

**Sing it Like you Mean it – Confessing the Carols  
Joy to the World - Zephaniah 3:14-20, 1 Thessalonians 1:4-10**

Well brothers and sisters, the Christmas season and our celebrations this year have been many things – but I’m not sure I would characterize them as particularly joyful.

I know they have been meaningful for us, comforting for sure, certainly different from what we are used to... but I would have a hard time saying they were joyous.

And In the midst of the pandemic circumstances and restrictions which we must endure at the moment I would say that our lack of joy is understandable – maybe even somewhat biblical.

Not to say that the Lord’s provision and protection thus far haven’t given us reason to be grateful, thankful, and hopeful, but these are different responses than being joyful.

And brothers and sisters, biblical Joy is how we respond when something that we have been waiting for, anticipating, longing for... finally comes to pass.

And right now, we are all waiting, anticipating and longing for our lives to be able to return to normal again, for restrictions to be lifted, to be able to return to work and school and gather together again, to travel freely, to party and celebrate and not live in fear of spreading a virus or getting sick.

So this is what we’re all waiting for right now for sure, and when life is able to return to normal maybe that also means a return to something else you’ve been waiting for and anticipating as well.

Maybe you’ll be able to return to waiting to graduate, or you’ve been longing to find that special someone to build a life and a family with, or you are anticipating getting married?? Maybe you are looking forward to having kids or grandkids, or retirement...

And when these things finally come to pass... then there will be Joy!

And the longer we have waited for them, the more we have anticipated and longed for them – the greater the Joy is when they finally arrive. Do you know what I'm talking about?

And so, brothers and sisters this is why we've arranged our Advent celebrations as we have this year, focusing on Hope, and Peace and Love in the weeks before Christmas, to help us build up our anticipation and longing for the return of Jesus Christ so that when He finally comes, we will be filled with such great joy!

And even though Advent finishes before we celebrate the birth of Christ – its still appropriate to use this last Sunday in December to complete our Advent celebrations... with Joy, because its too easy to stop anticipating Christ's return once we have celebrated His birth.

And to be honest brothers and sisters, if we aren't anticipating and longing for Christ's second coming then there isn't much point – beyond sentimentality – in celebrating his first coming.

So, this morning we bring this truth into focus by focusing on the Joy of Advent, and wrapping up our Confessing the Carols, Sing it like you Mean it series by looking at "Joy to the World."

Now with the other carols we've looked at thus far, the history behind the carol has been the key to getting a better sense of what the author was attempting to convey with the lyrics.

But with Joy to the World, its better for us to review some biblical history first as that is the key to better understanding the lyrics and what we are confessing when we sing them.

So, let's turn to our scripture reading from Zephaniah as our starting point this morning. Now it's pretty easy to see that this is a passage about joy isn't it. We read things like "*Sing, Daughter Zion; shout aloud, Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, Daughter Jerusalem!*" (vs. 14) and "*He [Yahweh]*

*will take great delight in you... he will rejoice over you with singing.”* (vs. 17) there is no doubt that this is about joy!

And the other thing we notice from scripture, is that joy gets expressed! In this way joy differs from happiness. Happiness is kind of quiet and content – nothing wrong with that – but you don’t hear people *“Shouting for happiness”* do you...

You do however hear people shouting for joy, singing for joy, and rejoicing with all their heart. Joy is expressed physically and audibly – especially great joy.

And the joy which Zephaniah is prophesying about results when Yahweh’s promises of a return, a restoration and a rebuilding of the exiled Jews, who were exiled as a punishment for their covenant unfaithfulness, finally come to pass and are fulfilled!

Zephaniah prophesies that some point in the future Yahweh will; *take away punishment and turn back their enemy* (vs. 15), *that He will be with them as their King* (vs 15), *remove what is*

*a source of shame to them* (vs 18) *he will deal with their oppressors* (vs 19) *he will bring them home – e.i. rescue the lame and gather the exiles* (vs. 19-20) *and he will make sure they are honored and praised publically* (vs. 19-20) *and He will restore their fortunes* (vs. 20).

And when this finally happened in 539 BC when a remnant of Jews lead by Nehemiah was given permission and funding by the Persian Empire to return and rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple – there was GREAT Joy.

In fact Ps 126 was written to express that joy, it says *“When the LORD brought back the captive ones of Zion, We were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter And our tongue with joyful shouting; Then they said among the nations, “The LORD has done great things for them.” The LORD has done great things for us; We are glad. Restore our fortunes, O LORD, As the streams in the South. Those who sow in tears shall reap with joyful shouting...”*

You can hear echoes of Zephaniah's descriptions of singing and shouting in this Psalm, and in fact the writer of this Psalm used the exact same Hebrews words for "restoring fortunes" that Zephaniah used.

So, this confirms that the Levites who wrote this psalm knew their return in 539 B.C. was a fulfilment of God's promises that we read about in Zephaniah.

So let's call this a Level 1 Material fulfillment of God's promises. Because it was experienced in very specific, tangible and quite literally "concrete" ways as they rebuilt their city and the Temple.

