



**SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE**  
**in the City of New York**  
*The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector*  
**[www.SaintThomasChurch.org](http://www.SaintThomasChurch.org)**

**Sunday, December 26, 2021**  
*The First Sunday After Christmas Day*

*Festal Eucharist*  
*11am*

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A Sermon by  
The Rev. Mark, *Associate for Pastoral Care*  
*on*  
Isaiah 61:10-62:3; Galatians 3:23-25, 4:4-7; John 1:1-18  
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### **The Time Being**

I remember in our apartment on 215th Street  
(Seems like ages ago now),  
The super would figure out a way  
To rig the elevator to play Christmas music for weeks and weeks before the Day:  
I think what he did was just put a radio on top of the elevator  
Set to a perpetually Christmas radio station.  
And it would be cute for a bit at the end of November:  
You could grumble to yourself, "Oh, it's not even Advent, what's with this Santa music."  
But you'd be delighted nonetheless, it's hard not to like Christmas music,  
Even if it's early and even if it is Santa-centric.  
And then...after a while...you'd wish that George Michael never formed "Wham!"  
So you could give quiet thanks that the song "Last Christmas"  
Was mercifully left unwritten and therefore uncovered by so many mediocre pop bands.  
On the Day itself it would be nonstop, commercial free, Christmas music endlessness,  
All those warm feelings and wishes that Christmas could last the whole year round;  
And then, 26th of December, the actual second day of Christmas, St Stephen's Day, Boxing Day:  
You'd get in the elevator to go to breakfast or something and...  
... it was like emotionally slamming into a brick wall:  
Vapid nondescript adult contemporary music would fill the elevator.  
You never yearned so hard for a song about magic reindeer in your whole life.  
It was like nothing had actually happened the day before, the weeks before.  
Like all that mounting expectation of something wonderful didn't just fizzle out...  
It vanished. Like it had never been:  
The Vision of something wonderful evaporating,  
The world suddenly less bright now, slightly more plastic and weary and shallow now.  
And you're left to wonder: is it actually possible to hold onto the Vision,  
However attenuated your grasp of it...  
Not the snowmen and the reindeer and the fireplaces and the roasting chestnuts,  
But the Thing to which all those things feebly point...  
Not merely to keep a day in your heart all year round,  
But to hold the Vision in spite of the times  
To deepen the Vision in spite of the times;  
Even while acknowledging, perhaps, as WH Auden writes, "To those who have seen

The Child, however dimly, however incredulously,  
The Time Being is, in a sense, the most trying time of all.”<sup>i</sup>

The terrible ache of the Time Being.  
It’s true, Christmas has Twelve Days.  
But so often Eleven of them feel threaded through with a kind of inarticulate yearning.  
Yearning for the Vision, Yearning for an end to the Time Being  
And the inauguration of the Time Fulfilled.

Because yesterday,  
We stood with shepherds keeping watch over their flocks on a deep December night  
Surprised when the darkness around us blazed with a joyful angelic glory,  
Eager to sing and to celebrate the birth of a Savior;  
Yesterday we traveled with the shepherds, awe-struck and wonder-filled  
For a glimpse of Our Newborn King,  
To worship the Light of the World, veiled in human flesh, blood and bone,  
We saw the very Bread of Life lying in a manger, a food trough (what a divine irony!);  
We were close enough to feel the warmth of his breath,  
Able to look into the Child’s eyes  
And to see in them the timeless and fathomless depths of his love for us  
Him whose name is Love  
And to read in those Eyes of Grace and Mercy a desire to be born again  
In us, in our hearts  
Now and now and now and now and every moment of our lives.  
Yesterday, there at the manger, we reeled dumbstruck and silent at what Eliot calls  
“The still point of the turning world”<sup>ii</sup>  
And if someone had asked us, we would’ve told them  
That the world was made of light and fire and radiant bliss: and we would not have been wrong.

But then, with the shepherds, we had to go home.  
Because, I mean, let’s face it. The world was and is still turning:  
And the sheep still need looking after;  
Bills still need paying;  
Our sick friends and family members need nursing;  
Our departed loved ones need mourning;  
Our broken hearts need tending;  
And there’s probably a Netflix series or two that needs binge-watching.  
The cares and occupations of our lives have a way  
Of spilling into the dearest moments of our deepest peace and contemplation.  
“It must’ve been a dream,” we might think, “it was all too wonderful to have been real.”  
And we fall into that old pattern of thinking that  
What is most blazingly wonderful about human life  
Is the least real thing about it,  
Is a dream from which we must always awake  
Banished by the brutal naked facts of our world and our work-a-day lives.  
And we, who have had the Vision, find ourselves back:  
Slogging along in the Time Being.

Our Gospel this morning is insistent, however:  
Telling us that the Vision’s wonder is no dream: it’s real,  
That the Incarnation is too wonderful *not* to be real,  
That wonder is at the *heart* of the real  
At the heart of everything that is anything;  
Telling us that in the birth of Jesus Christ,

The Word, the Logos of God, the Pattern of the Real  
By which God understands God's own fullness  
And by which God speaks and arranges and loves all creation into being,  
The fundamental plan and pattern of all things  
That One Logos, that One Word  
Incarnates, becomes human, and discovers its home with and among us;  
Telling us that the most mysteriously wonderful central naked fact of all  
Is the Nakedly Vulnerable Almighty and Wordless Infant Word of God  
In whose very real Body and Blood  
All of Heaven and all of Earth  
All of God and all of Humanity  
Are blissfully sweetly joyously joined...

