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Sermon 26 December 2021

Title: The Saviour Reigns

- Good morning church family and Merry Christmas! Today is, of course, the first Sunday of Christmas—it's also Boxing Day here in the UK, so I thought I might watch a couple of the Rocky movies, with Sylvester Stallone you know, this afternoon to celebrate—in the US not too many people would call this Boxing Day—they'd just call it the Day after Christmas—the day when all the After-Christmas sales start at the shops—and it always sort of annoys me when folks want to say Christmas is over when in fact it just started and we've got a couple more weeks of Christmas yet to go—we hear about the “war on Christmas” sometimes and it seems to me that the clearest evidence that there's a war on Christmas is how many people want to it to end before it's even gotten started—we waited all through Advent for this season, so let's slow down and appreciate it.
- Now during Advent and for the two Sundays in Christmas, we are looking to the lyrics of Isaac Watt's well-known Christmas hymn, “Joy to the World” for our theme. We began by considering how the lyrics “Joy to the World, the Lord is come,” remind us of the way that Jesus DID come—to a very specific place and time in history—but also of the way that He IS here—with us in the hearts and lives of individuals and in the life of the church ---and also the way that He IS coming, in the future, and so we await the arrival of the Kingdom even as we work to prepare the way for His coming. Then in our second week, on Gaudete Sunday, we considered the joy that comes with living expectantly—receiving the gift that God has provided in Christ and not

over-analysing and imposing our own standards upon our situations—being expectors and not inspectors—Let Earth Receive Her King was our theme that week

- And then last week “Let Every Heart Prepare Him Room” was our title and we learned about the way that John the Baptist prepared the way for Jesus, and the instructions that he gave those who came to hear him and to be baptised by him—instructions that we today could also use—instructions to “clean up and do the work that needs to be done”—to not only repent and be forgiven but also to bear fruit worthy of repentance—we asked whether there was room in our own hearts for Jesus, or whether there were obstacles and distractions that were taking up space and needed to be cleared out.
- Today I want to begin by moving to the second verse of Joy to the world, and that verse begins with this line: Joy to the World, the Saviour reigns—the saviour reigns
- Now when most people, even folks who aren’t Christians, even folks who are what we’d call “unchurched,” hear those 3 words—the saviour reigns—it’s very likely that they would know who they refer to—they’re about Jesus—we use the word “saviour” all the time to refer to Jesus—sometimes we pair it with the word “Lord,” so that if someone says “Let me tell you about my Lord and Saviour,” you can be about 99.9% certain that the Lord and Saviour they’re talking about is Jesus.
- But at the time Jesus was born, and in fact throughout his lifetime, if someone around Bethlehem or Nazareth or Galilee had said “the saviour reigns,” it would not have been assumed that they were talking about Jesus at all, but about Caesar, Caesar Augustus or perhaps about Tiberius, those folks that the gospel of Luke makes sure to list very specifically at the beginning of chapter 3 as we saw last week. That’s because the titles “Saviour” and “Lord” or *soter* and *kyrios* in the Greek,

referred specifically to those rulers—to Caesar—it was Caesar that you called Saviour, Caesar who was called Lord—and it didn't stop there—Caesar was also the one known as the son of God, the one whose birthday was celebrated as a day of *euangelion*—of good news-- that ushered in a Kingdom of universal peace, the Pax Augusta or Pax Romana—but Luke's gospel takes these very terms, these very ideas, and applies them to the son of unknown, relatively powerless parents who can't even find a decent place to give birth. Luke tells us that this Jesus is the true Saviour and Lord, the true Son of God whose Kingdom brings true peace.

