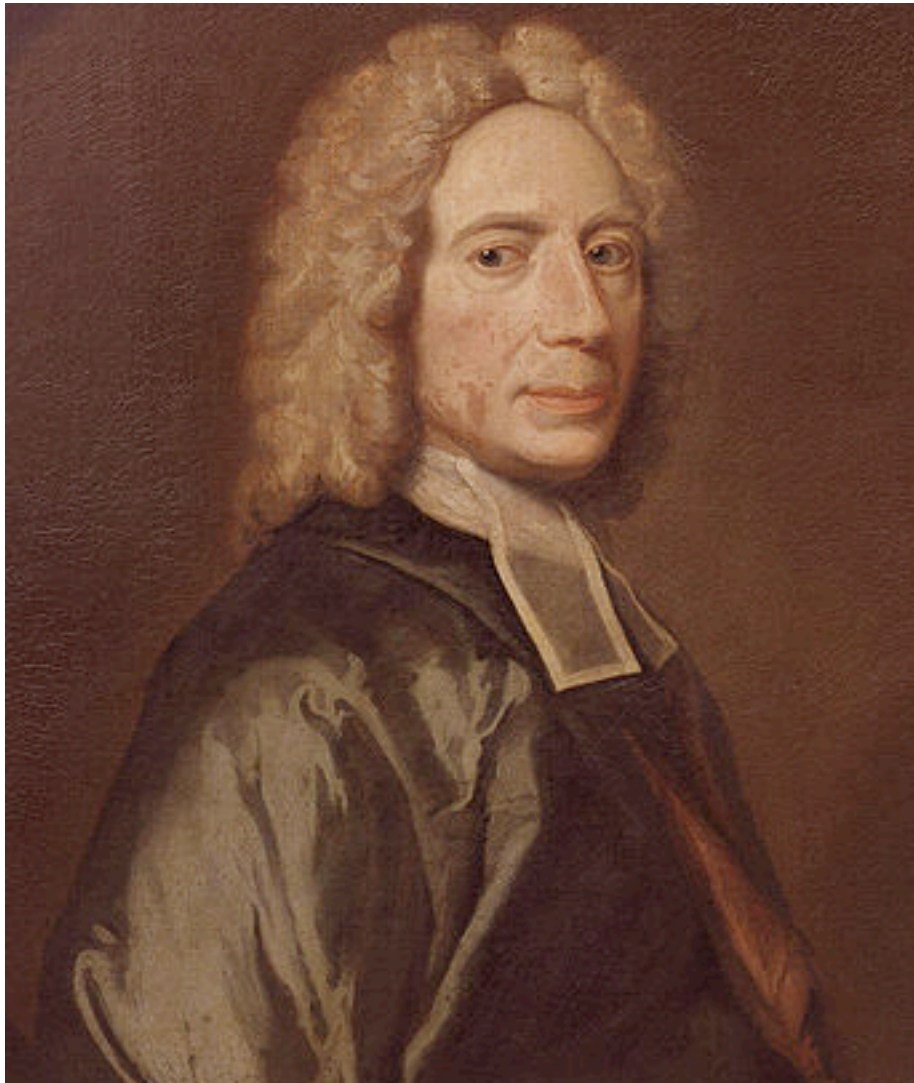


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Isaac Watts (1674-1748)

Observed 26 November



Isaac Watts grew up a 'non-conformist' in 17th century England, where failure to conform to the Church of England in worship and membership disqualified one from public office, from university, and much more. Isaac grew up faithful to his family's beliefs and religious practices, and seeming not to resent the difficulties they sometimes caused him. He was not dogmatic or a polemicist, less concerned with precise religious regulation than with good education and a good relationship with God. Because of this, his heritage is embraced by everyone. That heritage consists of numerous books on pedagogy and logic which were very useful in his own time, but less consulted in subsequent centuries. The heritage that promises to keep his name alive for centuries more is the body of hymnody. An avid, some thought compulsive, composer of verse from early childhood, he is credited with 750 hymns in English and is regularly called the

'Father of English hymnody'. He advocated, and practiced, two innovations in hymn practice in Christian worship. First, he proposed including texts that were not from the Bible, specifically Christian poetry. Before his time, the various Protestant and Reformed churches followed the practices advocated by Calvin and others, of only singing Biblical texts, most often Psalms. His other innovation was the inclusion of Christian ideas in adaptations of Old Testament Psalms. Examples of this latter include his own, "My Shepherd will supply my need" and the later "The King of Love my Shepherd is", both faithful to the 23rd Psalm while including Christian theology and emphasis. These two ideas greatly broadened the field for church musicians who had been limiting themselves to creative, singable settings of Biblical Psalms and Canticles. Hymns are a major source of inspiration, comfort, and spiritual growth for many within the Church. Thanks to Watts, the door was opened to the creations of theologians, poets, and Christians of all gifts to share their thinking with everyone at worship.

Sixteen hymns in our hymnal are credited to Watts, including many that are still favorites.

Examples include: Come, Holy Spirit, heavenly dove; Jesus shall reign where'er the sun; Joy to the world; O God, our help in ages past; When I survey the wondrous cross,

Lessons I Chronicles 16:1-6; Psalm 108:1-6; Colossians 3:12-17; Luke 18:35-43

Collect God of truth and grace, you gave Isaac Watts singular gifts to present your praise in verse, that he might write psalms, hymns and spiritual songs for your Church: Give us grace joyfully to sing your praises now and in the life to come; through Jesus Christ our Savior, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.