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Sermon 12 December 2021

Title: Let Earth Receive Her King

- Good morning church family—thank you for joining us today, we trust that you are blessed by what you see and hear this morning--we are so grateful to be with you and we hope that you have had an enjoyable week—it has certainly been an unusual week for Pastor Tasha and me—as you know we returned from the US over a week ago, and because of the new rules around COVID testing and international travel—those rules changed just a day before we left the US—we were required to book a PCR test, through the mail, and send that back to a lab to be analysed, and until we received a negative result, we had to self-isolate—which pretty much means that we were in quarantine at our own home. We weren't expecting to have to do that but we thought, well, how long could that possibly take—two or three days?
- Well it turned out that it took over a week—a week of waiting, sometimes patiently, sometimes anxiously, always eagerly, because we were ready to get out and get back to work—we had people to see and things to do—and so Thursday morning when I woke up I checked my email and sure enough, on the eighth day after we had arrived, there was my certificate that said my test was negative—I was set free at last— and I'll tell you—I like to tell people that they need to stay positive, but I have never been so happy to be told that I was negative as I was when I got that test result.
- and so naturally I woke Tasha up—I believe it was about 6:30 am so she appreciated that-- and told her she should check her email—and she did—but there was no

certificate yet—well, we thought, I’m sure it’ll only be a little while before you get it, and we’ll be able to deliver the meals to the Food Bank together, and get down to the church and see how things are, and do all the things we’ve been waiting to be able to do—well do you know that several hours passed, and since I was no longer required to self-isolate, I was able to take care of getting the meals to the food bank, and to do some other things that needed to be done, but Pastor Tasha was still stuck at home, waiting and waiting, and checking her email, and calling the lab, and texting the HelpLine—just trying to get some indication of when she would be granted her freedom—because we knew that it was going to happen, that the result would be delivered eventually, and we just needed to wait for it expectantly—and really that assurance, that expectation, is the only thing that made that difficult situation bearable—and sure enough, on Thursday evening—I believe it was after dark—the email finally came and we were both released from captivity and so we are very thankful to be able to get out and visit and of course to be able to worship in-person with our church family this morning.

- Today is Gaudete Sunday—the third Sunday in Advent—the day when you light the pink candle in the Advent wreath—now before any of my pedantic, liturgically-informed friends feel the need to correct me and tell me that it’s a ROSE candle, I know that it’s called “rose” and not pink, but I believe it was Shakespeare who said a rose candle by any other name is still pink—and so I’ve got my pink Gaudete Sunday t-shirt on—or my rose shirt I guess
- the name “Gaudete Sunday” comes from the first word of the traditional mass for this particular Sunday—that word is “Rejoice”—and the rest of the words are based on Philippians 4, verse 4-7, where the Apostle Paul writes this from prison—he says:

- 4:4 Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.
 - 4:5 Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.
 - 4:6 Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.
 - 4:7 And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.
- That's one of the lectionary readings for today. But on Gaudete Sunday we think particularly about joy—and so we heard in our Advent reading how the angels told the shepherds not to be afraid because they brought tidings of great joy—we heard Pastor Tasha read about how Mary said that her soul rejoiced in God her saviour—the word she uses literally means to leap with joy
 - now we said last week that “Joy to the World” would be our theme for these Sundays in Advent and Christmas, and last week we heard from the book of James how we should “consider it nothing but joy” when we face trials—of any kind, James said—and you may remember that we noticed that James doesn't tells us to “be happy about it” when you face trials of any kind—he says consider it nothing but joy—and we pointed out that that's important because as many writers, like Henri Nouwen and CS Lewis have told us—there's a big difference between joy and happiness—because happiness is associated with external situations—things that happen can make us happy or not depending on whether we want them to happen, whether we desire them to happen—but joy is different from happiness—it's more internal and more general—it is that sense that all is well, that God will provide, that everything is going to turn out alright—joy is not simply about what IS happening around us, the situation that we find ourselves in, but about our expectations—

about what we believe WILL happen—and so a person can have joy in the midst of trials, even in the midst of suffering, in the midst of unhappiness, even in the midst of confusion and longing for salvation depending on their expectations.

- Now we have all heard folks talk about how Advent and Christmas are a season of joyous anticipation and expectation, and it certainly should be, but unfortunately, it is not for many people—a great many folks say that the holidays are a time of anxiety and stress and sadness and grief—in fact, “holiday depression” and “post-holiday depression” are actual conditions that healthcare workers and therapists know about and recognize in more people than you might imagine
- There are multiple and complex causes of holiday depression—things like financial stress and grief and lack of sunlight, but one of the major contributors to, one of the major causes of, holiday depression, is this—unmet expectations. That’s when people think their holidays are going to look a certain way, and feel a certain way, that certain things are going to happen, and when they don’t that leaves them feeling sad and disappointed and depressed.
- It’s not hard to imagine that this would happen when you consider how the holidays are portrayed in the media—this week I’ve been noticing particularly how television adverts portray the Christmas season and everything is picture-perfect, families are all together and happy and laughing and eating beautiful food in beautifully decorated homes, snow is falling and there are lights and glitter and everything sparkles—it’s a magical time when dreams come true and husbands can somehow purchase a brand new Mercedes Benz without their wife’s knowledge and present it to her with a big red bow on top on Christmas morning and her first words are not “how are we going to pay for this?”

