

# SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

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*Fifth Avenue · New York City*

**Sunday, December 24, 2023**  
**Christmas Eve**

**Procession and Solemn Eucharist of the Nativity**  
**(Midnight Mass)**

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A Sermon by

The Rt. Rev. Matthew Heyd, *Bishop coadjutor of the Episcopal Diocese of New York*

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## **Sermon for Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve, 2023**

In the name of God, who is Grace and love and communion. Amen. Good evening. Good evening! And Merry Christmas. It felt so helpless. It feels so helpless. It's Christmas Eve in Ramallah on the West Bank. In Israel, Palestine, it's Christmas Eve. But all the Christmas celebrations have been cancelled. No wreaths, no trees. No events out in the square. It's true. Across the Diocese of Jerusalem. The Anglican Diocese of Jerusalem. No celebrations in Manger Square in Bethlehem this year. And this Christmas Eve at Saint Andrews Anglican Church in Ramallah, they're trying to figure out what to do with the war going on around them. While the war isn't precisely outside their doors, their people can't travel. Their people can't work. And so director of Saint Andrews, Father Diab, is trying to find ways that people simply get food in this Christmas season. Father Diab is also Vice Chair of the Board of the Al Ari Arab Hospital, which is a ministry of the Anglican Diocese of Jerusalem. The hospital that was bombed this fall and this week was closed. On this Christmas Eve, there are no functioning health facilities in northern Gaza. So where will babies be born this night? It feels so helpless.

That's the situation that begins our scripture stories too. It sounds so wonderful, proclaimed by the gospel. A decree went out from Caesar Augustus. Was tax ever good news? No. Decree from an emperor fall away an edict upon the family, an edict upon the nation and Mary and Joseph travel. Because, well, of tribal allegiances from David's family, Joseph's family from 1000 years ago. So here is the Holy Family traveling unsafe. Long journey. Exactly the time in those last moments of pregnancy when you don't want to travel at all. It feels so helpless. Those are the words of Isaiah. I love the beauty, the prophet Isaiah, but Chapter 9 is in the very first part of the text. The part where danger looms. In exile. Well, exiles coming soon. We come to this Christmas Eve. Bearing our own weights. Feeling maybe even our own helplessness. The breaking news of the world and our own lives. Well, that situation can be difficult to carry. This might be the situation on this Christmas Eve. Of our lives and the tumult and mayhem of the world. But this situation is not our story. Our story is the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. The love of God has come into the world; has come into our lives; and, that, that is our story. Now this is the biggest gift imaginable and it takes our whole lives to understand what it means. How to receive? It helps to have a guide. Have people whom we listen to. Help us know what the gift of the incarnation of Jesus Christ means to us; how we experience it; how we share it in the world?

Mark McIntosh, Systematic theologian, studied mystical theology. It's one of the preeminent theologians of his time. I read him in seminary and dipped in occasionally ever since. I heard him from this pulpit when he preached at the rector's installation in 2014. In 2021, he wrote a book with a Bishop, who ordained him, Frank Riswold, also familiar to this pulpit, our presiding Bishop, of some time ago. And he wrote about what the gift of the incarnation means. Professor McIntosh's favorite images is of God as the author of the whole universe. A God bigger than we can possibly imagine. A God who is the essential. Truth of the

world and of our lives. A God of eternal good. The God of infinite love. And this is the God who chooses to become most real, most present in the incarnation of Jesus. In the birth of a child. The fullness of unimaginable love comes to us in Jesus this night. Prof. Macintosh saw something in the text I'd never seen before in the gospel we just heard. This is the sign says the Gospel of Luke. This is the sign as a child. Nothing more vulnerable than a newborn. And that's where the fullness of the majesty and beauty of God's grace fully resides in this child. Now you and I we know the gospel stories. That Jesus grows to feed the multitudes, to heal the sick, to raise the dead. To preach the Gospel of Luke. A great sermon on the plane to pray. Before he does any of those things, while he was still simply a baby, vulnerable and nothing else. This is God's love at its fullness. In the incarnation, before he does anything at all, first Prof. Macintosh says, "That's true of us also." The incarnation is for us. It is within us. Because God has come to dwell in God's fullness in Jesus Christ. God comes to dwell in the fullness of love for us all. Wherever we are. Whatever stage we are in life, before we do anything or say anything, we just are this embodiment of the mystery of incarnation in God's love. Grace appearing to us. Grace abiding within us. And that, is our story. Professor McIntosh, says his decision God has made. But I'm fully present in Jesus. To be fully alive in us. That is our story and becomes the story of the world. The people who have walked in darkness have seen a great light to them. A great light has appeared. It's embodiment of love in each in all is a light the darkness, the brokenness cannot distinguish. And then because God has decided for us in love and grace in the incarnation, we have the freedom to decide as well, in every moment of our lives, to decide if we accept and try to understand the fullness of this gift that is God's love within us. What it means that we respond? As the shepherds respond in the gospel. To go and seek, to go and find. As the Angels respond to proclaim. This gift has been given to us to know the situation of the world is not helpless. That we are not helpless. But grace filled and empowered by love.

A number of years, after I first heard him preach here, after he preached at Cannon Turner's installation, Professor McIntosh was diagnosed with Lou Gehrig's disease, and you know what that entails; slow loss of mobility. And the last time he was in this pulpit, not long before he died, and his very last book he wrote that he wondered sometimes, he wondered sometimes as loss took over, whether there was ground beneath him. But he knew in his faith that the eternal truth of God, the eternal truth of God's love, was always his; was always the world's. Eternal goodness always, always abided. And that, is the Gospel proclamation of this night. The word is the same between Isaiah and Luke is joy. To know that we've been given this gift. The recipients of God's love that we carry, the incarnation, they can share it with the world. That carries all of us this night. It's Christmas Eve in Ramallah. Tonight, even without the trees and the wreaths they get to gather to hear again the gospel that we just heard. They gather again to hear the gift that we have received; that grace has appeared to us for our salvation in this incarnation of Jesus Christ who is truth, and goodness, and love. God has decided for us. This is our Christmas gospel and we have the grace to decide to receive with joy. This is our Merry Christmas. And Merry Christmas to you all.

In Jesus name. Amen.