

# PSALMS AT CHRISTMAS

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Advent 2020, Second Sunday: Psalm 98

December 6, 2020

*Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth, burst into jubilant song with music . . . .  
shout for joy before the Lord, the King.*

Psalm 98:4-6

## Learning from the Advent hymns

Joy to the world, the Lord is come  
Let earth receive her King  
Let every heart prepare Him room  
And Heaven and nature sing  
And Heaven and nature sing  
And Heaven, and Heaven, and nature sing  
“Joy to the World” (Isaac Watts, 1719, based on Psalm 98  
with allusion to Psalm 96:11-12; Genesis 3:17-18)

By gracious pow’rs so wonderfully sheltered,  
and confidently waiting come what may,  
we know that God is with us night and morning,  
and never fails to greet us each new day.  
And when this cup you give is filled to brimming  
with bitter suffering, hard to understand,  
we take it thankfully and without trembling  
out of so good and so beloved a hand.  
Yet when again in this same world you give us  
the joy we had, the brightness of your sun,  
we shall remember all the days we lived through  
and our whole life shall then be yours alone.  
“*Von guten Mächten*” (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Advent 1944,  
in a letter to his fiancé Maria smuggled out of his Gestapo prison cell)

Then from each black, accursed mouth  
The cannon thundered in the South,  
And with the sound  
The carols drowned  
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!  
“Christmas Bells” (Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Christmas Day 1863,  
this is the verse left out of most hymnals!)

## Singing about God's salvation, Psalm 98

- 1 Oh 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 known his salvation;  
he has revealed his righteousness in the sight of the nations.
- 3 He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness  
to the house of Israel.  
All the ends of the earth have seen  
the salvation of our God.
- 4 Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth;  
break forth into joyous song and sing praises!
- 5 Sing praises to the LORD with the lyre,  
with the lyre and the sound of melody!
- 6 With trumpets and the sound of the horn  
make a joyful noise before the King, the LORD!
- 7 Let the sea roar, and all that fills it;  
the world and those who dwell in it!
- 8 Let the rivers clap their hands;  
let the hills sing for joy together
- 9 before the LORD, for he comes  
to judge the earth.  
He will judge the world with righteousness,  
and the peoples with equity.

Book 4: Finding a place to worship

Stanza 1: Watch for the Lord's salvation (and celebrate his character!)

Stanza 2: I'm invited to the party

Stanza 3: Get ready for a new world!

## Living Advent

1) Advent (both First and Second) forces us to engage with evil

“Wrong will be right, when Aslan comes in sight,  
At the sound of his roar, sorrows will be no more,  
When he bares his teeth, winter meets its death,  
And when he shakes his mane, we shall have spring again.”

Mr. Beaver in *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*

2) Advent helps me find my place in God’s purpose for all creation

*<sup>15</sup> The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. <sup>16</sup> For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. <sup>17</sup> He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. <sup>18</sup> And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. <sup>19</sup> For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, <sup>20</sup> and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.*

Colossians 1

3) Advent gives me that space to praise

*<sup>4</sup> Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth;  
break forth into joyous song and sing praises!*

*<sup>5</sup> Sing praises to the LORD with the lyre,  
with the lyre and the sound of melody!*

*<sup>6</sup> With trumpets and the sound of the horn  
make a joyful noise before the King, the LORD!*

Psalm 98

## Resources for further studies of Psalm 98 and Isaac Watts

Reformed Worship has a wonderful series of Advent articles beginning with

<https://www.reformedworship.org/article/september-2014/mirroring-psalms-advent-christmas-and-epiphany>

and <https://www.reformedworship.org/article/september-2002/advent-through-psalms-alternative-traditional-lessons-and-carols>

and <https://www.reformedworship.org/article/september-2013/advent-through-eyes-psalms>

Willem Van Gemeren has a wonderful piece on “Yahweh Is the Divine Warrior” in his commentary on Psalm 98 in the EBC’s Vol. 5 (Zondervan, 1991)

Derek Kidner has an interesting article on Messianic psalms at [http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/evangel/6-2\\_kidner.pdf](http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/evangel/6-2_kidner.pdf)

Timothy George looks at Bonhoeffer’s “By Gracious Powers” which echoes much of Watts’ use of Psalm 98 at <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2014/12/bonhoeffer-in-advent>

This is a interesting study of Watts’ “peculiar” theology by R. W. Wilkinson at [http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/7841/1/7841\\_4838.PDF?UkUDh:CyT](http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/7841/1/7841_4838.PDF?UkUDh:CyT)

