

**New St. James Presbyterian Church
Sunday, January 10, 2021**

**“With You I Am Well Pleased”
Mark 1:4-11**

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“And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased’” (v. 11).

In my years of preaching, I’ve sometimes questioned the decision of the Lectionary to finish the reading there, at the end of verse 11...because that’s not really where this story ends in the Gospel of Mark. Rather, the baptism of Jesus is what launches him—right away—into challenge, adversity, difficulty, temptation: “And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’ *And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness*” (1:11-12). It often seemed to me that to end with verse 11—to end with the affirming voice from heaven—that this could give the impression of baptism without the *hard calling* that comes with baptism: comfort without challenge, baptism without discipleship. And so, as a younger minister, I tended to correct—maybe overcorrect—this apparent misstep in the Lectionary by highlighting the challenge laid upon us in baptism, by stressing that baptism involves a heavy burden and means accepting the high cost of Christian discipleship.

However, though I still think it’s important not to overlook the challenges laid upon us in baptism, I also think it’s possible to commit the opposite error. As a newly ordained minister, I sought to avoid preaching on baptism *as comfort without challenge...but I now recognize the risk of preaching on baptism as challenge without comfort*. And I wonder if that’s perhaps the extreme to which we are more prone: I think it’s possible that we Presbyterians—in our eagerness to serve, in our devotion to our duties—that we can sometimes accept the challenges of the Christian life without allowing ourselves much opportunity to contemplate the comforts of the Christian life. This isn’t to say that I won’t focus on the challenge next year (the pendulum swings), but today—in this rather dreary stretch of wintery pandemic—I’d like to invite you to reflect on the comfort of baptism. And we can discern this comfort in our Lesson from the Gospel of Mark especially by listening to the “voice” God speaks to Jesus in the waters of the Jordan.

Mark’s account of the baptism of Jesus is brief and abrupt: there’s no dialogue between Jesus and John, and that directs our attention to the voice from heaven, the only “speaking part” in the baptism. And this voice from heaven declares *the identity of Jesus: the voice declares who Jesus is*. Mark writes: “In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased’” (vv. 9-11).

In the waters of baptism, God declares the identity of Jesus: God declares *who Jesus is and whose Jesus is*. Jesus is God’s own Son, God declares, and God’s own Son is “Beloved.” The word “beloved” here is really a wonderful translation of the original Greek: the English ‘beloved’ shares a root with the English word ‘love,’ as you might guess—and the Greek word translated here as “beloved” [ἀγαπητός] shares a root with the Greek word for ‘love’ [ἀγάπη]. To be beloved is to be treasured, valued, *loved*.

And God's beloved Son is "pleasing" to God: the voice from heaven declares, "with you I am well pleased." And notice *when* God speaks these words to Jesus: this is *before* Jesus begins his public ministry. Before Jesus begins his ministry of healing and teaching and forgiving, and before dying for a world that did not receive him—before the testing and before the cross—before all that, God is "well pleased." God's loving affirmation for Jesus is not the result of Jesus's ministry; God's loving affirmation for Jesus is the beginning of Jesus's ministry.

The baptism of Jesus can teach us about our baptism—but it's important not to confuse his baptism with our baptism. Our understanding of baptism can't start with our baptism, and only then move on to the baptism of Jesus: that would get the whole thing backwards. Jesus was not baptized like we are baptized: the baptism of Jesus was unique, unparalleled, this unrepeatable event when the eternal Son of God was baptized and named by God as beloved and well-pleasing...

But we can learn about our baptism by starting with the baptism of Jesus—and seeing how our baptism finds meaning in his baptism. When we are baptized—in this sanctuary or elsewhere—when we are baptized, we share through Christ in the grace of his baptism. Jesus alone is the true child of God, the one "without sin" (Hebrews 4:15), well pleasing and beloved to God; but when we are baptized, it's as though Christ were drawing us into the waters of his baptism, drawing us into the loving affirmation of the Father for the Son. There, in the waters of the Jordan, as the Spirit descends, and the loving voice of God resounds—there Jesus in his baptism draws us in our baptism into the love and affirmation of God.

