God has already been with and among us to fulfill that promise, we rejoice in spite of our current reality. By rejoicing in the coming of the Lord, who rules the world with truth and grace, we dare to reject without fear the selfish, destructive power of the worldly ruler, and engage in solidarity with the lowly and the poor in our society. In this sense, to rejoice jubilantly by singing the Christmas hymn is a subversive eschatological act, anticipating the liberation of the whole earth from the unjust power of its most powerful empire.

It is truly good news that God did not abandon the world to darkness, but loved it so much as to save it. By sending the Messiah into a world of oppression, injustice, and subjugation, similar to ours, God initiated a new beginning. Surprisingly, this good news was announced first to shepherds—poor and lowly—who were living on the margins of the Empire, much like those who are being pushed back to “make America First.” In God’s saving work, the last indeed become the first, and the first last. The good news of God’s coming is a source of joy for the powerless, afflicted in the most powerful empire of the world, both locally and globally, and inspires them to rejoice in the promise of God in the midst of their hardships.

Can the Christmas hymn be heard as a joyful message even to the powerful, the instigators of “Make America Great Again”? The message that the Lord has come as the King and the Savior is a reminder for them that the world belongs to God who created the heavens and the earth, and who rules the world with righteousness and truth. Like the angel, Christian preachers are sent to proclaim “good news of great joy for all the people.” Unlike the angel, however, we are called to preach this good news to everyone—both the powerless and the powerful, the poor and the rich, the lowly and the proud—and empower them to respond to a radical call to work for justice and peace. By rejoicing through singing the Christmas hymn—which is an eschatological act—we demonstrate our solidarity with those who have been excluded, and we actively participate in transforming death-driving power into life-giving power.

1. *The Presbyterian Hymnal: Hymns, Psalms, and Spiritual Songs*, (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), 40. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The words of the hymn are by English hymn writer Isaac Watts, based on Psalm 98, 96:11-12 and Genesis 3:17-18, and were first published in 1719. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joy_to_the_World> (accessed July 30, 2017). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)