John Walton analyzes the cantata structure of the psalms at [http://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/34/34-1/34-1-pp021-031\\_JETS.pdf](http://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/34/34-1/34-1-pp021-031_JETS.pdf)

Tremper Longman III has a study of Psalm 98 at [http://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/27/27-3/27-3-pp267-274\\_JETS.pdf](http://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/27/27-3/27-3-pp267-274_JETS.pdf)

Jordan Wilson, “Joy to the World” at <https://postmillennialworldview.com/2016/12/27/joy-to-the-world/>

Christian History’s “Isaac Watts” at <https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/people/poets/isaac-watts.html>

Nicholas Batzig wrote an interesting piece on Watt’s theological issues at <https://www.reformation21.org/blogs/dr-watts-scheme.php> and has a good perspective on finding Jesus in the Psalms at <https://www.placefortruth.org/blog/discovering-christ-in-the-psalms>



# Bonhoeffer in Advent

by [Timothy George](#) 12 . 15 . 14

<https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2014/12/bonhoeffer-in-advent>

The year was 1943, and another Advent had dawned for Lutheran pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer loved Advent and had often preached sermons on this holy season of waiting and hope as a metaphor for the entire Christian life. Just one year earlier, during the Advent of 1942, Bonhoeffer had written a circular letter to some of his friends and former students.

The joy of God goes through the poverty of the manger and the agony of the cross; that is why it is invincible, irrefutable. It does not deny the anguish, when it is there, but finds God in the midst of it, in fact precisely there; it does not deny grave sin but finds forgiveness precisely in this way; it looks death straight in the eye, but it finds life precisely within it.

Those words took on a deeper meaning in December 1943 as Bonhoeffer found himself one of eight hundred prisoners awaiting trial in Berlin's Tegel military prison.

At this point, Bonhoeffer still hoped he might be released, perhaps even in time to spend Christmas with his family and his nineteen-year-old fiancée Maria von Wedemeyer. It was not to be. Though he would be shifted to other prisons and concentration camps on the way to his eventual execution at Flossenbürg in April 1945, he would never escape the Nazi grasp. This fact did not diminish but rather deepened Bonhoeffer's Advent reflections. Eight months after his arrest, Bonhoeffer wrote these words, "By the way, a prison cell like this is a good analogy for Advent; one waits, hopes, does this or that—ultimately negligible things—the door is locked and can only be opened *from the outside*." Advent reminds us that

misery, sorrow, poverty, loneliness, helplessness, and guilt mean something quite different in the eyes of God than according to human judgment; that God turns toward the very places from which humans turn away; that Christ was born in a stable because there was no room for him in the inn—a prisoner grasps this better than others. And for them, this is truly good news.

Tegel prison itself was built in the shape of a cross, and this fact was not lost on Bonhoeffer. More and more he turned toward Luther's *theologia crucis* as a way of understanding the connection between Mary's carrying the Christ child to term in her womb and her waiting with her beloved son beneath the cross. In prison Bonhoeffer was beset by longing, homesickness, and the torment of separation from those he loved so much. "We simply have to wait and wait," he wrote. "The celebration of Advent is possible only to those troubled in soul, who know themselves to be poor and imperfect, and who look forward to something greater to come."

There was a tender side to Bonhoeffer, but he was no sentimentalist, and he did not romanticize life inside prison. In letters to his family, he put up a brave front so as not to increase their worries about him. But he confided to his close friend Eberhard Bethge, "Despite everything I have written, it is horrible here. The dreadful impressions often pursue me well into the night, and I can cope with them only by reciting countless hymn verses, and then my awakening sometimes begins with a sigh instead of a praise of God." To Bethge alone, he confessed the shadows and self-doubts later reflected in his prayer-poem, "Who Am I?" "I often wonder who I really am: The one always cringing in disgust, going to pieces at these hideous experiences here, or the one who whips himself into shape?" God does not fill the emptiness, Bonhoeffer said. Rather, God keeps it empty, and in this way he preserves—even in pain—our authentic communion.