- When we hear “the saviour reigns” today, we just assume it's about Jesus, but to make such a proclamation about anyone other than Caesar in the first century would have been a big problem, because you don't use the titles that apply to the emperor to refer to anybody else—you don't challenge their rule, or question their reign—in fact, both Augustus and Tiberius issued decrees that made it illegal to raise questions about their health or to predict their death—now catch this, it's important—it was illegal to predict the death of the Emperor, the Saviour and Lord, because when they died, their reign was over—a ruler doesn't reign outside of their lifetime—when we talk about the reign of Queen Victoria or of Elizabeth or Edward or any monarch, unless they abdicate or are removed from the throne, their reign stops at their death—they don't go on reigning after that—and so predicting a ruler's death was seen as questioning their authority, tantamount to placing one's allegiance elsewhere, just like suggesting that someone else was the Saviour and Lord.
- But the Saviour and Lord that Luke wants us to know about is not like other rulers—not like those whose authority is temporary, whose reign is earthly and impermanent—no—and the announcement of the arrival of this ruler, this Saviour

whose reign has begun in Bethlehem, is different too—it is announced not by royal proclamation from a palace, but by the heavenly host appearing to shepherds tending their sheep out in a field in the middle of the night

- These angels bring to the shepherds good news of great joy—and why is it good news—*euangelion*-- of great joy? Verse 11 makes it quite clear--to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour—a *soter*, who is the Messiah, the Lord--*kyrios*. As we spoke about last week, as Isaiah and John the Baptist had prophesied, The long-awaited Messiah, who will redeem his people, whose birth will usher in a new age of peace, who will reign over the Kingdom of God has come.
- And the angels tell the shepherds that “this will be a sign for you”—you will find a child wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.
- This will be a SIGN for you—now on the surface, this is simply the angels telling the shepherds what to look for when they get to Bethlehem—how to identify the Messiah—some directions to follow—go to Bethlehem and find a child wrapped in cloths lying in a manger. Easy enough, right?
- Well, to be honest the first of those two identifiers doesn’t help much—swaddling—wrapping your baby in binding cloths was common practice—so most every baby in Bethlehem would have been wrapped in cloths---but that “lying in a manger” bit—that’s very unusual, even odd—so that part would help the shepherds find Jesus.
- But I think that this statement—“you will find a child wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger” is more than just a way to help the shepherds find Jesus in Bethlehem
- The angels tell the shepherds “this will be a SIGN for you”—the Greek that Luke uses here is ***sémeion*: a sign—this word means**

- sign, miracle, indication, mark, omen—it is given to confirm, or authenticate; it can be a foreshadowing; a pre-announcement by which the future is announced;
- it can mean a sign emphasizing the **end-purpose** of the one giving it—a prediction
- and so a semeion is a sign that doesn't just communicate something about the present—doesn't just tell us where we are—like “Welcome to Largs” but it can also tell us what's COMING, it announces the future—Stevenston is that way, it is yet to come
- And there are two parts to the sign that the angels provide: you will find the child wrapped in cloths; AND lying in a manger
- Let's consider that first part
- Now we've said that Luke is here referring to the practice of swaddling—wrapping a newborn baby up tight in cloths—or in a cloth—binding it, really—now this has been a common practice for thousands of years in different cultures, and it still is in some-
- it is not advised by most medical authorities these days because it's linked to some negative effects
- But Luke is the only writer in the New Testament to talk about swaddling—there's a specific Greek word for it
- But swaddling is mentioned in the Old Testament. The prophet Ezekiel refers to it when he's talking about Israel—and he is being quite critical—it's in chapter 16 of Ezekiel—and he's talking about the way Jerusalem has turned its back on the ways of God—he writes:
 - 1 The word of the Lord came to me: 2 Mortal, make known to Jerusalem her abominations, 3 and say, Thus says the Lord God to Jerusalem: . . . 4 As for your birth, on the day you were born your navel cord was not cut, nor were

you washed with water to cleanse you, nor rubbed with salt, nor wrapped in cloths.

- Here Ezekiel refers to Jerusalem as an abandoned newborn—uncared for—unwashed, unswaddled—and so when Luke tells us that the Messiah is wrapped in swaddling clothes, he’s emphasizing the reversal of that abandonment—the Messiah has arrived bringing to the people of God not the condemnation of Ezekiel, but the promise of redemption—you may remember last week when we read the words of Isaiah—

- Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.

² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her

that she has served her term,

that her penalty is paid,

that she has received from the Lord’s hand

double for all her sins.

- ³ A voice cries out:

“In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,

- And so when John the Baptist announces the arrival of the Messiah, he is proclaiming the same Good News that the angels proclaimed to the shepherds—that the day of salvation has arrived—that the wait is over—that Jerusalem, though she had been abandoned, unwashed and unswaddled, is now visited by her Saviour, her *soter*, whose reign begins even as He lies wrapped in swaddling clothes and reveals the glory of the Lord to the people of God.

- But not only to the people of God, to Jerusalem, but as Luke makes clear time and time again throughout his gospel and in Acts, to all the world, to all flesh—and that voice in the wilderness cries out: Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. 6 And all people will see God’s salvation.”
- This will be a sign for you-- you will find the child wrapped in cloths—this sign points to the past and to the present situation—the redemption that has arrived.
- But this sign also points to the future.
- To understand how, let’s consider both parts of the sign. Wrapped in cloths and laid in a manger.
- And let’s back up and consider what Luke is describing—what is happening here.
- If we back up a bit to the beginning of chapter 2, we read that Joseph and Mary have arrived in Bethlehem, and then in verse 7: ⁷ And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.
- So, God incarnate, the Messiah, the Saviour, has taken human form, and has been wrapped in cloths—and lies bound,
- Immobile
- Powerless, having sacrificed all power and placed himself into the hands of others
- And has been placed by them—by their hands, not of his own power
- Into a manger—into a precarious position
- No newborn baby belongs in a manger, and no baby has been laid here before—this is a place from which animals feed—it is a place of consumption—a place where what lies in the manger is consumed

- And this is how Luke begins the story of the reign of the Saviour
- But we said this sign points to the future—and what lies in the future for this baby, the Messiah, wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger?
- Let's look ahead—let's move from the beginning of Jesus' earthly life to Chapters 23 and 24 of Luke's gospel
- Looking at Chapter 23 of Luke's gospel, Jesus has been crucified—he has, though he was God incarnate, relinquished all power, emptied himself of all but love, emptied himself even to death on a cross—and in verse 50 we read:
 - 50 Now there was a good and righteous man named Joseph. . . and he was waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God. 52 This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. 53 Then he took it down, wrapped it in a linen cloth, and laid it in a rock-hewn tomb where no one had ever been laid. . . . 55 The women who had come with him from Galilee followed, and they saw the tomb and how his body was laid.
- So what is the situation here? Joseph of Arimathea, along with the women from Galilee—who are they? Well two of them, we're told in Chapter 24, are named Mary, so Joseph and the Marys do what?
- They—or more specifically Joseph does-- take Jesus' powerless body, wrap it in cloths, and lay it in a manger—sorry—in a tomb—where no one has been laid before.
- And so we find the Messiah, as he was at the moment of his birth, powerless, immobile, in the hands of others, placed where? In a tomb—dead—and what happens in a tomb? Dead bodies are consumed, they decompose, they are quite literally eaten away by microbes and whatever other animals are in the tomb—a

tomb is a place of consumption—a place where animals eat what has been placed there

- Why is it a sign that Jesus will be wrapped in cloths and laid in a manger? Because his beginning points to the end of the story—in the manger and in the tomb, Jesus is the one who, though being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God a thing to be grasped, but humbled himself, taking on the nature of a slave, taking on human likeness, who made himself nothing, who emptied himself, even to death on a cross---therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name above all names—
- The sign that the angels give to the shepherds is a prediction of Jesus’ death—but unlike the predictions that the Emperors outlawed because they pointed to the end of their reigns—this death doesn’t end the reign of the true Saviour and Lord
- And that is the rest of the story in chapter 24 of Luke’s gospel—Jesus’ story doesn’t end with the manger and it doesn’t end with the tomb—His reign is just getting started
- In chapter 24, we find the women at the tomb, where
- Angels appear to them and they are afraid
- Just as angels had appeared to the shepherds, who were afraid
- These women had seen Jesus, wrapped in cloths and laying in the tomb
- Just as the shepherds had seen Jesus wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger
- But now Jesus is gone, he has risen, and the women are told by the angels to remember what Jesus had said to them
- Just as the shepherds remembered what the angels had told them when they found Jesus

