

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, December 11, 2022

The Third Sunday of Advent

Festal Eucharist

11 a.m.

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Mark Schultz, *Associate for Pastoral Care*

on

Isaiah 35:1-10; Psalm 146:4-9; James 5:7-10; Matthew 11:2-11

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Believe

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

For many years—so many years it’s almost shocking that things have changed—
For many years, if you were to go to Macy’s on Herald Square, now, in this season, you’d see,
Blazoned on the front of the store in an enviably meticulous and readable cursive,
You’d see the word: Believe. Believe.
I was never quite sure whether or not it was an invitation or a command,
But either way,
I was also never quite sure what I was meant to so meticulously and readably believe.
And that was the real beauty of it, of course, as a campaign: it was so completely open-ended.
There *wasn’t* actually any *specific* belief that was being urged upon us.
It had more to do with a feeling than a believing. More to do with the power of nostalgia.
With a yearning for something. Something Good.
Or at least...something *felt* to be good.
And a wish...that this feeling might be realized in something tangible.
Something, perhaps, you might find available for purchase at Macy’s.
I fear, though, that the success of the Believe campaign has to do with how honest it is
Regarding how we generally think of belief. Not that it’s right. It’s just honest:
Belief for us is the yearning, the desire, that something we think might be true,
Might one day actually become or be proved to be real.
Belief is a yearning for a deferred reality.
What that understanding, our general cultural understanding of belief, gets right
Is that yearning is indeed involved
But the belief in which the Church encourages us, the belief we confess in the creeds...
It’s not about aspirational assent to an abstract set of truths that are somehow unreal or intangible
(and let’s face it, we too often identify reality strictly with tangibility and vice versa)
The belief in which the Church encourages us
Is a fixing of our hearts (which is to say, of our very beings, our understanding of who we are)
On a Reality of which materiality and tangibility are themselves shadows and manifestations:
A Reality of abiding love that made all things.
A Reality that has come to us in the Incarnation of Jesus Christ.
A Reality that continues to come to us in the Eucharist,
in the gathered community of the Church that is Christ’s real body.
And the yearning we feel as part of our belief is not a yearning for a proposition

To be really and substantially true,
Not a yearning for a deferred reality
But a yearning for the fullness of Love's Reality to restore and to renew all things in its image,
An image that we can only glimpse in Church and Word and Sacrament,
But even then, those glimpses are so many bright flashes of a Mysterious Glory
By which the world can finally shine with truth and substantiality.
Belief as it's popularly understood is a passive, subjective, emotivist wishful thinking.
Belief as the Church understands it
Is an active living into the tension between what is and what is coming to be
Between fall and redemption
Between now and eternity
Our hearts stablished, as James writes, in what is Alive with Reality
Even as we live among things that are passing away.
Belief as the Church understands it
Is to carry a Vision, to live a Vision of that Living Reality
By which our lives and our world can be illumined
And for the fulfillment of which we deeply yearn.
This kind of belief, the Church's kind of belief, is a challenge,
Not least because the Fullness of the Vision is unknown to us,
Even as we're called to live it in its fullness...or rather
Called to allow the fullness of the vision to dwell in and live through us.
And living the tension between now and eternity can be exhausting
Particularly when the arrival of the Light for which we long
Seems endlessly delayed by the long night of sin and death in which we toil.
Weary with watching, waiting, expecting, nurturing, believing,
It can be easy to fall into the world's idea of belief
To be lulled into a kind of nebulous spirituality of nothingness
Thinking that what we're called to do
Is benignly yearn for a notional good that is endlessly deferred, believing in believing.
It's at those times that Advent's constant message of "Wake up!" is most needful.
Wake up, cries the Church, to the Reality of Love, Joy, Hope, Peace
That is meant to quicken, renew, enliven, and enflame you in with and for all goodness,
Even as that Reality remains beyond your ability to grasp it completely.
So Wake Up! And let that Reality grasp and hold and cradle you instead.