Bonhoeffer's father was a renowned psychiatrist, but Dietrich himself grew weary of psychology and became thoroughly averse to any diagnosis of the soul based on its premises. Instead, he found comfort in the daily reading of the Scriptures, especially the Psalms and other passages from the Old Testament. The Bible he had with him in prison was a gift from his mother Paula. It had once belonged to his older brother Walter, who had fallen in battle during World War I. He also found solace in the hymns of Paul Gerhardt, which he hummed or sang aloud in his cell. Each day at 6:00 in the morning—rather than sleeping in, which he could have done—he

arose for Bible reading, prayer, exercise, and a wash with cold water. In thinking about his cold ablutions, he wrote to his parents with wry humor, “Being alone is certainly a steam bath for the soul!”

Bonhoeffer took delight in the simple pleasures and gifts that came his way—a thrush that sang beautifully in the prison yard, a cigar Karl Barth had sent to him, a sweater Maria had knitted for him, a slice of smoked goose from the family holiday meal. Even in confinement, Bonhoeffer was ever the pastor. He cared for and ministered to those around him—his fellow prisoners, guards, officials, and even an ecclesial “enemy” from the German Christian movement who sought him out for pastoral care. As Allied bombs rained down on Berlin, including Tegel prison (which suffered a direct hit), Bonhoeffer became a regular assistant in the infirmary bringing the love of Christ to those afflicted in body and spirit.

Christmas 1943 found Bonhoeffer still alone in his cell separated from the warmth and bonhomie of the family celebration he loved so much. In his cell was an Advent wreath and a picture of the nativity by Fra Filippo Lippi, a visual reminder of the Incarnation. He lit two candles in honor of his parents and Maria; he hummed some tunes from his favorite hymns; he read the Christmas story.

He could have escaped all of this, he knew, had he remained safely in America in the summer of 1939. But he had no regrets. On one occasion he heard someone say that the last several years of his life had been lost for him because of the war. Bonhoeffer, however, found a reason to think otherwise in the biblical text Ecclesiastes 3:15, “*Gott sucht wieder auf, was vergangen ist*” (in the 1912 version of the Luther Bible Bonhoeffer was using). “God seeks out what has gone by” (NRSV) or “God will call the past to account” (NIV). Bonhoeffer interpreted this to mean that nothing of the past is lost, that God—precisely because he is God—seeks out the past that belongs to us in order to reclaim it. His beloved Gerhardt made a similar point in one of his hymns in which the Lord says: “whatever fails you/I will restore it all.” “So what does that mean, ‘I will restore it all’?” Bonhoeffer asked. And then answered: “Nothing is lost; in Christ all things are taken up, preserved. . . . Christ brings all of this back indeed, as God intended.”

By Advent 1944, Bonhoeffer had been transferred to the infamous Gestapo prison on Prinz-Albrecht-Straße. There, the conditions were harsher and his ability to communicate with the outside world more restricted. But in a letter Bonhoeffer was able to smuggle out to Maria von Wedemeyer, he expressed the faith that had sustained him during his long ordeal and that would see him through to the very end. Dietrich’s words to Maria continue to inspire courage and hope in our own dark times. In the form of the hymn, [\*Von guten Mächten\*](#) (“[By Gracious Powers](#),” tr. Fred Pratt Green), they are still sung by Christians in Germany and around the world today.

By gracious pow’rs so wonderfully sheltered,  
and confidently waiting come what may,  
we know that God is with us night and morning,  
and never fails to greet us each new day.  
And when this cup you give is filled to brimming  
with bitter suffering, hard to understand,  
we take it thankfully and without trembling  
out of so good and so beloved a hand.  
Yet when again in this same world you give us  
the joy we had, the brightness of your sun,  
we shall remember all the days we lived through  
and our whole life shall then be yours alone.

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# Christmas Bells

[Henry Wadsworth Longfellow](#) - 1807-1882

I heard the bells on Christmas Day  
Their old, familiar carols play,  
    And wild and sweet  
    The words repeat  
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

And thought how, as the day had come,  
The belfries of all Christendom  
    Had rolled along  
    The unbroken song  
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

Till ringing, singing on its way,  
The world revolved from night to day,  
    A voice, a chime,  
    A chant sublime  
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

Then from each black, accursed mouth  
The cannon thundered in the South,  
    And with the sound  
    The carols drowned  
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

It was as if an earthquake rent  
The hearth-stones of a continent,  
    And made forlorn  
    The households born  
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

And in despair I bowed my head;  
"There is no peace on earth," I said;  
    "For hate is strong,  
    And mocks the song  
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!"

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:  
"God is not dead, nor doth He sleep;  
    The Wrong shall fail,  
    The Right prevail,  
With peace on earth, good-will to men."