

## *Advent IV Sermon 1 by Bishop Michael Hawkins*

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There stands one among you whom you know not.

I cannot imagine that John the Baptist would be much fun at parties. He was a severe, strict and odd figure, and very hard to pin down. At this time of year, the clergy can feel like John the Baptist at a Christmas office party, for we are often telling people to hold off their Christmas celebrations. And while the world starts the party a little early, we're preaching about death and judgment, heaven and hell. The Sears Christmas catalogue came in August, and yet here, on the last Sunday before Christmas Eve, we're still saying, "Not yet, whoa, hold your horses, don't jump the gun." We don't like to give and to hear this message, because Advent is about waiting, and none of us likes to wait.

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Yet today's readings don't say, "Now is not the time, keep on waiting," looking for a day to come. Rather, we hear, "The Lord is near, at hand, the Lord stands among you, he's here, this is the day!"

There stands one among you whom you know not. Before we go any further this morning, let's just notice how John the Baptist's words draw our attention to someone we don't yet know. There is someone here you don't know! Of course he is referring them - and us - to Jesus, but first of all he says, "There's someone you don't know." If there is someone HERE you don't know, then I want to suggest that in getting to know them, you may get to know Jesus. Jesus was a stranger to them, and Jesus comes to us in the stranger. There stands one among you whom you know not. I hope that before you leave this Church, and especially if you are a member of this congregation,

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you will come to know him or her. In God's name and for the sake of honouring Jesus, welcome the stranger and introduce yourself to the one you do not know. Jesus says, "Depart from me your cursed into eternal fire, for I was a stranger and you did not welcome me," but he also says, "Come, O blessed of my Father, for I was a stranger and you welcomed me."

In this season of Advent, we consider the coming of God in Jesus Christ. We look back, retell and even re-live his coming as our Saviour, and we look ahead to his coming again as our Judge. In all this we are reminded to be ready, to watch and to wait. Advent is about being ready, being prepared to meet our God. And we have considered how we are prepared for the coming of God in Christ, by the Scriptures and by the Church. The message of Advent is simple: Advent I - get ready. How? Advent II - Read your Bible, and Advent III - attend Church and

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attend to the Church.

Yet there is more than just Christ's coming in the past and his coming again in the future. Christ comes to us here and now, he is ever present as both Saviour and Judge. He says, "Lo, I am with you always. The kingdom of heaven is among you."

Jesus has come and Christ shall come again, but he is also always and everywhere with us. Jesus said, "Wherever two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in the midst of you. So he is among us in this and every Christian assembly, church or congregation."

He said that his words never pass away. He speaks to us in the Scriptures, and teaches us still. He says, "If anyone loves me, he will keep my words." So he is among us in the Scriptures.

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Jesus said, "This is my body, this is my blood." Paul warns us about the danger of not recognizing the Lord' body in the Eucharist, failing to recognize that Christ is with us and among us in the breaking of the bread.

Finally, Jesus himself tells us that he is with us in the least of these his brothers and sisters, in the hungry and thirsty, in the stranger, in the naked and sick and prisoner. And he warns us, "inasmuch as ye cared or didn't care for these, ye did it to me."

Both John and Paul remind us today that Christ is with us, among us. The Lord is at hand, he stands among you, behold him! And the judgment is this: that we do not know him. Whether it is in how we approach and receive the Needy, this Communion, the Scriptures, or One another, we fail to recognize and to honour Jesus, who stands among us.

But John gives us further help, saying, "Behold the lamb of

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God, who takes away the sin of the world." John introduces us to Jesus. He tells us that Jesus is both God and Saviour. He is the Lamb, the innocent sacrifice. He is the Lamb of God, God providing himself for a sacrifice. And this sacrifice is for the sins of the whole world. What we fail to know and recognize is that Jesus is God, Jesus is the Saviour, and Jesus stands among us.

John the Baptist invites us to turn our gaze and attention to Jesus, and to see and know in him the Lamb of God, who takes away our sins. Either we behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, or there stands one among us whom we know not. Either way, Jesus is present as Saviour and Judge, or we might say as Saviour or Judge.

John saw Jesus coming toward him. I hope that by faith we can know that as well, that we can recognize Jesus coming to us,

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in all these little advents of our lives. For the Christian, every event is a potential advent, an opportunity to recognize and welcome the coming of God in Christ among us. We will pray today, "Lord Jesus, come soon." Let us then, in all things and times, look for his coming, even in dingy barns, in the mouth of friend and stranger, in the poor and homeless, in humble bread and wine, and even right in the midst of our messy gathering.

Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. Jesus is present, among us, in the Scriptures and Breaking of Bread, in the fellowship of believers and in the needy. In our celebration of Christmas, both here and at home, let us heed John's call and Behold the Lamb of God.