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Sermon 5 December 2021

Title: The Lord is come

- Good morning church—we are so glad you've joined us today, and we are particularly glad to be joining you once again from our home here in Largs, Scotland. It was wonderful to spend the last month in the US—we had a good visit with family and friends—we saw my parents and Pastor Tasha's parents, and had a good time at Thanksgiving—we got some things taken care of that we had been unable to do because of the restrictions on travel to the States—and it is good to get away for a break, but it is also good to get back home and get back to our community and our church family and all the things that are happening here. And it's because of all the exciting things that are happening here in Largs and at LargsNaz that our current situation is particularly frustrating. We left the US this past Wednesday afternoon, and on Tuesday afternoon—less than 24 hours before our departure, the government here in Scotland, and the UK government as well, revised the rules for travellers arriving from the US and other international destinations—because of this new COVID variant we were no longer required to take a rapid, lateral-flow test when we got back, we had to book a PCR test—and not only did we have to book a PCR test, but we had to self-isolate until we got a negative result.
- Now when I first heard about that, I thought, well that's no big deal, we'll just take a PCR test from the walk-up testing area at the Glasgow airport, and you can get results in 24 hours there, so we'll be freed from self-isolation on Friday and that won't have any effect on our plans at church. But it turned out that the only PCR

tests that were acceptable were the ones that you order by mail and they send to your house and then you have to send back to a lab—and at the time I'm writing this the test still hasn't arrived even though we ordered it before we arrived and went through customs—we had to because we were required to—so it looks like we're going to be in COVID jail here at our house for a few days—and that wouldn't be so bad except that we had things planned at church—and we missed seeing all of you—we were excited to get back and to decorate the sanctuary and to have worship and brunch and communion on Sunday

- And if you know me at all, you know that once I make a plan, I do not like to change it—not one bit—I can tolerate being spontaneous and not having a plan but if I go to the trouble of making a plan, I like to stick to it—and so when we got back on Thursday, even though we had ordered that PCR test I spent the rest of the day trying to figure out some other way that we could get a negative test result more quickly than the way it seemed that we were locked into doing it—well to make a long story short, by Friday morning I had to resign myself to the situation—and Pastor Tasha had been telling me that there was no need to get anxious or frustrated since we couldn't do anything about the situation anyway—we were just going to have to accept it—and by Friday morning I did just that—I accepted the fact that we were not going to be able to see the people that we were so excited to see—we were not going to be able to worship with our brothers and sisters on Sunday morning—we would not be able to have brunch on Sunday or serve communion—and so we had to let people know that all that was cancelled—or at least postponed, which felt as bad as if it were cancelled to me—I was going to have to accept the situation but I was not happy about it.

- The fact was that we are still, even after almost two years, living in very trying times—times when sometimes things do not go the way we had planned—things do not turn out the way we expect—things get cancelled. And we don't have to be happy about it when things like that happen—but we can't let external situations and circumstances steal our joy, either.
- I've been reminded of that all this week as the words of James to the twelve tribes of the dispersion, in the first chapter of his epistle--those verses that you heard Pastor Tasha share with us, have been going through my mind and convicting me if I'm totally honest about it—they're worth repeating—James writes: 2 My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, 3 because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; 4 and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.
- Whenever I read the book of James I remember that Martin Luther didn't have a lot of use for it—he didn't appreciate it much at all—he considered it an epistle of straw—but that's where we disagree, and I say this in all humility and deference to Martin Luther, because I know that he was almost certainly a lot brighter than I am—but it seems to me that Martin Luther thought that James was saying that if you do certain things you'll have faith, but it seems to me that what James is saying throughout his epistle is that if you have faith, you'll do certain things—let me say that again in a slightly different way: you don't have faith because you do certain things, but you do certain things because you have faith—if you have faith you'll love the Lord your God with all your your heart, soul and mind and you'll love your neighbour as yourself—if you have faith you'll store up treasures in heaven and not on earth, if you have faith you'll love your enemies, if you have faith you'll seek

justice, if you have faith you'll feed the hungry and heal the sick and house the homeless and clothe the naked and visit the imprisoned—you'll be a friend to the friendless, a champion for the powerless, a voice for the voiceless-- and so James' idea that faith without works is dead doesn't mean that works result in faith, that what you do will make you righteous or holy, but that faith results in works—if you're holy and righteous then that is going to result in you doing some things—that, as we at LargsNaz say in our Vision Statement, we say that holiness, that perfect love and heart cleansing that the Spirit works in us, transforms the way we think and act—not just the way we act but the way we think—not just the things we do but the way our minds work—and so when James says “consider it” he is referring to the way we think about our situations, about the events and the circumstances around us—and James tells us that even when we face trials of any kind—did you hear that? trials of any kind—consider it nothing but JOY—NOTHING but joy—because your faith is being tested and refined and you are being made mature and complete— James uses the same language in the Greek that Jesus used when he told folks to be perfect—when James talks about being mature and complete--that's Christian perfection—that's what we Wesleyans call holiness—and James connects that holiness with not only faith, but also with joy—

- Now James doesn't say “be happy about it” when you face trials of any kind—he says consider it nothing but joy—and that's important because as many writers, like CS Lewis have pointed out many times over the years—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 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—and so joy is connected to faith and hope—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.

