

Heaven and Nature Sing

A Sermon by the Rev. Daniel W. Hinkle
Christmas 2019

One of my favorite Christmas carols is “Joy to the World.” It was written by Isaac Watts and set to a George Frederick Handel tune, and has been a hit for more than two hundred years. You can find it at # 100 in our Hymnal.

Notice the broad scope of joy in this carol. In the Christmas Gospel, Gabriel, the angel of the Lord says joy will be to “all people.” But the words of Isaac Watts go far beyond Gabriel’s words. “Joy to the world! Joy to the earth! Heaven and nature sing! Fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains repeat the sounding joy!” And when it talks about sin and sorrow ceasing, this includes thorns, too. In other words, the joy of Christmas encompasses heaven and earth and the whole universe!

The Christmas story goes beyond the world of people to include the whole realm of nature. Jesus was born in a stable and laid in a manger, a feeding trough for animals. So we can assume that animals were present at his birth. Angels appear to the shepherds and the heavenly host are like the trillions of stars themselves singing. The shepherds run to see the holy child. Did they take their little lambs with them? Did the Wisemen bring their camels? When the nativity scene is dramatized, many congregations bring live animals right into their churches. Yes, this king of all creation, born on Christmas Day, brings joyful glad tidings to the whole world. And heaven and nature sing!

Now, the thing I want us to notice here is the contrast with our typical, tunnel-vision Christian hope that someday we’ll simply go to heaven when we die. And we’re usually only talking about our souls going to heaven. Perhaps we’ll even get to sit around all day on clouds playing harps. So, heaven is some ethereal, cloudy place where God is and where our disembodied souls go to live with him forever when we die. How boring.

But then, the question is, why are all those animals in the creche, and why are the “fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains” so joyful on this day? If Jesus comes only to take the souls of certain people to heaven when we die, namely, those few of us worthy to be saved, then why is the whole universe so joyful at his coming? Clearly, our typical Christian hope needs Lasik surgery and an upgrade, don’t ya think?

The faith of our Jewish brothers and sisters, which we graciously inherited through Jesus and the apostles, is for the whole of creation. Their faith in God, which is so unique, is in the one, true God who lovingly created the entire universe, nonviolently, I might add. As the late George MacLeod, the founder of the Celtic Christian community on the ancient Isle of Iona off the northwest coast

of Scotland use to say, “We’re not in the business of saving souls, but of saving wholes.” So, if our ultimate hope has a narrow focus on just some special human souls, that comes more from the pagan Greek philosopher Plato than it does from a good Jew like Jesus.

No! A Jewish-Christian hope must be for the whole of creation, heaven and earth, which our good God takes great care in bringing about. In fact, God is still working on it. It’s a work in progress and not yet finished. You and I, we aren’t finished yet. So that’s what a good Judeo-Christian hope for the world is all about: that the very good creation will finally be set to rights; that it will at last come to fulfillment and perfection; that the lion and the lamb will lie down together; and that even thorns will stop infesting the ground. Heaven and nature sing this Christmas season because the Savior of the whole universe became flesh to bring salvation to all.

In fact, that’s why Jesus was born in the first place. Jesus, the Word who was with God at the beginning of Creation, became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth. His light was the life of the whole world. Why would he have become this human flesh if it didn’t matter? It does matter. “Matter matters,” another thing the Celt, George MacLeod often said. Matter matters. And Christmas is joyful because Jesus came into the matter of this world to show us how and why it matters. It matters because of God’s infinite love for each and every one of us. It matters because through Jesus Christ, and the love of the cross, we can truly begin to share that infinite supply of love and life not only with one another, but with the matter of this precious earth “*our island home*” and all its other beloved creatures, too.

Now, you might still be wondering: So, if our souls don’t go to heaven when we die, what then happens to us after death? Aren’t our deceased loved ones and friends alive even now? Yes. I believe that our loved ones are somehow alive with God right now. Jesus spoke of being with him in paradise to the thief who was crucified along side him. Paradise is a place of rest and healing and restoration, and not permanent. Heaven is God’s place, not ours.

Jesus repeated the common Jewish faith in the God of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Jacob. Those folks had died long ago before Jesus ’time on this earth. Yet he expressed a faith that they were somehow alive in God, because God’s power of life goes far beyond death and our limited imaginations. But we need to be clear here that the Bible never talks in terms of disembodied spirits or souls. Life means having a body. The older Christian belief that we need to reclaim once again is one of “Life after, life after death.” Now that truly is worth singing about.

Yes, it’s a mystery that our loved ones who have gone before us in death are somehow still alive in God right now, whatever “now” might mean exactly to our eternal God. Like I said, the picture of disembodied souls dwelling forever in

heaven is more like the pagan philosopher's picture of things, not the Bible's or that of our ancient faith. No, our hope is more like what we pray for every time we pray the Lord's Prayer: God's kingdom come, God's will be done "*on earth as it is in heaven.*" In other words, our ultimate hope is not for our disembodied souls to go to heaven when we die, but for heaven to come to earth.

Our prayer and our hope are that someday God's power of life will set the world to rights and bring the whole of creation to fulfillment and that God's will and love finally be completed here... on... earth. Indeed, this great work has already begun. On that day, the trumpet will sound, and all those who have died but are alive in God will be raised and given their resurrection body like that of the risen Lord Jesus to live in this heaven and earth that will be restored like new.

That's why heaven and nature sing! That's why "fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains repeat the sounding joy!" Because the salvation which our Lord Jesus was born into this world to bring is for the whole of creation! not just a few poor souls.

Joy to the world, the Savior reigns! Let all our songs employ!

Listen!...

"And heaven and nature sing!"

Sources:

"Surprised by Hope" by Anglican Bishop N.T. Wright

1982 Episcopal Hymnal # 100

"Let Heav'n and Nature Sing"

A Sermon by Pr. Paul J. Nuechterlein

Delivered at Grace Lutheran,

Kenosha, WI, December 24, 2003