- And the women tell the disciples, who don't believe them
- Just as the shepherds told others who were amazed—after they had gone in haste to see Jesus wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger
- And Peter too, goes in haste--running to the tomb, and finds what? Only the cloths that he had been wrapped in
- And so the swaddling cloths and a manger point to burial cloths and an empty tomb—the sign given to the shepherds points to Jesus' future, and the manner in which he would defeat death and the grave and bring about salvation for all the world. **The way that his reign would live on beyond death.**
- I want to make one final point about the way that the second part of that sign, “lying in a manger” points to the future—not only to the tomb but to another scenario
- But first, I want to tell you a story
 - When we lived on our farm back in SC, we had pigs—American Guinea hogs—five of them—and we'd feed them in big hard rubber tubs—and when they were eating, they were focused—I mean, they ate like pigs—now when we had those pigs, we also had chickens, and the fence around the pig yard, separating them from where the chickens lived, was a wire grid, and so it was big enough for a small chicken to fit through—and when the chickens were older they'd just hop over the fence—the fence was there to keep the pigs in, not to keep the chickens out—and once when we were raising Cornish Rock Cross chickens—these are meat birds—the kind you buy in the supermarket—they grow fast and they get big—and they are not smart—in fact they're dumb—well one morning while we were feeding the pigs, we had put their food into their tubs, and so they're busy eating—they're focused—

and a little Cornish Rock chick got walked through the fence, and walked over toward one of the pigs' feed tubs—I believe it was Basil—he was our big boy—well that chick walked over to Basil's food tub and jumped in—and before either of us could run over and get him out, Basil gobbled him up in one bite. He didn't miss a beat. And you can't blame him—if you're a pig, anything that's in your feeding tub is food.

- And so it's a strange thing to find baby Jesus in the second Chapter of Luke, all bound up and helpless, placed into a manger—a place where food goes—right? **By definition, food goes into a manger.** But baby Jesus isn't food, right? That's meaningless—nonsense—until you think about what Jesus says in chapter 22 of Luke's gospel, just before the crucifixion—as he's eating the last supper with his disciples—
 - 19 Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, 'This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' 20 And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, 'This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.'
- That Jesus is placed in a manger is no meaningless occurrence—it points to Jesus' sacrifice, offering his body and blood to be consumed
- And if you look at the previous paragraph, we see that Luke uses the word Passover 4 times in 6 sentences—he wants us to know this meal takes place during Passover, and he even specifies in verse 7:
- ⁷ Then came the day of Unleavened Bread, on which the Passover lamb had to be sacrificed.

- On which the Passover lamb had to be sacrificed—that Jesus lies in a manger, a place of consumption, reminds us that he is none other than the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world, who offers up his body and blood that we may be redeemed
 - When Jesus is called “saviour,” this is no mere empty title—He is the Saviour because he is the one who has saved us—he is the LAMB of God—
 - so why do the angels appear to shepherds? Not **just** because they are outsiders and among the lowly in society, but because lambs are their business—they look for lambs—and in Bethlehem they find the Lamb of God, wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.
- **This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.**
 - **Joy to the world, the saviour reigns. Over** each of us, over the church, over the community. Over all the world. And like the shepherds did, let’s tell people about it. Let’s let the world know the good news, let’s praise and glorify God for all we have seen and heard, let’s let folks know what the Saviour, the one who was wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger, means to us—and like the angels that appeared to the shepherds, let’s bring JOY to the world.