



**SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE**  
**in the City of New York**  
*The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector*  
**www.SaintThomasChurch.org**

**Sunday, January 9, 2022**  
*The Baptism of Our Lord*

*Festal Evensong*  
*4pm*

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A Sermon by  
The Rev. Mark Schultz, *Associate for Pastoral Care*  
*on*  
Isaiah 55:1-11 and Romans 6:1-11  
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### **God's Love Our Glory**

Happy New Year, everyone!  
How're those New Year's Resolutions coming along?  
Personally, I've yet to meet a Resolution I couldn't eventually excuse myself from pursuing.  
Do I want to eat more healthily? Sure.  
But oatmeal raisin cookies haven't stopped being completely delicious last time I checked.  
So. You know.  
Do I want to learn a new language? Of course.  
But when?  
Do I want to worry less about so many things that are completely beyond my control?  
Absolutely. But...  
There are so many new things to worry about.  
And so many new ways to worry about them. (The internet is very helpful in that regard.)  
And yes, sure, all around I want to be a better sort of person—  
fitter, happier, more productive as the song goes—  
but...there's a lot to do and no time to do it in.  
According to a University of Scranton study done some years back,<sup>i</sup>  
About 60% of New Years' Resolutions made fall apart...  
Which doesn't necessarily recommend the making of them as particularly useful.  
And yet: the making of resolutions and actually pursuing them  
Is at least a small sign that we're looking forward to being better people  
That we actually *desire* to be better people, that we think it's possible  
Even when, especially when, we fail or know we're likely to.  
And there's something about that persistence in the face of failure that is, in fact:  
Human and beautiful and lovely and true.  
Whether or not we make New Year's Resolutions, though,  
There's a lot in our lives and in the culture around us  
That's geared toward answering, in some way or another  
Our desire to be or become the better sorts of people we feel we ought to be.  
And I think we can come to expect that, maybe, church  
Is the sort of place that can help us in that regard as well:  
That church can help us be more moral people, more caring  
Self-realized, self-actualized

Better  
Sorts of people.  
Except, and I'll be blunt:  
I don't think that's what it's about.  
I don't think that's what church is about  
I don't think that's what our lives are meant to be about.  
Partly because: what we think of as better  
Will always always always  
Be within the sphere of what's imaginable to or for us.  
What's better is never beyond or outside our imagination.

Which poses a challenge. Because the goodness that God desires for us  
The Goodness that is in fact God's very own life  
Is so Good, so completely and bafflingly wonderful  
That it's beyond our imagining.  
And so, paradoxically, it's hard for us to imagine it as anything at all  
Including: as anything better.  
In fact, the brilliant philosopher and theologian Simone Weil, writes:  
"The good that we can neither picture nor define is a void for us.  
But this void is fuller than all fullness."<sup>ii</sup>  
This is one of the reasons for the Incarnation:  
To give us a glimpse of that unimaginable fullness,  
Some imaginable something of what that divine fullness might look like in a human life.  
But, true to form, it was nothing much like what we would have imagined it to be.  
Our imaginations, conditioned as they are by the world around us,  
Have always expected God's presence among us to look a particular way:  
Like raw abject power, inhabiting some ready-to-hand understanding of human mightiness.  
But God didn't come among us as a warrior,  
Nor as a politically influential sort of person;  
Not a king like any other king,  
Not a successful businessman or CEO (he's a complete failure there)  
Not glamorous, or famous,  
Not possessing any particular glory of mightiness we would immediately recognize as such.  
No: Jesus came among us as a poor, homeless, itinerant person,  
From a nowhere town and a disenfranchised and oppressed people  
And the thing he consistently and explicitly referred to as his glory  
Turned out to be his public, cruel and bloody execution by the Roman state.  
There's very little recognizably "better" about that picture.  
Which suggests, in the end: we may not know what better really is  
Because we're not yet able to imagine it properly.  
"For my thoughts are not your thoughts," our Lord says through his prophet,  
"Neither are your ways my ways."

Between Isaiah and Paul this evening, we're given every hint that our thoughts and ways  
Are in need of redemption.  
"Wherefore do ye spend money for that which is not bread?  
And your labor for that which satisfieth not?"  
Why is it, we're asked, that we keep thinking  
That those ways of being and relating to ourselves and each other  
That are literally so completely unfulfilling, so devastating  
So contrary to our flourishing:  
Why is it that we persist in them?