I think it's salutary, then, that we hear this passage from Matthew this morning.
Because if you're struggling with belief today, with what it means to really believe,
I hope you find some comfort here. And encouragement.
Our reading starts with John the Baptizer in some dark and lonely prison.
He's spent his entire prophetic career anticipating the coming of the Kingdom of God.
He's literally pointed out his cousin Jesus to crowds of folks, saying,
"Look! That's the Lamb of God!"
And now he's found himself in prison.
And I can only imagine the doubts and turmoil of heart he must be experiencing:
Was it worth it? Was he right? Was the Vision as he knew it true?
Or would prison be the last word. Would darkness, would loneliness be the last word.
After all that anticipation, all that prophecy, all that teaching, all that ministry, all that work:
Was this it? Was there to be no real dawn?
So he asks Jesus, through some friends,
"Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another?"
Chances are, John was expecting Jesus to be a different sort of Messiah:
Perhaps some version of the long-awaited warrior-king

Who would liberate Judah from Roman oppression, and give everyone what they deserve:
The pure righteously rewarded, the wicked punished with righteous and wrathful impunity.
And you can see this expectation in the fire of his preaching.
But Jesus sends John's friends back to him quoting Isaiah:
"Tell John," he says, "That the liberation is under way,
Tell John that everyone indeed is getting precisely what they deserve,
Because what they deserve is precisely what they need, if they can receive it:
Healing, liberation from sin and death, good news.
And this is a Vision," Jesus says,
"Of an end to exile, an end to estrangement from Goodness, from God,
A Vision of heaven and earth reconciled: renewal on a grand scale.
And blessed are you if you don't insist that the limits of your imagination
Ought to limit God's imagination for you or anyone else."
I don't know how John received Jesus's words.
But at least one ancient commentator suggests that, from the darkness of his prison cell,
In the tension between his circumstances and his hopes,
He responded something like this:
"Your will be done.
I cannot imagine the Kingdom you are imagining and inaugurating,
But I am content for you to imagine it in me and for me:
I am content that my yearning for it should open out onto your Vision of it.
Let me die, then, and in my death,
Let me be your forerunner in the darkness
As I've been your forerunner in the day.
Let my ache for the Vision's fulfillment give me strength even to evangelize the dead."
This hints at why, by the way, Jesus says the children of the Kingdom will be greater than John:
Because in the light of the Resurrection, their imagination regarding the Kingdom
Will be a different sort of imagination,
They'll have a clearer Vision of what really is possible with God and by God's grace
A Vision John can only have when he himself will see the prison house of death shattered
And the darkness of the grave flooded with the Light of God in the face of Jesus Christ
When he breaks the gates of brass and harrows hell
To bring life to the tombs and end the reign of sin and death for all,
Not on account of our righteousness, but on account of God's goodness and infinite love for us.
Until then, though, John is willing live the Vision patiently, expectantly,
Even as James counsels us in his epistle today.
Knowing full well how painful,
How desolate and desolating our present circumstances are and can be,
By faith John fully lives the tension between that desolation
And the Joy of the fulfillment of all things he is content to let God imagine in him;
And even in the depths of his prison, he believes and becomes what he believes:
He becomes a window onto the Heaven he cannot fully imagine.
He allows the Vision of the Reality he cannot fully imagine
To inform the difficult circumstances he cannot otherwise bear or recognize as meaningful.
And in life, in prison, and in death, the Vision lives in him.

And I wonder: are we willing to do the same?

The blazing Sun of Righteousness
For which we prepare in this season,
Is already beginning to rend our darkness with the rosy fingers of its dawn light.
The Vision is nearer: Christmas is indeed around the corner.

We can almost make it out, the shape of it, what's coming.

Are we willing to let the Reality for which we yearn

Live in us, transform us by grace, and through us, transform our world?

Are we willing to be sites of the inbreaking of God's presence in the world?

Are we willing to live what we profess in liturgy, hymnody, and creed?

Are we willing to walk the royal road from exile to home, from death to life

That Isaiah describes to us today, the highway that is none other than the Way of the Cross?

Will we believe? Not as the world believes, but as the Church invites us to believe,

For our good and for the good of the world around us?

Will we believe? Will we live the Vision of Love that is Jesus Christ?

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.