



*Joy to the world, the Lord is come!
Let earth receive her King;
Let every heart prepare him room,
And heaven and nature sing.*
—by Isaac Watts

One of the most popular Christmas hymns is *Joy to the World*, which is kind of ironic, as it was not written to be a Christmas song, and you probably sing it wrong. The words of the first line, you will notice, are *the Lord is come*, not *the Lord has come*, which is how many people sing the song. The words, written by Isaac Watts, actually celebrate not so much the coming of Christ into the world in Bethlehem, but the second coming of Christ, hence the word *is* rather than *has*. Also, the song comes not from the Christmas story as told in Matthew and Luke, but from Psalm 98.

*(1 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.*

2 The Lord has made his salvation known and revealed his righteousness to the nations.

3 He has remembered his love and his faithfulness to Israel; all the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God.

4 Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth, burst into jubilant song with music;

5 make music to the Lord with the harp, with the harp and the sound of singing,

6 with trumpets and the blast of the ram's horn—shout for joy before the Lord, the King.

7 Let the sea resound, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it.

8 Let the rivers clap their hands, let the mountains sing together for joy;

9 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)

Watts was one of three collaborators on the song, although none of the three worked together. The second collaborator was George Frederic Handel (1685-1759), who wrote the *Messiah*. Lowell Mason, the third collaborator, pieced together portions of Handel's *Messiah* to make up the tune. It's fascinating, I think, that one of the most-loved Christmas songs was pieced together separately by three different people and not even intended as a Christmas song. I don't know for sure, but I believe, that the song became a part of Christmas because of the joy that is such an obvious part of the song, and joy is foundational to Christmas.

As we continue our series of three Advent messages, based on the theme *What the World Needs Now*, this morning we come to *joy*. Our text comes from a portion of Matthew's account of the

Christmas story.

Matthew 2:1-12 –

1 After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem

2 and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.”

3 When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.

4 When he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born.

5 “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written:

6 “‘But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.’”

7 Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared.

8 He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.”

9 After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was.

10 When they saw the star, they were overjoyed.

11 On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

12 And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

I think the world needs a lot of things these days, and something the world certainly needs now is joy, don't you think? It's very easy to believe there is very little about which to be joyful in our world today. In fact, Christmas itself, which celebrates joy, is often a time when joy is lacking from the lives of many. For those who are unable to keep up with the frenzy of gift-buying, it is not joyful. For those whose economic situation means they must watch other children showered with mounds of gifts while their own children are the recipients of a meager collection of gifts, it is not a joyful time. And though we speak often of the truth that the true meaning of Christmas is much deeper than presents, tell that to a parent unable to provide much to their children at Christmas. For those who see an empty seat at the table at Christmas dinner, joy is as absent as the friend or loved one who is not in the seat they have enjoyed year after year. For those who have loved ones who are deployed, in the hospital, incarcerated, or in a nursing home, Christmas is a time when joy is lacking. And, for many other reasons, there are scores of people who find it difficult to summon joy at Christmas.

As we speak about joy this morning, I want us to consider joy in several contexts, the first of which is –

1. The path to joy is often long and difficult.

There is not much that we know about the magi who came to visit Jesus. In fact, much of what we think we know about the magi is not accurate. We sing of them as *we three kings*, but they were not kings, and we don't even know how many they were. The assumption is made that there were three because they offered three gifts to Jesus, but there is nothing that tells us how many of them traveled to Bethlehem. We don't know where they were from, although there is much speculation since we do

know they came from *the east* (verse 1), which probably points to what would be modern day Iraq or Iran. And, contrary to most manger scenes, they arrived in Bethlehem after the shepherds were gone.

So what do we know? First, it must have been a long and difficult journey. We are accustomed to much more comfortable travel these days than just a few decades ago. It was many years before I was able to travel in a car that was comfortable. I had a string of rather junky, uncomfortable cars that I drove. In June of 1984 I had the opportunity to buy my first decent car. I had graduated from seminary the previous month, Tanya and I had married only a few weeks before, and the church I was serving in Anderson County had must made my position with them full-time. In the middle of that month we were in Vacation Bible School, and every afternoon, when VBS was finished (at that time is was from 9:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m.) a friend and I would travel to Lexington to look at cars. At the end of the week, as we traveled back to Lawrenceburg, my friend commented on how hot it was in my car. It was a typically hot and humid week, and it was indeed very hot in my car. We were crossing the Kentucky River, on the Tyrone Bridge, when he said, *Dave, it is so hot in this car, and if I didn't know better I would swear that heat must be on.* I told him, *it is on! The heater never turns off!* In the winter that was great, but in the summer, it was rather uncomfortable to drive a car with the heater pouring out heat. In my younger years I traveled many hundreds of miles in old cars, with no air conditioning, with AM radio (that didn't always work), and had many breakdowns in the middle of nowhere. Now, I very much appreciate traveling in the comfort of air-conditioning, satellite radio, and smooth-riding, dependable vehicles. I do not take that blessing lightly.

So imagine what it was like to travel a great distance two millennia ago, setting off on a journey, with no knowledge of your final destination, with no knowledge of the time it will take, with no knowledge of whether or not you have enough supplies to see you through to the destination, with no knowledge of the dangers and difficulties of what you might encounter along the way, with miles riding on the back of an animal and many miles walking across unfriendly and difficult terrain, and yet you set off on that journey. On our farm we had a few horses, and I had a pony, and though riding an animal was better than walking, I can tell you that after a certain number of miles it gets very uncomfortable riding on the back of an animal.

