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CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK
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“Joy to the World” at 300

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Happy anniversary “Joy to the World!” It’s your 300th! If you looked in the lower righthand corner of hymn 245, you would see two names listed in small type:

Words: Isaac Watts, 1674-1748

Music: arr. by Lowell Mason, 1792-1872.

Those dates tell us that Watts died decades before Mason was born, but their separate contributions combined to create one of the world’s most beloved Christmas carols. But here’s the thing: neither of them thought they were writing a Christmas-themed song. (I’ll get back to that, but first let me tell you a bit more about the two co-creators.)

Isaac Watts was born in England in 1674. His father was a cobbler and tailor. More consequentially, he was also a theological heretic. (As many of you know, we’re kinda into heresy as UUs—because it turns out that root of the word heresy means “to choose.” It simply means that you choose for yourself what to do and believe instead of passively accepting what others tell you.)

Sometimes, however, heresy can get you into trouble. And when Isaac was born, his father was in prison for the so-called crime of spreading ideas contrary to the approved teachings of the Church of England. And from his father, Watts inherited a habit of questioning everything. Throughout his life, he was never satisfied with accepting the way things were if he perceived a way they might be improved (Collins 108).

In particular, as has frequently been the case generation after generation, Isaac Watts judged the church music of the time to be boring. When he complained to his father that the church music used translations of the Psalms that he judged to be far too archaic, his father issued that perennial parental challenge: “Well, if you don’t like, why don’t you come up with something better?” To Isaac Watts, that sounded like a grand idea, and he proceeded to compose more than six hundred hymns and hundreds of other poems (Collins 108).

I should hasten to add that despite his impressive work ethic, he for many years met much more *resistance* than encouragement. A significant number of critics responded to him with contempt. He was told, “No one wants new translations of the Scriptures” (108, 110). One of his arch rivals called his efforts not hymns, but “whims” (Morgan 9). And as had happened to his father before him, Isaac was called a “heretic” and “tool of the devil” (110). Although his lyrics have come to be beloved, his words were too often rejected in his own day because he “dared to rewrite the Psalms” (110).

For quite a few years when Watts was composing on the side, he was earning a living as a personal tutor. Then in his early twenties he was hired as the assistant to the minister at the Independent Chapel in London. Finally, at age twenty-six, he became the minister. And it turned out that his new ideas were actually quite popular, and the congregation began to grow. **“With his new position and the respect that accompanied it, Isaac was finally able to publish his songs”** (110).

He became one of the best known clerics in England. In particular, his writing attracted the attention of a young woman name Elizabeth Singer. She began a long distance correspondence with Watts in which she not only declared herself his biggest fan, but also proposed marriage to him in a letter. When he wrote back his acceptance, she rushed to meet him in person—only to return home quickly after their first and only meeting. She later said that he was too short and unattractive for her. “Heartbroken, Watts poured himself into his writing, never again seeking” female companionship (110). (So that’s not great, but he did have a successful career, and a lasting musical legacy. Indeed, he came to be known as the “inventor of English hymns”).

His inspiration for the lyrics to “Joy to the World” came from Psalm 98:4, which says, “Make a joyful noise unto the LORD, all the earth: make a loud noise, and rejoice,

and sing praise.” But nothing much happened to them until many decades after his death in 1748.

Indeed, it would be another forty-four years until Lowell Mason was even born in the year 1812. Unlike Watts, who was from England, Mason was actually born about three hours from here in the town of Orange, New Jersey. He started out as a banker, but never forgot his teenage years spent during a local church choir and teaching at singing schools. He began to compose music in his spare time.

When he tried publishing his compositions, he was roundly rejected and told “The American public wants new folk music, not classical standards” (11). Mason gave up his dream until he received a completely unexpected notice in 1827 that another publisher had not only heard about his work, but had also ordered fifty thousand copies of his songbook. In 1839, more than a decade after his initial breakthrough, Mason set Watt’s lyrics to one of his musical arrangements, and this time around, the world was finally ready for “Joy to the World” (112).

But here’s the thing: no one actually knows how this famous hymn became a Christmas carol. Remember that it’s based on a Psalm from the Hebrew Bible that Watts had interpreted Christologically. Both Isaac Watts and Lowell Mason thought it was a song about joy in general that Jesus had come, not about his birth in particular. But it has nevertheless now become a Christmas classic.

Now we UU’s, for better or worse, are unabashed changers of lyrics. If we think we can improve them theologically or ethically, we usually go for it. But that’s also precisely what Watts was doing in his day: making music more contemporary and relevant for his age. So on this 300th anniversary of “Joy to World” notice that we have changed the lyrics in verse three from “far as the curse is found” to “as far as *love* is found” to be in line with the Universalist half of our heritage. For what it’s worth, I’m glad we did! Let’s sing together:

No more let sins and sorrows grow, nor thorns infest the ground.

Let righteousness its glories show as far as love is found, as far as love is found, as far as, as far as love is found.