

Faith Story: Isaac Watts, The Father of English Hymnody

June 13, 2021

When I Survey the Wondrous Cross

Jesus Shall Reign Where'er the Sun

My Shepherd Will Supply My Need

Joy to the World



These are just a few of the more than 600 hymns which Isaac Watts wrote. The three hymns we are singing together this morning in worship are also his work. All of us who find hymn-singing such a meaningful part of Christian worship -- and I suspect that is most of us -- owe a great debt of gratitude to Isaac Watts, who is often called the Father of English Hymnody.

Watts was born in 1674 into a family of religious Dissenters. In fact, on the day Isaac was born, his father was in prison for refusing to embrace the established Church of England. Seventeenth-century Dissent, with ties to the Protestant theology and practices developed by John Calvin, was a religious culture distinguished by its attention to local congregational authority, the education of preachers and people, and the cultivation of individual piety. Watts, like his father, was ordained as a minister of this tradition and served an Independent -- or non-conformist -- congregation, although he avoided prison time.

It became clear when Isaac was still quite young that he had an extraordinary intelligence. He learned Latin when he was 4, Greek at 9, French at 10, and Hebrew at 13. He was offered a scholarship to study at Oxford or Cambridge but declined because that educational route would have led him into Anglican ministry. Instead he studied at London's Dissenting Academy, which I think we can all agree is an *excellent* name for a school. After completing his education, Watts worked as a tutor, a ministry assistant, and then as the appointed minister for Mark Lane Independent Chapel in London.

When Watts was growing up, congregational singing in English Protestant churches followed the practice set by John Calvin and consisted only of metrical psalms.

Isaac criticized the singing of his father's congregation, decrying what he saw as "dull indifference, the negligent and thoughtless air". His father promptly challenged him to provide the people with something better, livelier to sing. A week later, Isaac presented his father and the church with his first hymn composition: *Behold the Glories of the Lamb*.

Later, when Watts was serving as the minister of Mark Lane Chapel, there was a two-year period when he wrote a new hymn for every Sunday. Many of his hymns are reworkings of the Psalms, written to bring a New Testament perspective because of Watts' conviction that "the Christian church should sing of Christ." For instance, our Christmas carol "Joy to the World" is based on Psalm 98.

Watts' physical and mental health were frail for all of his life and he was forced to leave his ministry position after ten years. He spent his remaining years writing much-respected works on a wide range of topics, including thirty theological treatises; essays on psychology, astronomy, grammar, geography, and philosophy. A number of his educational books were regularly reprinted and used for more than a century.

But Watts is best known now for his hymns, which are still regularly sung in Christian churches. The Poetry Foundation website entry on Watts suggests that his model of congregational song "is arguably the most lively vestige of the 18th-century understanding of what poetry can and ought to do."

Isaac Watts died in 1748. He has a statue in Poet's Corner of Westminster Abbey.

You can check out the Composers Index in the back of our Glory to God hymnal to see which of his hymns are included.