What is so good about the violence we inflict on ourselves and each other  
The hatred we inflict on ourselves and each other  
The prejudice, the gossip, the backbiting, the abusiveness, the ill-will,  
The excuses we make to ourselves, to each other,  
To turn a blind eye to oppression and injustice in this world:  
Has it gotten us closer to better yet?  
Has it fed us yet with anything but ashes, gall, bitterness, resentment and regret?  
Paul asks: "Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? God forbid."  
But our lived reality is that we *do* continue to sin, you and me, individually and corporately  
Expecting that somehow grace *will* abound, that we *will* somehow manufacture the good  
That we'll wind up producing a better, the best world  
Through all of our violent death-dealing at the service of our best intentions.  
Author and Inkling Charles Williams, meditating on the trial and crucifixion of Jesus, writes:  
Even "Caiaphas and Pilate were each of them doing his best in the duty presented to them.  
The high priest was condemning a blasphemer.  
The Roman governor was attempting to maintain the peace. ...  
Humanly speaking, they were doing the best they could.  
They chose the least imperfect good that they could see.  
And their choice crucified the Good."<sup>iii</sup>  
And that is how we are.  
But that is not how God is.

How, then, to imagine the unimaginable?  
How to think the good we cannot on our own comprehend?  
How then, finally, to *do* the good we cannot, by our own wills, accomplish?

Isaiah's prophecy gives us a clue.  
The vision in chapter 55  
Begins with an invitation to a banquet  
Characterized by an inexplicable, excessively gratuitous abundance  
That defies the ability of anyone to reciprocate it, earn it, or appropriate it:  
It is completely beyond our capacity to pay for it or merit it,  
And the only way to partake of it, is to answer the invitation of the gracious host  
And receive it as pure and unreasonably generous gift.  
The imagery Isaiah's working with here is that of Wisdom's Feast;  
You might recognize it from Proverbs 9:  
"Wisdom hath builded her a house...she hath furnished her table.  
She hath sent forth her maidens: she crieth upon the highest places of the city:...  
Come, eat of my bread, and drink of the wine which I have mingled.  
Forsake the foolish, and live; and go in the way of understanding."  
Isaiah continues: "eat ye that which is good,  
And let your soul delight in fatness."  
Beloved, however far we may have fallen,  
However lost we may be,  
Whatever things we may have done or left undone,  
However much we have been a stranger to grace,  
Unworthy as we are, this invitation is for us:  
Because it is God's good pleasure to love you and make you worthy by his grace;  
It is God's good pleasure to wash away your sins, to bring you out of death into life  
through the waters of baptism  
To clothe you with God's own righteousness

To feed you at God's own table  
With God's own resurrection life,  
God's own Bread  
God's own Body  
From God's own love-wounded hand that shattered hell and death for you,  
So that, God's life alive in you,  
The mind with which you try to comprehend all this incomprehensible graciousness,  
All this love  
Is a mind illuminated and transformed by God's own Wisdom, Jesus Christ.  
God can imagine in and for us the Good that we cannot.

The vision of generosity, life, and love to which we're invited,  
A vision most fully held and beheld in the sacraments  
A vision made clearer through prayer,  
Is a vision of intimate relationship with God in which we receive  
A new life, a new imagination  
Not merely new thoughts  
But a new mind, the mind of Christ, with which to think them,  
And a new family, the Church, in and through which the unthinkable goodness of God  
Is nearer to our understanding in the beauty and wonder and given giftedness of our neighbor.

Strange as it may seem: we are not called to be better.  
We are called to allow ourselves to be loved by a transforming and transfiguring love  
That does not wait for us to be "better" in order to love us, but loves us into the unimaginable  
Incomprehensible perfection of Goodness that this Love has always desired for us.  
And in the discovery of our belovedness, we understand, dimly at first,  
But more and more fully:  
Love is the Will of God working in us to accomplish God's unthinkably good purposes,  
To feed the hungry, clothe the naked, unbind the captive and declare the year of God's favor.  
God's Love is our Wisdom,  
God's Love our Truth, our Glory, our Beauty, our Goodness, our Life, our Power,  
Our Lord...

...even Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with the Father in the Unity of the Holy Ghost ever one God,  
world without end. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.vox.com/2014/12/29/7434433/new-years-resolutions-psychology>

<sup>ii</sup> From "Detachment" in *Gravity and Grace*, 1952.

<sup>iii</sup> In the essay collection *What the Cross Means to Me*, 1943.