Why would the magi undertake such a journey? Because at the end of it was *joy*. I believe they knew that at the end of the journey they would find the one born king of the Jews, but they did not know what the journey would contain. The end of the journey, however, made it all worthwhile, because it was an end that brought *joy*. But still, they had to weigh their options – a difficult, perilous journey that they might not survive, but with joy at the end, or remaining home, where they were safe and comfortable.

Joy is a very, very precious commodity. It is not one that always comes easy. Many times, our own journey to joy is difficult. It might be very different in details from the journey of the magi, but it is still a difficult journey and one that is fraught with many struggles. Scripture promises us joy, but it does not always promise us a smooth, easy journey to that joy. It does, however, promise that joy is there, waiting for us, which means we have to remember the next part of joy –

2. *The journey to joy might not be on the obvious path.*

I always like to read between the lines of Scripture, because there is much that is left out of the stories. I am fascinated by the economy of language the Biblical writers so often used. Take, for instance, the phrase *Magi from the east came to Jerusalem* (verse 1). Wouldn't you like to know more about the details not only of the journey but the details leading up to the journey? I sure would. Imagine the first time they saw the star and the discussions it must have brought about. *Could this star be that of the prophecies of which we have heard? Could this be the star that points the way for us to find the one born King of the Jews? Should we go? When should we go? What should we take? What might we encounter along the way? What will people think about our excursion into the west with no*

idea of where it will ultimately lead? What will our friends think? What will our employers think? Do we have enough vacation time for such a journey? What will our families think? What should we take? How much should we take? What might happen along the way?

Imagine the discussions that must have started when the star appeared! The sign of the star was obvious to them, obviously, but was it to others? Imagine what people must have thought, or asked as they made their preparations. *What are you doing? Where are you going? You following what? Are you crazy? You can't leave your families! You can't leave your professions! You can't load up a bunch of supplies and set off to who knows where! You're supposed to be wise men – show a little bit of wisdom and stop this folly and nonsense!*

I'm going to assume that what the magi did was not obvious to everyone. I think there were more than a few people who thought they were anything but wise as they set off on their journey to follow a star. Just as many people could not – or would not – recognize the wisdom in what the magi were doing, the path to joy today is not always seen. The path to joy is not always obvious, because Jesus tells us that it is found in what seems to be opposite of what most people would assume. Jesus said, for instance, *the last will be first, and the first will be last* (Matthew 20:16). He also said that *whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant* (Matthew 20:26). In the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:1-12) he defines happiness in unexpected ways as well. In that passage Jesus says those who are happy – or joyful – are the ones who are meek, the ones who are poor in spirit, the ones who mourn, the ones who show mercy, the ones who make peace, and the ones who are persecuted. That is not the prescription for joy that is generally held up, is it? The path to joy that is most often held out in front of us is that of exalting one's self, getting what one can, and accumulating as much as one can.

Perhaps that is why there are many who cannot seem to find joy in their lives; because they are taking the obvious path, when the path to joy is not found on the obvious path.

3. Joy is found in the right destination.

I wonder how often the magi relived their trip after they returned to their homes. I wonder how often they spoke of the difficulties they encountered, I wonder how often they spoke of the doubts they may have had along the way, and I wonder how often they said *but wasn't it worth it all? Wasn't every difficulty worth it because of what we found? Wasn't every doubt overcome when we arrived to find Jesus? Wasn't it worth it to encounter the danger of Herod? Wasn't every bumpy step on those camels worth it? Wasn't every step through the sandy desert worth it? Yes! It was indeed worth it!*

My sense of joy is not always tied to an emotional feeling as much as it is tied to a sense that I am going in the right direction. I am often tired. I am often weary. I am often discouraged. I am often overwhelmed. I am often left to doubt my decisions and leadership. But joy is present – maybe not a joy that is an emotional state – but a joy that is the knowledge that my life is based on the right goal and the right destination, so the path is right, even though the path may be difficult, even though the path may not always be clear, and even though the path may have its share of stumbles and obstacles.

A group of us went to the Diersen Center on Tuesday night to lead worship. For those of you who are not familiar with the Diersen Center, it is a halfway house for women. The women who are incarcerated there have been transferred from other place of incarceration to the Diersen Center, where they spend six months preparing to re-enter life. While at the Diersen Center they remain incarcerated 24/7, as it is not the kind of halfway house where they can spend part of the day on work release or away from the facility for any reason. Every Tuesday there is a worship service in the cafeteria, as it is officially a Disciples congregation that meets there (New Life in Christ Christian Church) and we lead worship there three or four times a year. When that date was first offered to us I wasn't sure about committing to it because of it being such a busy time of the year, but I realized it was a time of year when it was even more important that we go, because the residents there need encouragement more than ever at Christmas time, as they are separated from parents, siblings, spouses, and children. We have a

time to share joys and concerns and the difficulty of separation is very palpable at that time, but something else was obvious as well, and that was joy. In spite of the difficulty of what they have experienced in life, in spite of the loss of their freedom, in spite of the separation from their families and loved ones, in spite of the reality that many were faced with the complete rebuilding of their lives, you could feel the sense of joy in their lives as they sang the songs of Christmas, you could feel the joy as they prayed, and you could feel the joy as we shared communion. I think I sensed it more on Tuesday evening than any other time I have been at the Diersen Center. Their path to joy has not been easy, but their goal is right and true, and that makes all the difference.

I hope you have joy in your life not only during this Christmas season, but every day of the year. Remember, however, that true joy is not based on an emotion but is based upon heading for the right destination, and however difficult the path might be to that destination, if the destination is right, the joy will be present.