For Goodness Sake!
Titus 3:1-8

Just over eight years ago, on January 15, 2009, an aviation event occurred which quickly became known as the “Miracle on the Hudson.” Three minutes after takeoff from New York City's LaGuardia Airport, US Airways Flight 1549 struck a flock of Canada geese just northeast of the George Washington Bridge and lost all engine power.

Unable to reach any airport, pilots Chesley Sullenberger and Jeffrey Skiles glided the plane to a ditching in the Hudson River off midtown Manhattan. All 155 people aboard were rescued by nearby boats and there were very few serious injuries. The NTSB described it as “the most successful ditching in aviation history.”

On that mid-January afternoon, as U.S. Air Flight 1549 made an emergency landing in the Hudson River, it looked like an unfolding tragedy. Yet, as emergency responders, ferry boats and others raced to assist, all passengers and crew miraculously survived the crash. Captain Sullenberger, a former U.S. Air Force fighter pilot was rightly acclaimed as a hero for his cool, calm, stellar reaction and response. Something which appeared to be very bad, in many ways had a “good” ending.

What does “goodness” mean to you? Where do you see goodness these days in our church? How can we celebrate this goodness? And with whom can we share this goodness?

In his book The Sacred Journey, Frederick Buechner relates a memory from a January evening many years ago. “One winter I sat in Army fatigues somewhere near Anniston, Alabama, eating my supper out of a mess kit. The infantry training battalion that I had been assigned to was on bivouac. There was a cold drizzle, and everything was mud. The sun had gone down.

“I was still hungry when I finished and noticed that a man nearby had something left over that he was not going to eat. It was a turnip, and when I asked him if I could have it, he tossed it over to me. I missed the catch, the turnip fell to the ground, but I wanted it so badly that I picked it up and started eating it anyway, mud and all.

“And then, as I ate it, time deepened and slowed down again. With a lurch of the heart that is real to me still, I saw suddenly, almost as if from beyond time altogether, that not only was the turnip good, but the mud was good too, even the drizzle and cold were good, even the Army that I had dreaded for months.

“Sitting there in the Alabama winter with my mouth full of cold turnip and mud, I could see at least for a moment how if you ever took truly to heart the ultimate goodness and joy of things, even at their bleakest, the need to praise someone or something for it would be so great that you might even have to go out and speak of it to the birds of the air.”

What does “goodness” mean to you? Where do you see goodness these days in our church? How can we celebrate this goodness? And with whom can we share this goodness?

Maybe you’re having a hard time envisioning a feast of turnip and mud as “good.” But whatever you or I term as “good,” one thing’s certain: If God is not at the heart of it, or if we fail to see God’s hand in it, it falls short of what is truly good. What does the Psalmist David tell us? Let’s read Psalm 100:5: “For the Lord is good and his love endures forever; his faithfulness continues through all generations” (Psalm 100:5).

Sometimes we need to be reminded that true goodness cannot be manufactured, packaged or sold. It’s not attained by what we do, by how we look or by what others say. Genuine, true goodness is found in God alone.

What does “goodness” mean to you? When we study God’s Word we discover that the
good things God wants to develop in our lives and in His church by the work of His Spirit are quite different from what the world around us generally considers “good.”

This morning, as we begin a new worship series, let’s focus on the Bible’s teaching on what God wants us to know “for goodness sake” and for our sake as His people.

1. **God is the source of all that is good**

   First, God is the source of all that is good. Time and time again the Bible reminds us that God is the source of all goodness. That magnificent statement of David in Psalm 100 is found from the first verse of Genesis to the last verse of Revelation. We serve a holy, righteous, just and merciful God who embodies all that is good. The Psalmist David further invites us to rediscover this reality when he tells us to “Taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the man who takes refuge in him” (Psalm 34:8).

   Not only is God good, God does what is good. We see this in His acts of creation. The Bible tells us, “God saw all that He had made, and it was very good” (Genesis 1:31). The first truth we need to note is this: God is the source of all goodness. Then there is a second truth.

2. **God tells us to be good**

   God tells us to be good. Neil Plantinga has said that young adult parents who let their preschool child visit someone else’s house for a day often do so with fear and trembling. They wonder, “What if he hogs all the toys? What if he tells lies about our family. Worse, what if she tells the truth?” Before leaving their child at his friend’s house such parents will commonly say, “Try to be good.” Try to be good! That’s a high calling for any preschooler, just as it is for any youth or adult (Plantinga, *Beyond Doubt*, 1980).

   How can we try to be good? For starters we need to heed Paul’s counsel when he writes, “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is--his good, pleasing and perfect will” (Romans 12:2). One thing’s certain: You and I need to be transformed by the renewing of our minds in order to be good. And who transforms us? God does through His Word, the Bible and through prayer. This mind renewal, this change of mind—metanoia—is at the heart of repentance.

   It’s coming to see God for who God is and coming to see yourself for who you are. It’s seeing God as someone who loves you and wants a relationship with you. It’s seeing yourself as someone who has sinned against God, needs God’s forgiveness, is willing to turn from that sin and turn to God’s Son as your Savior, Lord and Leader. That’s the start of having a renewed mind. This transformation comes by the work of God’s Holy Spirit.

