**1 Christmas, Dec. 29, 2013, Is 61:10-62:3; Ps 147; Cal 3:23-4:7; John 1:1-18; The Rev. Mary Trainor**

***"In the beginning***" are the first words of tonight's Gospel and the first words of the Gospel of John. Those words, "***in the beginning***" stop us in our tracks and gain our attention! Today, we will look at this "***in the beginning***" in two ways: through your eyes, as you anticipate a new beginning as 2014 rolls in, and through God's eyes at the beginning of the universe, the beginning of time.

First, "***in the beginning***" through our eyes is the fact that it is just a few days before New Year's, the time when we make new year's resolutions. Do many of us make resolutions? Oh yes. We groan about setting them, but most of us set resolutions. A 2008 statistical survey by Stephen Shapiro revealed that 62% of people in the US make new year's resolutions....and the other 38% feel guilty for **not** making resolutions. We all want to be better people, and our resolutions are how we want to do this. G. K. Chesterton, the brilliant early 20th C. British theologian and writer, said this, "**The object of a New Year is not that we should have a new year. It is that we should have a new soul and a new nose, new feet, a new backbone, new ears, and new eyes. Unless a man starts afresh about things, he will certainly do nothing effective.**"

Most of our resolutions involve health and fitness, finances, or relationships. Businesses know this, and they advertise accordingly -- but does buying a treadmill get us fit? No, the treadmill has to be used, and used a lot. That survey tells us that 85% of us DO NOT keep our resolutions! Whew -- so only 15% of us actually manage to keep our resolutions! Illustration: at the beginning of every new year, a certain high school principal has the tradition of posting all his teachers’ new year’s resolutions on the bulletin board. One year, things went differently than before -- as the teachers gathered around the bulletin board, a great commotion started! One of the teachers complained. "**Why weren’t my resolutions posted?"** She was throwing such a temper tantrum that the principal hurried back to his office to see if he had overlooked her resolutions. Sure enough, he had mislaid them on his desk. Before he went back out, he read her resolutions....and he was astounded! This teacher’s first resolution was as follows "**To not to let little things upset me."**

Now, maybe you aren't that bad - but let's face it thinking about the new year can remind us of our failures and our weaknesses, our lack of self control and will power; we are very aware of the fact that the resolutions we made last year have yet to be kept. So, "***in the beginning***" of a new year can be tough - because we are so tough on ourselves. And, here we are, at the brink of 2014. Does God join in with us on our being tough on ourselves? No. That's not God's way. God knows our flaws, and He loves us, flaws and all. He is here to give us strength to keep our goals, to make a new beginning. Isaiah uses a plant metaphor today in our 1st reading to help us understand this message: "***I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God.***..***For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to spring up"*** in us! God will cause us to become better people, if we let Him. God has sent us a whole community as part of this process too. We don't have to go it alone!

God is here accepting us, supporting us, encouraging us. Jesus came to live among us and died that we might know the extent of His love for us -- just as we are. This message is best captured in Hymn 693 which we will be singing today. Look it up and let's read some of the words now, "**Just as I am without** **one plea, But that Thy blood was shed for me, And that Thou bidst me come to Thee, O Lamb of God, I come, I come."**  This hymn was written in 1835 by poet Charlotte Elliott. When she was 46 years old, an elderly man approached her at a dinner party and asked if she was a Christian. She considered him rude and unkind, because of his inappropriate question. But after the man walked away, she couldn't get his question out of her mind. So she went out and found the man, and asked him how to become a Christian. He told her this, that "**she could come to Jesus Christ just as she was, and Jesus would welcome her."** Charlotte was taken aback by this news, as it was contrary to what she had thought -- she had not realized that God loved her just as she was. That night she received Jesus as her Lord and Savior, and soon after she wrote *Just As I Am* as a testimony to her newfound faith. Over the remainder of her life Charlotte wrote 150 hymns. Once we, like Charlotte, allow God to fill us just as we are, we will get stronger and we will become those better people we want to become.

God, who helps us with our new beginnings, is an expert at beginnings! The Gospel of John begins this way. John's Gospel is different than the other Gospels -- it is more reflective and the whole thing is told from the post-resurrection perspective. John, instead of beginning with the birth of Jesus as Luke and Matthew did, begins with the identity and omnipotence of Jesus. He said: ***"In the beginning was the Word*** (i.e., Jesus), ***and the Word was with God and the Word was God***....***All things came into being through God, and without Him nothing came into being***." So, not only does Jesus know about new beginnings -- He was there before the beginning, and is responsible, not only for us humans coming into being, but for the existence of everything! And, it is His light that gives us hope. God took on human nature, was born of a human mother, and it is this we celebrate at Christmas: "***the life He brings is the Light of all people***." With Christ's Spirit working inside of our "***whole being***," we can not only do better keeping our new year's resolutions but we can extend God's love to others, filled with His life and light.

Let us pray together the Collect for the day: Almighty God, you have poured upon us the new light of your incarnate Word: Grant that this light, enkindled in our hearts, may shine forth in our lives; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.