- Longing for salvation, yearning for rescue from the present situation is something we talk about a lot during the Advent season—as we think about the prophets and the people of God who looked forward in faith and hope to the one who would change everything—the one who would bring Joy to the World.
- Joy to the World is going to be the theme of our sermons for the next few weeks, in Advent and Christmas, and you'll recognize it of course as the title of a very well-loved hymn.
- And that song, Joy to the World, was written in 1719 by the very well-known hymnwriter, Isaac Watts.
- JTTW is based on Psalm 98, Psalm 96, and Genesis 3: Psalm 98 and 96 are two Psalms that tell us about God's reign and Kingship and the way that He reigns over all of creation with equity and justice —the way that He rules the world—with truth and grace—and calls on all of creation, both heaven and earth—heaven and nature, to sing His praises--and Genesis 3 of course tells us the story of the Fall of Adam and Eve—the way that the very earth itself became cursed because of the sin of humanity's forebears—the way that sin and sorrows grew and thorns infested the ground—but Watt's hymn looks forward to the one whose appearance would change all that—looks to the one who comes to make his blessings flow, far as the curse is found.

- And so what Joy to the World does, is to interpret Psalms 98 and 96, and the Genesis story that preceded them, in light of the gospel—and so it is not surprising that the hymn was part of a collection that Watt’s called “The Psalms of David: Imitated in the language of the New Testament, and applied to the Christian state and worship”—because that’s what Watts is doing here—using the language of the Old Testament and the elements of its narratives to talk about what happens in the New Testament—in the Gospel—in particular, to tell the story of the way that the Son of God, the second person of the Godhead, appeared in history-- in the form of one particular human in a particular place at a particular time—the story of how, as the gospel of John put it, the eternal logos, the Living word, became flesh and dwelt among us—or as Eugene Peterson put it, the way that He The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood.
- And so we sing Joy to the World, and we hear it played on the radio, and we hear it when we’re out shopping, around Christmastime
- In fact, by the end of the 20th century, Joy to the World had become the most widely published Christmas hymn in all of North America—but this is despite the fact that when we really take a good look at its lyrics, it does not directly present any of the familiar elements of the Christmas or Advent narrative like some other Christmas songs, like Silent Night, or O Little Town of Bethlehem, or Away in a Manger do.
- There is not one iota of the Christmas story to be found here in these 4 verses, in these 142 words of Joy to the World --Isaac Watts did not include any mention of the angel Gabriel appearing to the virgin, or of shepherds abiding in their fields keeping watch over their flocks by night, or of the star appearing in the heavens or of the wise men that followed it, or the way that Herod tried to find out where the Messiah

had been born, there is no mention of Bethlehem or the manger or the inn at which there was no room, no mention of Joseph's dream or the flight to Egypt—in fact there's no mention of Joseph, or Mary, or even of Jesus at all—

- But on the other hand, we know what this song is about—audiences for 300 years have known what this song is about
- And so during Advent and Christmas, it is this song, Joy to the World, that will be providing the theme for our sermons, and we will be looking to its lyrics for inspiration as we journey toward and into the Christmas season, because even though Advent is a time of waiting, a time of anticipation, a time even some might say as Pastor Jacob did last week, of having the discipline to deny ourselves the full celebration of Christmas, there is, even in the waiting of Advent, a joy to be found—a joy that emanates from the assurance of what lies ahead—because in Advent we do not wonder IF Christmas is coming, we do not question WHETHER God's promises will be fulfilled—we do not think, well, PERHAPS someday, MAYBE the Lord will appear—no, the waiting of Advent is an anticipation that takes place with the full assurance of FAITH—and it is that FAITH that we are reminded of on this second Sunday of Advent—the faith that the prophet Isaiah and John the Baptist demonstrated when they proclaimed that somebody's coming—they didn't say, "well maybe God will send somebody to help us," oh no, they spoke with the conviction of their faith—maybe they didn't know when, maybe they didn't know how, but they knew beyond any shadow of a doubt, that somebody was coming who was gonna change everything.
- And that somebody's coming is what brings Joy to the World—that somebody coming is what Isaac Watts is talking about in the lyrics of Joy to the World.