- But real Christmases and real family gatherings at the holidays don't often live up to the way they're portrayed on television—or even the way they're portrayed on social media—it's well-known that folks can get depressed because their own lives don't live up to the edited and filtered images that their friends post on Facebook
- And a lot of times people have expectations that aren't even very well-defined—they don't really know what they expect their holiday season to be like, but they know that what they've got is not good enough
- And so they are disappointed and anxious rather than thankful and at peace and they don't receive the gift of the season with gratitude and excitement—they reject it as inadequate—because they impose their expectations on it—they take a critical and judgemental look at it, examine it and analyze it and come to a conclusion about it—and like a person who didn't get the Christmas present they wanted, they, sometimes unconsciously, reject it and don't receive the blessing that the season ought to provide—because this is the season in which we celebrate God's gift to the world—a gift that, if we let it, exceeds our expectations
- I've heard several times from various preachers over the years a story about a golfer, sometimes it's Arnold Palmer or Bobby Jones, it doesn't really matter because as far as I can tell this story never actually happened, but it's told because it makes a good point about expectations, and the way our expectations can be exceeded—and the story goes that a wealthy king in Saudi Arabia invited this professional golfer, let's say Arnold Palmer, to visit and play some exhibition matches in his country, and while he was visiting, Arnold took some time to help the king improve his game, he gave him some tips on his stance and his swing and his follow-through, and the king was so thankful that he said he wanted to give Arnold a gift to express his gratitude

but Arnold said that wasn't necessary, that it had been a privilege to play there and to see the country and meet the people there, but the king insisted and said to Palmer, "How about if I give you a golf club?" And Arnold thought to himself, "just a single golf club—that's simple enough," and so he told the king, "sure, that would be appropriate and I would be honored by that." The king said that he'd need to make some arrangements before sending the club to Arnold's home back in the states and Palmer said that would be fine—and as he flew back to the states he wondered what kind of golf club a wealthy king might give somebody—he didn't know if it would be a wood or an iron or maybe a putter but probably not—maybe it would be solid gold or hand-crafted by an artisan—and he was eager to find out. Well, he went home and a few days went by, and then a week, then two, and he was wondering whether the king had forgotten about his gift—he figured he probably did—kings probably have important royal stuff to do that keeps them busy-- but one afternoon there was a knock on his front door and a man in a business suit was there and introduced himself as an attorney acting on behalf of the king—and Arnold invited him in but noticed that all he was carrying was a briefcase, and it wasn't big enough to carry a golf club, but he was wrong about that because inside the case was a deed—the deed to a 36-hole, 350-acre golf course in south Florida—that is, a golf club. Now Arnold could have rejected that gift because it wasn't what he was expecting, but how foolish would that have been to miss out on the blessing this king wanted to provide—and so he received it with gratitude and it far exceeded his expectations

- Now last week we considered the first line of the hymn, Joy to the world—Joy to the world, the Lord is come—and today we move on to the next few words—"Let earth receive her King," and when I think about those words I think about the fact that

when Jesus arrived, there were those from the time he was born, all through his life and even after his death and resurrection, who did not “receive their king,” but rejected this greatest of all gifts because it was not what they were expecting—they examined it and analysed it and it was not their idea of what a Davidic king—a Messiah—should be—think about what the Scribes and Pharisees have to say about Jesus throughout the gospels--and they miss out on God’s blessing—and the joy and freedom and peace that it could bring

- But there are others who receive their King—who don’t impose their own incorrect expectations but allow God to exceed their expectations
- A prime example is Jesus’ mother Mary. We heard Luke’s beautiful rendition of Mary’s Magnificat this morning—those powerful, prophetic words that Mary speaks when she’s visiting Elizabeth and Elizabeth says that John the Baptist, who hasn’t been born yet—leapt within her womb when the Mother of the Lord came near.
- Now you’ll remember that the word Mary uses there in verse 47 when she says her spirit rejoices means literally to leap for joy—so there’s a lot of joy going on in this scene
- And the joy that Mary is expressing is directly related to the fact that she is now expecting Jesus—she has received her King—she is carrying the Messiah—now, a few verses earlier, when Gabriel appeared to her, she was at first perplexed and confused and no doubt anxious, but her expectation brought joy to that situation.
- And I want us to think about that situation for a moment—because from a certain perspective, it is a difficult one—because what the angel Gabriel announces to Mary is that she is going to be an unwed mother--that she is going to have to tell Joseph that she’s pregnant and he’ll no doubt want to end that relationship—and that’s

exactly what Matthew's gospel tells us did happen—and Mary lives in a society in which it is not unusual to put an adulterous woman to death—