In our baptism, we share in the love of God through Christ—and so, like Christ in his baptism, we also hear our identity through Christ. One interpreter puts it like this: "the baptism of Jesus establishes his identity"; "the baptism of Jesus establishes our identity. Jesus is who God says he is. So also, we are who God says we are, and in Christ Jesus we are sons and daughters of God" (Williamson). As that interpreter points out, baptism draws us into the love of God in a way that gives us a new identity: baptism is also a sign that we have received this new identity, that we have been given the new name, "Beloved." God's love and God's presence are, of course, not limited to those who are baptized; nonetheless, baptism is—for us—a sign that tells us *who we are* (beloved, well-pleasing to God) and *whose we are* (God's own children).

For many of us, baptism—this theologically weighty event with its many layers of meaning—for many of us, this happens when we're infants. I was baptized as a young adult, when I came to faith in my early 20s—but maybe most of you were baptized as babies. And one of the wonderful things about being baptized as an infant is that this will always remind you that your baptism—and your identity as God's child, beloved and well pleasing—none of this was dependent on your faithfulness or your dutifulness or your giftedness. In baptism, through Christ, God called you "Beloved" before you could even hold up the weight of your head—let alone do anything to deserve such rich grace. One benefit of being baptized as an infant is that you can never make the mistake of thinking you'd done anything to deserve it.

I haven't yet baptized anyone in my 8 weeks at New St. James (socially distanced baptism could be quite messy); however, in the past, whenever I've had the joy of baptizing people—whether I'm baptizing an infant or an older child or an adult—I always offer these words, from a French Reformed liturgy. Addressing the one being baptized directly, by name, whether infant or adult, I say:
for you Jesus Christ came at Bethlehem;

for you he lived and showed God's love;
for you he suffered the darkness of Calvary
and cried at the last, "It is finished";
for you he triumphed over death
and rose to newness of life;
for you he ascended to God's right hand.

*All this he did for you,
before you knew anything of it.*

And so, the Scripture is fulfilled:

"We love, because God first loved us."

In baptism, God calls us beloved, well pleasing, God's children...and none of this is anything we could merit.

And our identity, received in baptism through Christ, as God's beloved and well-pleasing children: this identity is something we carry with us always. Years ago, my wife and I were hiking around the Isle of Skye in Scotland: sometimes we'd reach quite remote locations, but—of course, no matter where you go, no matter the difficult terrain traversed, there's always sheep that are just there already. And these far-off sheep would be marked with distinctive colours—combinations of blue or red or green—marking them with their own shepherd's symbol. Their identity stayed with them: no matter how far they wandered off, the mark showed that they still belonged to the shepherd.

And as that paint from the shepherd marked the sheep as the shepherd's own, as belonging to the shepherd—so too does baptism serve as a sign to mark us as God's own, as belonging to God. "I know my own and my own know me," says the Good Shepherd in the Gospel of John (10:14). *Living Faith*, one of the guiding documents of the Presbyterian Church in Canada, puts the comfort of this belonging very well.

Paraphrasing the Heidelberg Catechism, *Living Faith* states:

"Baptism assures us that we belong to God.

In life and in death

our greatest comfort is that we belong

to our faithful Saviour Jesus Christ" (7.6.5).

We may take comfort in baptism: in the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan, the voice from heaven declared him Beloved, well pleasing, God's own Son—and as Jesus draws us into the waters of his baptism, we hear that we too are beloved, well pleasing, God's own children. In my early years of preaching, I probably ran too quickly past the comforts of baptism to highlight the challenges of baptism...but I think that if we really hear this comfort—that God looks to us, through Christ, as well pleasing, beloved, God's own—if we really hear the profound comfort of baptism, then we'll find ways to respond gratefully, to live out our baptismal calling faithfully, to act like the well-pleasing people that God declares we already are.

"In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased'" (v. 9-11). Amen.