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St. James Cathedral
4th Sunday of Advent – Year C
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My friends our Advent is drawing to a close, the season of anticipation and preparation; the time of year during which we make ready the manger of our hearts for our Savior's birth into our lives. During this last week before we celebrate the Nativity of our Lord, our prayers and our liturgies encourage us to push past the crass commercialism and media hype that constantly reminds us of the "countdown," the number of shopping days left before the happily stressed holiday that our culture has turned this blessed event into. Advent encourages us to focus our attention elsewhere; not just to an event, a birth, but to the person of that event, Jesus, the God-Man that became flesh and dwells among us. During Advent we reflect and meditate on who Christ is, and more importantly, who is He to each one of us?

To help answer this question, the church has its own countdown to Christmas. During the week before Christmas we sing the "O" antiphons for the Magnificat during Vespers, we are also singing them today during Mass. Starting on December 17th, we pray different titles of Christ, reminding us of the truly important gifts of the season, the gift that God alone can give; gifts and images of Christ that all of us are in such desperate need of being birthed into our lives. During this week we pray to Christ as: *O Wisdom, O Lord and Leader, O Root of Jesse, O Key of David, O Morning Star and Sun of Justice, O King of all and joy of every heart*, and on December 23rd, *O Emmanuel*. Each of these images of that little, helpless baby in a manger, bring forth the Good News, God is with us.

With this assurance, we can eagerly count down the days toward Christmas. We can rejoice with Micah and the psalmist that Christ will come to us as a shepherd, who will stand firm in the strength of the Lord and reign in peace. This image of a shepherd is not as familiar to us today as it was in biblical times. I would hazard a guess that few of us know any shepherds or have ever raised

sheep ourselves. But it is a beautiful image of our Lord, as it suggests a personal relationship, for shepherds know their flock quite well, and the sheep of the flock recognize the voice of their shepherd. The shepherd is responsible for the care of the flock, nurturing it, protecting it, and leading it to lush green pastures. Micah's prophecy, centuries before the birth of Christ, is one of hope for the future. A future that will be secure, we will remain with the Shepherd, who will rule with peace and safety.

Our psalm today brings us another image of Christ, that of an imperial ruler. Singing "O Lord of Hosts...Look down from heaven and see," we are calling upon Christ to rouse His power and save us. Save us from our afflictions; save us from our woes; save us from our enemies. Christ the Shepherd; Christ the Lord of Hosts; Christ the vinedresser, what wonderful images the psalmist uses to characterize Christ and his relationship with us: Though a powerful ruler, He cares for us like an attentive shepherd or a patient vinedresser.

St. Luke presents us with more Good News, another image of the Christ child soon to be born. Today's gospel scene is "The Visitation"--the meeting of two people on a deeply personal and spiritual level, and in that scene we see an image of Christ portrayed through his blessed mother, that of a servant. As soon as Mary was told by the angel Gabriel that her relative Elizabeth was also with child, she immediately left her own home and travelled in haste to be with her; to care for her; to assist her in anyway possible; to serve Elizabeth in her time of need and to be present for the birth of the miracle growing within her.

Advent is about birth, the birth and the coming of Christ to dwell among us, to be present to us. Right now I am in the middle of three very significant births: The first was a couple of weeks ago. It was a sad, painful, tragic birth; a stillborn baby. I had the privilege, the very difficult privilege, of presiding over the baby's funeral the day after she should have been born. After all of the prayers had been said, the family gathered around the tiny casket and kissed their little baby goodbye. Then, as is the Samoan custom, the women, the mother, aunts, cousins and grandmother all began to sing to Christ the Shepherd, not only to

bring comfort, but more importantly, to receive their baby into his loving arms and bring her into his heavenly sheepfold.

My second significant birth is this coming Thursday, Christmas Eve, when my first grandchild is due to be born. My daughter's prayers, and mine, have been to Christ the Servant, to help her in her time of discomfort and pain, to assist her in her fears and anxiety.

My third significant birth is of course the one that we celebrate on Christmas Day; a birth that happened long ago, in a cave in a small and insignificant village; a baby lying in a feeding trough; a baby, yet so much more, God with us.

And so my friends, what image of Christ do you need to have birthed into your life today? a shepherd; a servant; a king and the joy of every heart? All of these gifts are wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger within each and every one of our hearts; and that is Good News.