- and so Mary could very well have said, “No, this is not what I was expecting—I have plans to be married to this carpenter and to live my life in our happy home and do all the things that other women in my village do—I reject this proposal”—but rather than rejecting it, she receives it—and we read in the words of the Magnificat just what her expectations are as her expectations are aligned with the purposes of God—
- My soul magnifies the Lord, 47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, 48 for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; 49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.
- Now I want you to notice that the difficulty of Mary's circumstances have not changed—all that stuff, all that baggage that goes with getting pregnant before she was married still remains—she is still in a difficult situation—but she rejoices—she has joy because of her expectations—because joy has much more to do with our expectations than our situations—let me say that again—joy has more to do with our expectations than with our situations
- When we are tempted to impose our critical standard, our wrong expectations, on the things we see around us, the situation we're in, when we say “this doesn't live up to what I had in mind—I reject it and I'm anxious and stressed out about it” that's when we lose our joy and our peace—but even in difficult situations we can, like Mary, say “this is what God has done for me, and this is what he's doing in the world, and this is what he'll do in the future,” then we can rejoice in God our Saviour

- And so as we read in the passage from Philippians, the Apostle Paul could sit chained in a jail cell, knowing he could be tortured or put to death at anytime and say “Rejoice, and again I say rejoice”—he doesn’t look at his situation and say “this doesn’t meet my expectations, I’ve examined it and inspected it and found it wanting”—no, he lives expecting what God is working out, knowing that God’s purposes are unfolding, even in a difficult situation
- And it occurs to me that the word “expect” literally means “to look out” —ex, of course like exit, is out, and spect, like spectacles or spectator, is to look—and so the opposite of expect would be to inspect—just as the opposite of expire, to breathe out is inspire, to breathe in, and the opposite of an extrovert is an introvert—and my point is this:
- When we get all bogged down in evaluating our situations, the things that are happening to us and around us, when we spend our time INSPECTING and not EXPECTING—looking out for what’s coming, looking forward to what God is doing and where God is directing us, that’s when we can lose our joy—but when we live EXPECTANTLY—when we EXPECT what God is going to do, what God is doing, that’s when we find joy, and peace, and freedom—and so I think it’s good to ask ourselves from time to time—am I living my life as an inspector—finding flaws and faults and failures—or as an expector—living with hope and faith and gratitude—
- Joy has more to do with our expectations than with our situations, and joy has more to do with what we EX-pect than with what we IN-spect.
- Now I want to make one last point about Mary’s expectancy, her perspective as she is expecting, and it’s this—as we read through these powerful, prophetic words about what God is doing, what is happening in her life and in the history of the world

as Earth receives her King, you might notice that Mary doesn't say that God is GOING TO do some things—she says that He HAS DONE some things—in the past tense-- He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud. . . . 52 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; 53 he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

- But even though her words are in the past tense, it is clear that she's talking about what God is doing through the arrival of Jesus, who hasn't even been born yet, who has yet to begin his ministry and his teaching and his sacrificial work through the cross and resurrection—what God will do—what she is expecting Him to do—but she speaks of it in the past tense, as though it has already been done—and that I think is a statement of faith and hope and expectation and gratitude—an expression of thanksgiving for what Mary is certain is coming to pass—what God is doing and what God will do—she's not worrying about her situation, but rejoicing in expectation of what God will do
- And that I think is the same attitude that the Apostle Paul is talking about in Philippians 4, when he writes—from his prison cell remember-- Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.
- Let your requests be known to God with thanksgiving—showing gratitude for what you've asked for even before it has been given to you—living in expectation that God will provide—that God is working out his purposes—
- And notice that Paul doesn't say “let your requests be known and you'll get everything that you ask for—if you just expect it, you'll get it—

- No Paul says “And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus”—and that is the gift we receive when we live with expectation. Peace. Not stress, not worry, not anxiety—and that is cause for rejoicing.
- As we gather at the Lord’s table together in just a moment—on this Gaudete Sunday let’s remember the way that God’s gifts exceed our expectations—let’s remember that joy has more to do with our expectations than with our situations, more to do with what we EX-pect than what we IN-spect. Let Earth receive her King this morning.
- Pastor Tasha is going to lead us in just a moment, but first we’re going to take a few moments to prepare the elements, and to prepare ourselves. Take the next couple of minutes to gather the wine and the bread where you are, and to still your heart and mind, and then we’ll partake together, expectantly.