The Vision is intimately bound up with us.  
But, as Eliot writes, "Human kind / cannot bear very much reality."<sup>iii</sup>  
That conscious proximity to the Vision at Christmas,  
Proximity to the Vision of Grace and of Grace's fulfillment,  
Might actually mean for us a Joy which is at some point experienced  
As desolating...  
Not because Grace desolates us  
But because Grace makes us alive to and suddenly aware of  
The desolation in and with which we already live  
And which heretofore had been comfortable to us, normal, our life as usual...  
Even as that same Grace fits us for a Joy we could not have previously imagined,  
Deepening our vision of- and longing for the Kingdom that both is and is coming.  
This tension between a desolating consciousness of the way things are in the world,  
The way things are for the Time Being,  
And a joyful and anticipatory awareness of what is coming to be even now  
In Christ and through the Church:  
This tension can be a difficult thing to bear.  
But I think that's the invitation of these remaining Eleven days of Christmas:  
Not to shy away from living into that tension.

Which is a challenge.

Because our tendency will be:  
To keep Christmas yesterday. To let Christmas stay yesterday.  
To resist the inexorable draw of that Christmas Star of Mystery every day of our lives,  
Afraid that what we'll encounter at the end of its silvered tether of light,  
In the human life of the Infant God-Man Jesus,  
Is a brightness that, in our present state, is far more than we can bear:  
A brightness that brings home to us, makes us face,  
In no uncertain terms, the desolation of the Time Being,  
The distance between us and the Vision's fulfillment in us.  
Refusing the Vision, receiving it not, packing it away with the tinsel,  
Is a way by which we can come to an uneasy peace with our real proximity to Heaven:  
By refusing to see it, we can convince ourselves that we're not seen by it,  
That it can't ask anything of us, because we're actually much too far away  
To understand what it's saying.  
Because if Heaven really has come among us  
If Heaven really was born among us in a stable's poverty,  
If Heaven really grew among us as a child  
Really suffered with us as a human  
Really suffered *from* us as a human

Really loved us enough to die for love of us  
 Really died our death to undo death from the inside  
 And really rose again so that death would no longer be our lived reality  
 Nor the limit of our life  
 If Heaven really is here, now, as it promised  
 In a community, in Heaven's own Eucharistic Bread  
 If Heaven is really here:  
 Then it might, at any inopportune moment  
 —And what moment would not be inopportune—  
 It might turn to us and say something so terribly good  
 and so devastatingly life-changingly wonderful as this:  
 "I love you. I love you so much.  
 And there is nothing you have done or can do to earn this love or lose this love.  
 I will never stop loving you. Not even death can stop me loving you."  
 In the face of this blindingly brilliant and vulnerable love:  
 How is it possible to live a "normal" life without being transformed?  
 How is it possible to just go about one's day? To eat our little breakfast? Do our little work? Sleep our little sleep  
 and wake up again as if nothing was wonderful?  
 How is it possible not to be aware of our own smallness  
 In the presence of a love which loves us so far beyond our capacity to love anything?  
 How is it possible to live the Time Being as if it were anything other than what it is:  
 A desolation yearning for redemption?  
 How is it possible for one's own heart not to break with yearning for the love so freely given?  
 Yet  
 In the breaking  
 How is it possible to miss the life of love flooding through the cracks and into our lives  
 Healing, redeeming and becoming our lives?  
 How is it possible to miss that the joy of heaven, incarnate in Jesus, sharing our humanity  
 Is filling every aspect of our ordinariness with its own extraordinary loveliness?  
 How is it possible to miss that the love which names us beloved  
 Is empowering us to love more fully, more deeply  
 And to participate in the redemption of the times by grace?  
 How is it possible to miss that we are becoming, even now:  
 Sites of Heaven's inbreaking, our own lives blazing stars  
 Pointing the way to an always-already arriving glory of depthless love?  
  
 Beloved, we've seen the Vision that makes the ache of the Time Being more keen.  
 I invite you this Christmastide to live in the tension of that ache,  
 To understand the ache as a sign of your need for the Vision  
 So that when it comes to you more clearly, as Eucharist, as a stranger in need,  
 As a child wordlessly pleading for nurture, comfort, shelter, love,  
 You can hold the Vision and be held by it, even in the midst of the Time Being  
 Becoming a sign of the dawning Fullness of all things  
 From whom we have received grace upon grace.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom be all honor and power and glory with the Father in the Unity of the  
 Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> W.H. Auden, *For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio*, published 1944. <sup>ii</sup> T.S.

Eliot, "Burnt Norton," part II, in *Four Quartets*, published 1943.

<sup>iii</sup> T.S. Eliot, "Burnt Norton," part I, in *Four Quartets*, published 1943.