

Christmas Eve Sermon 3 by Bishop Michael Hawkins

By the Right Reverend Michael W. Hawkins

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For thus saith the Lord God; Behold I, even I, will both search my sheep, and seek them out, and will deliver them. I will seek that which was lost and bring again that which was driven away, and will bind up that which was broken, and will strengthen that which was sick. I will save my flock. (Ezekiel 34)

Sheep can be skittish. While it's not hard to get them to move along, coaxing them from behind, it is a lot more difficult to catch up to them. If you are trying to save a sheep, lost outside of safe pasture, you are going to have to approach them very quietly and gently. Running after them, and hollering for them to come back or stop, will not work.

There were shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. To them the angel comes. To them, first of all, the news that God himself has come to search for the lost sheep is given. The coming of the Good Shepherd is

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announced to Shepherds, for they would understand why God had to come in such quiet humility. They knew that a true and good Shepherd must live with his sheep, so they would understand why God would come and live with us, to save us and to guide us. Jesus is born in the city of David, who was himself a Shepherd. We celebrate tonight, then, the birth of Christ the Good Shepherd, who comes not to elicit fear, not to have us flee from him in dread, but to draw us back to God with his love. It is that love, that quiet humble love of God, known in this child born in a stable, lying in a manger, which draws us. “Fear not,” the angel says, for God has not come in stormy wind or earthquake or fire, but in the still small voice of a newborn child. Like the Shepherds, we this night are told of the birth of Christ, tidings of great joy for all people, and we are drawn to him.

The Good News of this night is: fear not, be not afraid. It is not that we, or Shepherds stunned by the blinding and deafening sight and sound of angels, have no reason to be afraid, even - or especially - of God.

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“You’re either with us or against us,” goes the saying. Well, we would have lots of reason to think that God our Creator, the all-holy and almighty God, would be against us, his rebellious and unjust creatures. Look what we have done to his world and with our lives. In fact, we often feel like God is far away, distant and inattentive. Isaiah says, your iniquities have separated you from God. Yet, the coming of Jesus is this Good News, not that God is against us or absent from us, but the Good News of God with us. They shall call his name Emmanuel, which means “God with us.” That is the news of this night, that even in the darkness, even in the gloom, God is with us.

And more than that, while guilt and pain in our lives may make us think that God should be or is against us, the news of Jesus Christ is that God is for us. Remember Paul’s almost ecstatic cry of victory and praise: “If God be for us, who can be against us?” Jesus did not come into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him. It is God that justifieth, who is he that condemneth? This is the proof, this child, his birth and life and death and resurrection, is the final

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proof of God's goodness towards us. He gave himself for us. This is the demonstration of God's love for us. For us and for our salvation, he came down from heaven and was incarnate and born. And yet more, this gift, God's gift of himself, is to us. It is to us that he comes, to us that this supreme gift is given. To you is born a Saviour, to us a child is born, to us a son is given.

The tidings of great joy, the Christmas Gospel, is that to us this Saviour child and son of God is born, that in him God is with us, here in our life, in our broken, messy world, and that in him God is for us. Jesus Christ born of Mary in Bethlehem is God, with us, for us and to us. Now I may be no angel, but that same message of two thousand years ago, that message from God I proclaim to you. God is with you, God is for you, God has come to you in Jesus Christ. And there is only this one sign by which you may recognize him, his humility. Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. God accepted the manger and stable as home and bed, in the same way that any loving parent accepts the makeshift presents of their child, the collage that has two gallons of glue on it, or the

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misshapen clay art project. The babe lying in a manger is wrapped in swaddling clothes. What does this mean? She brought forth her first-born son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger. Here is our God, and not quite where and how we would expect to find him. Just so later, they took the body of Jesus and wrapped it in linen clothes and laid it in a sepulchre.

Jesus Christ was born for us all and Jesus Christ died for us all. He came to die, he came to be our Saviour and to give himself on the cross for us, to be with us in our darkness and death, and to be for us against darkness and death. The news of Christmas is of God's love in Jesus, which gives forgiveness and life to all the people. As in Bethlehem, God is with us, God is for us, and God comes to us. He comes to us in humility and trusts himself to us, but he can only be known and received by those who come in humility and trust him. Let us now go to him, and see this thing which the Lord hath made known to us, and here and at home, tonight and forever, let us give glory to God and share his peace on earth and his good will to all.