And there are lots of times in our lives when Yahweh takes these sorts promises from the scriptures and does a Level 1 Material fulfillment of them in our lives as well.

Maybe we can point to a specific example in our lives where we have been spared from the consequences of a foolish decision, or even a sinful action; as a Level 1 Material

fulfillment of vs. 15 *"The Lord has taken away your punishment..."* And as we expect the Covid-19 vaccines to slow and eventually stop the spread of the Coronavirus we can see this as a Level 1 Material fulfillment of the second half of vs. 15 *"he has turned back your enemy."*

And when this fulfillment happens it calls for singing and the expression of great joy! The Jews certainly praised Yahweh in 539 B.C, we read about it in Ezra 3:11 *"all the people shouted with a great shout when they praised the Lord because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid."*

So brothers and sisters; besides our pandemic circumstances are there other things going on in your life right now that would be examples of Yahweh fulfilling the kinds of things He says he will do in Zephaniah?

And are you expressing your joy back to Yahweh in worship? You don't have to write a Psalm – just turning up the Audio feed so you can sing along loudly, enthusiastically, and

regularly on a Sunday morning will do. To sing it like you mean it certainly means to sing for joy!

But brothers and sisters, as great as this was, it was only a Level 1 Material fulfillment. Returning to Jerusalem and rebuilding the Temple wouldn't resolve the deeper issue of Covenant unfaithfulness that had sent them into exile and caused the destruction of the Temple.

That's why Ezra 3:12 goes on to say – *“Yet many of the priests and Levites... who had seen the first temple, wept with a loud voice when the foundation of this house was laid...”* It was not a restoration of the former glory of Israel and King Solomon.

And so too – the joy that we feel with a Level 1 Material fulfillment in our lives is somewhat bittersweet as we quickly realize it doesn't do away with our struggles and our sins.

And so brother and sisters there is a bit of a godly caution here for us this morning. Especially as we expect to get back

to normal in 2021... we need to realize the “normal” we that will return to will not be like it was before this pandemic.

It has taken its toll on us physically, economically, and emotionally and those impacts will be felt for a long time.

But even more than that I would say that it's exposed the sinfulness of our human nature. We've seen greed in hoarding, pride over our rights and freedoms, lies in conspiracy theories, anger and rebellion against authority, and I could go on...

Brothers and sisters we need a Level 2 Spiritual fulfillment, and the Jews who resettled their land quickly realized this as well.

Something more was needed if they were going to experience the fullness of all what Yahweh had promised to them in Zephaniah and throughout the rest of the Prophets.

So, they began to look for the coming of the Messiah to truly fulfill the promises of the Kingdom of God and to restore the full Glory of Israel as it had once been.

Brothers and sisters, we need to realize that when we experience a Level 1 Material fulfillment in our lives and as 2021 hopefully brings about a return to a new normalcy, that we understand this is how God is at work to prepare us for and increase our anticipation of greater things, deeper things – spiritual things...

And it's also how we come to recognize the manner in which God works to bring those greater things to pass. Which, given what we learned about how Joy works, means that the Joy will also be even greater!

But the Level 2 Spiritual fulfillment can still be a bit confusing if we don't understand what the Messiah was really coming to do – He wasn't coming to restore the old glory of Israel, He was coming to begin the new glory of a new Israel.

Let me give you a few easy examples of how Jesus as the Messiah fulfilled the Messianic promises of Zephaniah in a more profound spiritual way than what materially anticipated.

Jesus takes away our punishment (vs. 15) by bearing it upon himself in his death on the cross. Jesus turned back the enemy (vs. 15) by first refusing to give into Satan's temptations in the desert... and then he turned back death itself in his resurrection from the grave.

He dealt with our oppressor (vs.19) by taking on our sinful human nature in his incarnation and turned into a faithful human nature...

He rescued the lame (vs.19) by healing them, he gathered those who had leprosy and healed them and this allowed them to return to their homes and restored their fortunes...(vs.20)

He performed miracles in the name of Yahweh and so Jesus showed the people that their God still honored His

relationship with them, and that in his very person their God was with them and had come very near to them; *“He shall be called Immanuel, which means God with us”* (Matt 1:23)

These Level 2 Spiritual fulfillments get to the very root of the problems that affect us and our world, and it is good to remind ourselves that without the birth of Jesus none of this would be possible.

Paul emphasizes in Ephesians 1:3 how *“we are blessed with EVERY SPIRITUAL blessings in Jesus Christ!”*

So, brothers and sisters, how are you experiencing the Level 2 Spiritual fulfillment in your life in the form of these Spiritual Blessings we’ve received in Jesus? Are you living in His grace, mercy, forgiveness, the Holy Spirit and His fruit and gifts?

Because brothers and sisters, we must admit that we are not often very joyful over our spiritual blessings that the Lord has given us, it’s so easy for us to become consumed with the

Often our focus on wanting to see Level 1 material fulfillment can cause us to miss the deeper aspects of Yahweh’s promises that in some ways are more important for us.

And we allow the unfulfilled Level 1 material aspects to diminish the expression of great joy that should come from the fulfilled Level 2 Spiritual promises that have come to us.