   A few verses later in Romans 12, Paul gets quite specific as to how we are to be good. In fact, he gives us a defensive strategy. He writes, “Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good” (Romans 12:9).

   In your mind’s eye, try to capture the image of a group of mountain climbers scaling and conquering the world’s highest mountain peak, Mount Everest. Then try to capture the image of these mountain climbers holding tightly, clinging to ropes as they rappel. Survival is dependent on holding on to that which is true, trustworthy and dependable. Climbers have to trust the very procedures that enable one to steadily move on upward when all the gravitational forces are pulling downward.

   Stuart Briscoe once said, “The most obvious evils of our society are usually quite repulsive to believers, and they hold little attraction and therefore afford little temptation. To be repelled by such things can easily lead to hating that particular evil.

   “But the more seductive and dangerous evils are the ones to beware. The erosion of
principle that comes from careless exposure to the attractively wrong only becomes apparent in some lives with the incidence of spiritual and moral collapse.

“It is learning to identify the dangerously attractive evil and disciplining oneself to hate it that is necessary for good to triumph. But there is a positive side, too. Clinging to the good is like hanging onto a rope when you’re tired; it is working conscientiously when you’re bored, sticking with your commitments when you’re disappointed, and being dedicated to your church even when little progress is evident. It is holding on through disappointment, persevering in discouragement, pressing through disillusionment.” Why? Because you discern that it is God's will and you choose to do it. First, God is the source of all goodness. Second, God calls us to be good. Then a third truth:

3. God tells us to do good

God tells us to do good. In fact, the Bible has a great deal more to say about doing good than being good. What kind of good should we attempt? All kinds! In as many areas of life as sin has done “bad,” in that many areas we must do good! We are to fit ourselves into Christ’s great work of reclaiming and restoring a corrupted creation.

Neil Plantinga notes that the name “Bethlehem” was a common name given to hospitals years ago. It seemed right to associate places of mercy and healing with the village of Jesus’ birth. “One hospital, in particular, was in London. Over the years the hospital’s name was shortened and slurred from Bethlehem to “Bedlam.” People called lunatics and maniacs were kept there. Eventually the hospital began to charge admittance for those who wanted to gawk and giggle at the patients.

“Sinners turn Bethlehem to Bedlam. Redeemed sinners try to turn it back. A compassionate, cheerful nurse ministers to terminally ill persons. A keen business-person attempts to create jobs for unemployed workers. In thousands of ingenious ways, the followers of Christ seek to show their love for God and neighbor by turning sickness to health, depression to hope, ignorance to knowledge, Bedlam to Bethlehem” (Plantinga, Beyond Doubt, 1980).

We referred to the defensive strategy in Romans 12:2 a moment ago. A little later in this same chapter Paul gives us an offensive strategy. He writes, “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Romans 12:21).

Here at West Shore Baptist we are seeking to do good— to turn Bedlam to Bethlehem— in a variety of ways. For example, in the past few years, members of West Shore Baptist have served in regional, national and international missions.

From leadership on Region Boards, to ongoing Hurricane Sandy relief projects in New Jersey, to rebuilding rubble homes in Haiti, we’ve supported our American Baptist mission work through mission prayer, stewardship and service. In these and many other ways, we’re seeking to do good in great measure!

God is the source of all goodness. God tells us to be good. God tells us to do good. This leads us to a fourth and final truth to which we’ll all say, “thank goodness.”

4. God helps us to be good and do good

Singer and songwriter Steven Curtis Chapman says that “in the Gospel we discover we are far worse off than we ever thought, and far more loved than we ever imagined possible.” We will never know the true goodness of God until we give ourselves to Him, confessing our need for God’s forgiveness. Like David we must cry out, “Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me” (Psalm 51:10). In spite of all of his moral flaws, David became “a man after God’s own heart.” His life was living proof of God’s goodness and mercy.

In Paul’s letter to Titus the apostle contrasts our old way of life with the new life which is
ours in Christ. Let’s read the first few verses of Titus 3: “Remind the people ... to be ready to do whatever is good, to slander no one, to be peaceable and considerate, and to show true humility toward all men” (Titus 3:1-2).

Then Paul goes on to say that when “...the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life” (Titus 3:4-7).

Paul concludes this passage with these words: “This is a trustworthy saying. And I want you to stress these things, so that those who have trusted in God may be careful to devote themselves to doing what is good. These things are excellent and profitable for everyone” (Titus 3:8).

What does “goodness” mean to you? Where do you see goodness these days in our church? How can we celebrate this goodness? And with whom can we share this goodness? When it comes to this matter of seeking, serving and sharing God’s goodness, Stuart Briscoe writes, “The answers are important because a Spirit-filled life includes goodness. Goodness doesn’t come naturally. It requires a decision.”

Maybe the best decision we can make will emulate that made by John Wesley who once said: “Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as you ever can.” ...