- And so today I want to consider that first line of Isaac Watts' hymn—we all know it—you probably heard it in your head when you heard the notes of that instrumental version that we started the service with—Joy to the world, the Lord is come.
- Joy to the World, the Lord is come.
- Now that phrasing, the way those words are put together, when you just consider them out of their context within this hymn, those words might sound a little strange to us—because we don't talk like that—I mean, I can't think of any other instance outside of singing this particular song, where I or anyone I know would say that the Lord or anybody else for that matter, "is come"—
- imagine if I walked into church one Sunday morning and said to you "Hey guess what, Pastor Tasha is come, isn't that great?"
- You'd probably think that you had misunderstood me or that I had misspoke, or maybe if you had some medical training you might think I was having a stroke, but you'd definitely wonder what in the world was going on, because you would be confused by the ambiguity in my diction—you might wonder, "well does he mean that Pastor Tasha is coming to the church—or that Pastor Tasha is already at the church—or maybe that Pastor Tasha came to the church earlier, at some point in the past?"
- And so when the phrase "the Lord is come" strikes our modern ears, it brings with it a multiplicity of meanings—it could suggest something that has happened in the past, or something that is happening in the present, or something that will happen in the future
- And that, I want to suggest this morning, is particularly relevant when we consider what we as Christians are doing when we celebrate Advent—when we

commemorate and celebrate the arrival of Jesus as we look toward the Christmas season

- Because on the one hand, during the Advent season, we look forward to an event that has already happened.
- And I don't know if you've ever tried to explain Advent to someone who is not a Christian, or someone who is what we might call "unchurched," someone who doesn't have a knowledge of Christian tradition—but it can get a little tricky—you know, if such a person asks you, "What is Advent all about—what does it mean?" You might respond by saying that Advent is the time when we look forward to the arrival of Jesus—the coming of the Messiah into the world—it's a time of waiting for that event
- And they might say to you, as some folks have said to me, "but wasn't Jesus born about 2000 years ago?"
- And you'd say, "yes that's right, in a manger in Bethlehem," and they'd say, "so how can you look forward to something that's already happened?"
- And you might say, "well, we do this every year—the church year begins with a time of anticipation of Jesus' birth and then we sort of work through his life and his crucifixion and death and resurrection at Easter"
- And they might ask, "and you do this every year? You look forward and wait and anticipate something that not only happened 2000 years ago but also happened last year and the year before that and the year before that?"
- And that's when you might begin to realise that when you think about it, Advent, and Christmas, and Easter, and really all of our Christian lives are a proclamation that what happened in the past 2000 years ago is still happening in the present in 2021

and will be happening in the future—and that wrapped up in that past, present, and future is a reason for joy—a joy for all the world.

- When we sing “the Lord is come,” we remember that the Lord DID come—the Lord, the Christ, the Messiah, the Saviour of the world, appeared in a manger in Bethlehem, in the very specific person of Jesus of Nazareth, and we remember that salvation is found not simply in the truths he taught, not just in agreeing with the things he said, but salvation is found in who He was, in the good news of his life and death and resurrection—the life and death and resurrection of this one particular person—joy to the world, the Lord is come—the Lord came to Bethlehem, where he grew up and taught and performed miracles and healed the sick and fed the hungry and suffered and died and rose again that we might believe the gospel and follow his example—that we might die to sin and be raised again in righteousness—joy to the world—the Lord is come.
- When we hear those words we are reminded that Jesus is alive in the present—in our own lives and in the church which is the body of Christ—and in the lives of the least of these—those that Jesus told us as you do unto them you do unto me—when we say that Jesus is called Emmanuel we are reminded that GOD IS with us--Jesus IS come—in the present—in us and with us each and every moment of each and every day, right now, right here—joy to the world, the Lord IS come.
- But those words also remind us that the Lord is coming—that there is a Kingdom that is not yet—a coming of the Lord to which we look forward
- And I know that a lot of Christians have a lot of ideas about what that looks like—there are pre-millenials and post-millenials and folks that talk about realized eschatology but what is essential is that we affirm those words that we proclaim

every time we celebrate communion—that great mystery that Christ has died, Christ is risen, and Christ will come again.

- We don't have to know all the details of what Christ's coming again looks like—we don't have to know exactly what to expect to be able to look toward the day of resurrection, that great gettin'-up morning—and we've seen time after time that folks who have said they've got it figured out—that it was going to happen after the American civil war, or World War 1, or in 1988—there was a book called 88 reasons why the Rapture will be in 1988—I think it sold pretty well that year—but then of course, 1989 came along and nobody bought it any more—I believe it's out of print now—and then folks said the Second Coming was going to happen in the year 2000—and of course, it didn't—and sadly some folks put their faith in those predictions and the people who made them, and when things didn't go as they expected, some folks lost their faith
- But they should have remembered those words from the first chapter of James' epistle that remind us this morning that even when things don't turn out the way we had planned, even when things happen that make us unhappy and frustrated and anxious—even when we face trials of any kind, we can consider it nothing but joy-- trials need not cause us to lose our faith but can build our faith and move us toward holiness
- Things may not go according to our plans or expectations or desires—things may get cancelled—but as Pastor Tasha's mom, Melanie, will share with us, joy is not cancelled
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