

A CHRISTMAS WORD by Nancy S. Taylor,  
December 24, 2019 at the 8pm Ceremony of Lessons and Carols

There is a birthday among us tonight. The Christmas carol, *Joy to the World* – the most published Christmas hymn in North America – is having a birthday. Who knows how old it is?

It is 300 years old this year. First published in 1719. Words by Isaac Watts. Sung it to a tune by George Frideric Handel. It's got some pedigree.

Isaac Watts based *Joy to the World* on verse 4 of Psalm 98: *Make a joyful noise unto the LORD, all the earth: make a loud noise, and rejoice, and sing praise.*

I gotta ask: How often do you do this? Make a joyful noise. Rejoice. Sing praise.

You see, there's a lot of noise out there, these days. A lot of human shouting. It's not joyful. Quite the opposite. Everyone feels quite free to rail and rant and rage. Am I right?

Many of you know the poem by William Butler Yeats, *The Second Coming*. The first stanza goes like this:

*Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.*

The best lack all conviction, while the worst / are full of passionate intensity.

Here's my proposal tonight. What if we turned Yeats's observation on its head and proved otherwise? What if we proved Yeats's wrong? What if the best (I'm supposing, I'm assuming, I am guessing here, that *you* are the best!) were to raise their, our, your voices – not in rant, not in tirade, not in diatribe or harangue, not in scolding, not in meanness, not in judgment, not in rage or bluster or histrionics, not, in other words, in passionate intensity. What if the best – what if you – weren't heard to be ranting about everything that is wrong – although there is a lot wrong, I grant you that – but what if you were heard to be praising everything that is right: praising beauty, defending kindness, proclaiming justice, decreeing gentleness, announcing grace, singing of love?

What if we shouted love, bellowed it, roared it, and incarnated it? What if the best – what if you – exercised passionate intensity over love and mercy and grace? What if you raised your voices not to deride or belittle, but to build up?

To do so would mean this: you, we, me we'd have to make room in our hearts, prepare him room in our hearts. Which means we'd have to do some heart-house-cleaning. Clean out the too easy

hatreds, discard the partisan rankle, shed the certainty that *they* are wrong and *you* are right. We'd have to clean out the noxious stuff in our hearts that's thrown in the towel and given up, given up on good, given up on God, given up on hope.

It would mean, you'd have to trust God more than CNN or Fox News or your favorite columnists.

It would mean trusting the angels' proclamation of *Peace on Earth and Good Will Among All People*, despite the evidence.

It would mean believing and trusting that, at the end of the day, or at the end of the world, or at the end of your own life, there is something more; something fine and eternal and transcendent; something resplendent. It means believing, and acting as if truth and grace matter and that love has the last word.

It means believing that we humans live in a redemptive universe, made redemptive by this: that at the heart of it all, the universe is not against us, nor indifferent to human plight, but is benevolent. So benevolent, so kindly, so well-meaning toward you and I that the Great Mystery, the Holy One, the numinous energy at the heart of it all was born an infant, soft and vulnerable and so beautiful and so innocent we can't take our eyes off of him. So magical is he, so disarming, that we are irresistibly drawn to this tenderest gift. And, this: we come to understand that in beholding him, we behold God.

You don't have to believe any of this. You can shout bah and humbug and join the ranters, the angry shouters, the despisers and despairers. You can. Go ahead.

*Joy to the World begins softly...*

Or, or, you could rise up, rise up, arise, get to your feet, stand church, rise now in body or in spirit. You can stand up, rise up and side with the angels, and side with God and side with good, side with mercy, and side with justice. You can lift your voice, make some noise. You can proclaim: Joy! Joy to the World! Joy to the Earth! Why? I'll tell you why: The Savior Reigns! It is he who rules the world. It is he who reigns – not the earthly kings, not the presidents, not the prime ministers, not the potentates, not the strong men. Christ rules the world with truth and grace!

Here's the claim of Christmas and what Isaac Watts wants you to make some noise about: the proposition that, at heart, the universe is neither indifferent nor malevolent, but benevolent.

You ask me? That's something to make some noise over.

Sing it like you mean it. Because, if you lack conviction, if you let the worst of us shout down the best of us, then the worst will win. For Christ's sake, don't let the worst win.