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St. Margaret's Episcopal Church
December 12, 2010
Advent 3A

*Strengthen the weak hands,
and make firm the feeble knees.
Say to those who are of a fearful heart,
"Be strong, do not fear!"
Here is your God. Isaiah 35:3–4.*

Where is our God?

That would have to be one of the world's oldest and most oft-asked theological questions. Among the faithful it first surfaces perhaps about age twelve, returning as we make our way through life, especially in times of trouble.

The ready answers are, thumbs-up that God is "everywhere, glory alleluia" and, thumbs-down, that God is "nowhere—dead, bah humbug."

The gospel answer is:

*Mild he lays his glory by
Born that we no more may die.
Born to raise us from the earth,
Born to give us second birth.* Hymn 86

Although it isn't easy, this gospel answer doesn't go away. It will not ever go away go away, I think, because, first, it is beautiful, as lovely as Christmas Eve; and second, because it is brutally realistic, as painful as Good Friday; and third, because for twenty centuries and more it has successfully resisted all attempts at explaining it away. I'm thinking here especially of Easter, and the excellent reasons we've been given for believing it is true.

The gospel's beauty, with its candor, and its hospitality to reason, have given Christian faith its great, resilient strength through centuries of changing times.

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and make firm the feeble knees.
Say to those who are of a fearful heart,
"Be strong, do not fear!"*

On the other hand, weak hands, feeble knees and fearful hearts also belong to the gospel story, almost as much as Christmas, Easter, and Good Friday. Think of St. Peter, who had been given every reason to be strong in his hour of trial, but melted under pressure. In Peter, the church flunked its first test—and unfortunately we have continued to fail them

on a consistent basis ever since. Present company is, I feel sure, included. I've certainly failed some tests in my life, and I would be astonished if you all hadn't failed some too. The same can be said for us collectively, as a congregation, now a parish. Parishes are tested too.

"Strengthen the weak hands." I think that means "weak" with respect to love.

If "Where is our God?" is one of the world's longest-running theological questions, an even older one might be, "God, what am I supposed to do?"

The gospel answer to that question sounds simple and is easy to remember: "Love one another, as I have loved you." But we all know that answer is not nearly as simple as it sounds, and is far easier said than done. It is the age old problem: "the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak."

"*Strengthen* the weak hands," says the Lord.

Love occurs naturally in families, among friends, and of course as romance in all its painful glory. These natural expressions of love are different enough from one another that the ancient Greeks gave them different names: *storge* for family love, *philia* for friendship and *eros* for romance. C.S. Lewis wrote a book about them, called *The Four Loves*, which is very much still worth reading, in my opinion.

As a natural occurrence, love comes easily to families, friends, etc. However, as we learn to our chagrin, it also comes with pitfalls, trials and complications. Families can smother; friends can disappoint; romantic love is fickle and can be cruel. If you don't believe me, ask Jessica Simpson.

So our natural loves require spiritual attention: guiding, taming, softening and stretching. All that is included in Christ's command to "love one another as I have loved you." This is the fourth love, *agape* in Greek,

*Love divine, all loves excelling,
Joy of heaven, to earth come down.*

This fourth, more-than-natural love makes for a different kind of family, different ways of being friends and lovers, different ways of being church.

"Strengthen the weak hands," with "joy from heaven, to earth come down."

For deeper insight into this heavenly strength, let's look to Julian of Norwich.

In the year 1372, when Julian was thirty, she nearly died. At the brink of death, however, she was visited by Christ in a series of sixteen revelations. These "showings," as she called them, are one of human history's more extraordinary recorded spiritual encounters. Afterwards, she returned to health and then for years reflected on her experience and its

meaning. Julian came to believe that Christ had not come for her private benefit, but rather for the hope and edification of all humankind. Christ showed himself to her, for us.

Julian's theological question was not "Where is our God?" To that, she had the answer. Her question was: "Dear Lord: What did you mean in this experience?" She waited for years until the answer came, and when it did she wrote it down.

"I was answered in my understanding, thus: *Would you know your Lord's meaning in this thing? Know it well, love was his meaning. Who showed it to you? Love What did he show you? Love. Why did he show it? For love. . . .* Thus was I taught that love was our Lord's meaning . . . that before God made us, he loved us, which love has never slackened nor ever shall. And in this love he has done all his work. . . . And in this love our life is everlasting."

*Mild he lays his glory by
Born that we no more may die.
Born to raise us from the earth,
Born to give us second birth.*

"Strengthen the weak hands . . . make firm the feeble knees."

These "knees" bring to mind St. Paul's astonishing prediction: "At the name of Jesus, every knee shall bow." That is Philippians, chapter two. Earlier, I told you why I think that Christianity won't ever go away. Here, Paul is telling us that in the end, when the truth at last is fully known, all the world will worship Jesus. "Every knee shall bow."

If that strikes us as exclusive, we need to think on it a little more, because this is a vision of glorious inclusion. The love of God in Christ is high and deep and broad enough for everyone.

Julian saw it too. In one of the showings, Jesus directs her attention to his own side, where she notices the wound from a Roman spear.

"With a kindly countenance our good Lord looked into his side, and he gazed with joy and with his sweet regard he drew his creature's understanding into his side by the same wound, and there he revealed a fair and delectable place, large enough for all mankind."

"Strengthen the weak hands, make firm the feeble knees . . . say to those who are of fearful hearts, be strong: do not fear."

Tomorrow morning, early, is the second anniversary of Peggy's death. That Saturday morning two years ago, I stopped by her house on my way out here to church for Marion Kingdon's funeral. The Campbell's house was still and quiet, everyone had finally gone to sleep, exhausted. Here at St. Margaret's, many arriving for Marion's service first got the word about Peggy as they reached the doors. There are days in life that we know we won't forget, and that was one for me.

“Be strong: do not fear.”

Death is obviously terrifying to our human nature, both for the dying and in some respects even more for what it means for the survivors. Dying, we feel the threat of non-existence. Bereaved, we must feel our loss and somehow, eventually, put back together the pieces of our lives, and move on. That is painful work, difficult at best and the fact is that a lot of the times we just don't do it very well. That is true of individuals, of families, and it can also be said of congregations.

*Say to those who are of a fearful heart,
“Be strong . . . ”*

From where is our strength to come?

*Mild he lays his glory by
Born that we no more may die.
Born to raise us from the earth,
Born to give us second birth.*

As Julian lay still, awake, he came. Opening her eyes, her “spiritual eyes” she called them, he showed her, she says, the beautiful truth about her soul.

He showed me my soul in the midst of my heart. I saw my soul as wide as if it were a kingdom, and from the state which I saw in it, it seemed to me as if it were a fine city. In the midst of this city sits our Lord Jesus, true God and true man, a handsome person and tall, honourable, the greatest lord. . . . And my soul is blessedly occupied . . . for in us is his home of homes, and it is the greatest delight for him to dwell there.