

" 'The LORD declares to you that the LORD himself will establish a house for you: <sup>12</sup> When your days are over and you rest with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, who will come from your own body, and I will establish his kingdom. <sup>13</sup> He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. <sup>14</sup> I will be his father, and he will be my son. When he does wrong, I will punish him with the rod of men, with floggings inflicted by men. <sup>15</sup> But my love will never be taken away from him, as I took it away from Saul, whom I removed from before you. <sup>16</sup> Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever.' "

■ 2 Sam 7:11-16

<sup>14</sup> Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.

■ Isaiah 7:14

The name of the child who would be a sign of God's faithfulness to Israel was "Immanuel." Translated into English, Immanuel means "God is with us", and when it was first spoken by Isaiah some seven hundred years before the birth of Jesus, the sign that a virgin would give birth to a child who would be "God with us" was a sign of hope in the midst of darkness. For at that time, seven centuries before the birth of Jesus, the city of Jerusalem had been surrounded by enemies, and all hope seemed lost. But God speaks to the people through his servant Isaiah, and says "*Do not be afraid, for though you might be surrounded and outnumbered, this child will be a sign to you that I am with you.*"

This is worth remembering today: that even though we might be surrounded on all sides by difficulty and sorrow, God is with us. We may ask the question, "what possible good can one little child do against a world that even now tears itself apart in

war and famine? What kind of sign can possibly deal with our broken hearts, our broken marriages, our broken homes, and our broken lives? What good is one little candle in a darkened room?"

So, thinking that this candle could not possibly be enough, we make up our own answers to these questions. We may say "Jesus is not enough to light a dark world", and seek what we think is better, a spectacular saviour who will enchant us with light and music. We may say "Jesus deserves better than to be born in a barn" and so sing "away in a manger/no crying he makes", as though this is one baby who would never ever cry. Yet Jesus weeps for those he loves. The shortest verse in the Bible is "Jesus wept"<sup>1</sup>, as though telling us that if there is one thing worth remembering, it is that God cries.

Some of us here have come today because it's Christmas, and if there is one time of the year we might think about coming to church, it is when everything looks its best and brightest. If anything, we come thinking that Christians celebrating the birth of Jesus ought to look like how the shopping malls make Christmas feel: all tinsel and glitter and glamour, all neighborly favours in the form of "*buy one get one free*"s, all the strains of comforting music drifting in through hidden loudspeakers. Some of us come thinking that today ought to be an extension of the consumer culture in which we live, that like the shepherds watching their flocks by night, the skies above us should explode

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<sup>1</sup> John 11:35

in light and song and that we should walk away nodding and smiling and saying “*well, wasn't that nice.*”

Even more, some of us will stay for lunch and sit with strangers and practice niceness with each other, and then we will drive away, nodding and smiling and saying “*well, aren't those people nice.*” What a nice service. What a nice people. And then there I am, watching you go, waving goodbye, but inwardly wringing my hands as I hope that you think nice things of me too. That you say of me “*what a nice young man.*” But if this is all we leave with today—that everything is nice—we would be missing something much deeper than that. We would be missing the very fact that in celebrating Christmas and the coming of God in the flesh, God Himself is with us.

It often seems like such a small thing that we miss it. It happens so quickly and so quietly; too quickly, too quietly for we who want a dazzling spectacle. It happens out back, in the stable, witnessed only by goats and sheep and a confused husband who knows this baby isn't his. The mother moans, the baby screams, the cows chew their cud, the goats roll their eyes, and the night presses in, cold and deep. The sign of God with us in the form of a helpless little baby, a candle flame in the dark, seems impossibly useless. And, by extension, sometimes following a God whose brilliant plan is to send himself in a helpless form feels useless. Innately, we don't want this kind of God. We want the God who will ride at the head of some great army. We want the God who will heal the sick and raise the dead and make sure none of us ever feel pain again. We don't want a God in a manger, a candle flame in the dark, a God who suffers, then dies.

I am not just speaking of you, I am speaking about myself and my own wish for a Saviour, *not* a baby, *not* a candle flame in the dark. Yet the truth insists upon me—God with us is a baby, a baby who weeps, a baby who bleeds, and a baby who dies. God with us—God with me—is nothing like I want it to be. And this is the heart of the mystery of God with us: that God with us looks nothing like what we expect. The God I want with me is a roaring fire by which I am warmed and can cook and around which we all can be safe. But most often, God with us feels like a candle in the dark, small and useless; like a baby in a stable.

*“My idea of God is not a divine idea,” writes C.S. Lewis. “It has to be shattered time after time. He shatters it Himself. He is the great iconoclast. Could we not almost say that this shattering is one of the marks of His presence? The Incarnation is the supreme example; it leaves all previous ideas of the Messiah in ruins.”*<sup>2</sup>

In all truth, I still hunger (as do you) for an easier picture of God. I want a shinier God, a God who swoops in with bronzed, muscled arms to scoop me out of danger. But very often, as I get to know God, I’m left with a picture of God that more than anything else leaves me feeling disturbed, because God shows himself to me as weak, as helpless, as a baby. The God I am coming to know is a God who is vulnerable to love. The God I am coming to know is a God who weeps. The God I am coming to know is a God who not only takes on the appearance of being human, but also feels our pain and our dying. The God I am coming to know is like a candle flame in the dark, sometimes

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<sup>2</sup> C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*. HarperSanFrancisco: San Francisco, CA. 1961. p.66

seeming so small, too small, for the task at hand. Yet there is just enough light to hope for more.

Maybe the sign of a baby is a sign to us that this God is a different kind of God, a God who willingly suffers with us. Not a God who stands far away laughing and stroking his beard. No, this is God who stubs his toe, a God who has his heart broken, a God who has family and friends that never understand him. At Christmas, we do not only celebrate a cute little baby Jesus asleep in the hay; we remember the mystery of how God is not only with us, but how God is also one of us.

The most difficult thing you might do today is wrestle with God. It is the most difficult thing I do every day. What a surprise, then, that sometimes when we wrestle with God, God is overpowered, and we win.<sup>3</sup> We know full well that God could throw us down and break us over his knee, but he doesn't. And he won't, because for the sake of love, he becomes vulnerable—he becomes a child.

Which God do you want? The God you make up in your head? Do you worship an image of God that is not God after all? Or, today, can you for the first time draw near to the candle flame in the darkened room; wondering at how such a seemingly insignificant thing could possibly herald the coming of our rescue?

God is with us. He flickers in like a candle in the dark.

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<sup>3</sup> Gen 33:25