Brothers and sisters, if this is the case then we may need to ask the Lord, as King David did in Ps 51:12 to *“Restore unto us the joy of your salvation...”*

However, that is also an indication that there is still a Level 3 Kingdom Fulfillment that must take place. For all the spiritual blessings we have received we still struggle with our sinful nature... and we can’t simply write off the fact or denigrate that those spiritual fulfillments need to come to full expression materially.

As we know too well this world is still affected by death and disease and sickness, natural disasters and famine, corruption

and war and those who follow Jesus Christ are persecuted and sometimes killed.

Now we might think that this would diminish the joy of our salvation – however, as we read in 1 Thessalonians this morning it is possible that in the midst of all this, we can still experience Joy. Paul says that they received the spiritual blessings of the gospel *“in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit.”*

You see brothers and sisters, when we must struggle with our sin, and face the brokenness and tragedy that still exists in our world, and when we must endure times of persecution - the Holy Spirit can and will give us a “Joy” advance.

This joy is borrowed from the coming Level 3 Kingdom fulfillment that we are still waiting for.

It is the Joy we will feel in the future on the day when we see Jesus Christ face to face, when we have been resurrected, made new... when we become aware that the effects of sin

have been completely eradicated from our heart, mind, soul and body... When this world and all that is in it made new...

Can you imagine that Joy!? It’s not just a greater Joy it is an all surpassing – unspeakable Joy!

And the Holy Spirit can borrow from that Joy and gives it to you now as an advance, a deposit of what is to come. We can’t produce it, it doesn’t come from our circumstances... We just receive it and experience it and are strengthened by it and we are able to persevere because of it, thus as Nehemiah 8:10 says *“the Joy of the Lord (who will keep his promises, and it brings him Joy too) is your strength!”*

That’s why the Thessalonians were Joyful in the midst of severe suffering, and... this is what we are confessing is possible when we sing the carol Joy to the World, this is what Joy to the World is all about.

It is a Carol that connects to Christmas by framing the first coming of Christ as a Level 1 and 2 Material and Spiritual



Fulfillment that is still looking towards a Level 3 Kingdom fulfillment, this is why we needed to look at the scriptural history first.

Because if you think carefully about the words of Joy to the World you will realize there are no references in it to Christmas... at all.

There's nothing about shepherds, or angels, or Joseph or Mary or Bethlehem or Wise Men or gifts... so how did this hymn end up as one of our all-time favorite Christmas Carols?

Well – let's wrap up the message this morning and prepare ourselves to sing Joy to the World by answering that question.

The lyrics to this hymn were written by Isaac Watts in 1719 and this is the first carol in our series that was originally written in English.

Isaac Watts was a minister who was also prolific hymn writer, responsible for such classics as O God our help in Ages Past

and When I survey the Wondrous Cross. Watts wrote Joy to the World as theological poem about how Christ had fulfilled and would yet fulfill the Messianic promised in Psalm 98, 96:11–12 and Genesis 3:17–18.

He published it in his book titled *“The Psalms of David: Imitated in the language of the New Testament, and applied to the Christian state and worship.”* It was not set to any particular musical score to begin with but could be sung to any common meter tune.

One hundred and seventeen years later, in 1836 a Boston music teacher and Presbyterian hymnist by the name of Lowell Mason set these lyrics to the music that we are familiar with. He had it published it during the Christmas season – and that is how it came to be known and loved as Christmas carol, even though it has no references to the events of Jesus' birth.

Instead Joy to the World describes how Christ's birth is both a Level 1 and 2 Material and Spiritual fulfilment of scriptural promises while at the same time prompting us to look forward

to the day when His return will bring about the Level 3 Kingdom fulfilment to the entire creation.

The lyrics speak of Earth receiving her King... and the very creation – rocks, hills, fields and floods will sing... the curse on creation will be undone – thorns will not infest the ground any more, and Christ will rule the world and all the nations with truth and grace.

And when this occurs – the promises of Zephaniah that we've read about will also receive their Level 3 Kingdom fulfillment as well.

The Lord Jesus will deal with our oppressors and persecutors; He will turn away the enemy and throw the Devil and his demons into the Lake of Fire;

He will be close to us – we will see Him face to face; He will gather all those who have been purchased by His blood and He will bring us home – the home that he has gone to prepare for us – the New Heavens and the New Earth!

And we can't fully imagine the joy of that occasion – but by the grace of the Holy Spirit, as we sing about it this morning in a carol like Joy to the World, we can receive a Joy advance from it, to give us Joy in spite of our present circumstances and to increase our desire to see the Lord return so that our joy may be complete.

So my prayer brothers and sisters is that in hearing about these promises of Yahweh from His Word this morning, and being assured of what is going to take place in future because of what has been accomplished in the past... Christmas has come, so we know that Christ is coming.

So let's get the band back up here now, so we can sing Joy to the World this morning, and may the Holy Spirit give you the JOY you need to be strong and endure in the present as we wait for the future.

Brothers and sisters be strong in the Joy of the Lord! Are you ready? Let's sing it like we mean it! Amen