Mark 1:4-12

4John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.6Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 7He proclaimed, ‘The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. 8I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.’

9 In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 10And 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. 11And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’

12 And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness.

You Are God’s Beloved, in Whom He Delights

Well, we have just finished celebrating Jesus’ birth and Epiphany, the day that the magi visited him in Bethlehem. Today we celebrate Jesus’ baptism, which was *not* an infant baptism but likely occurred when Jesus was a young man around the age of thirty. In one week, the lectionary brings us ahead thirty years, which is okay because not much is written about those years between his birth and his baptism.

It’s kind of amazing to think about it; a man who is recognized as the Messiah, the Christ from his birth falls off the radar screen for thirty years, then reappears with a bang! No other person that I can think of, religious or otherwise, had such a huge impact on world history in so short a timeframe. Three years is what most people believe was the duration of Jesus’ ministry on earth. And now, almost two thousand years later millions of people profess to be his disciples. And whether you accept him to be your Lord or not, you follow a calendar that is centered upon his birthday. Three years of a ministry that began with his baptism.

All four of the gospel records, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, all report that Jesus’ ministry began with his baptism. Today’s reading from the gospel according to Mark describes the event as very personal for Jesus; as he comes out of the water, Jesus sees “the heavens torn apart and the Holy Spirit descending as a dove on him.” Jesus hears God’s voice tell him, “You are my Son, my beloved; in you I am well pleased.” I say that Mark’s version of the story is the most personal, because everything that happens is between Jesus and God. In Matthew, God tells everyone around, “This is my Son in whom I am well pleased.” In Luke, an actual dove descends on Jesus for everyone to see. In John’s gospel, John the Baptist recognizes Jesus right away as being the “lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.” But in Mark, Jesus is baptized, and no one but Jesus sees anything. No one but Jesus hears anything. And John the Baptist doesn’t’ distinguish Jesus from anyone else who’s coming to be baptized. Jesus alone sees and hears God. And we assume that God alone knows that Jesus is the messiah; he is God’s son, *the* beloved in whom God is well pleased.

God certainly held Jesus in high regard, declaring him to be his son – a special member of the family, his beloved in whom he delights as a father. I imagine that Jesus felt pretty good when he heard this. After all, how would you feel if God spoke to you in this way? “(Your name), you are my (son/daughter), my beloved; In you I am well-pleased.” Wouldn’t it feel great? Well I have great news for you; God says this to you every day. Really, He does. I just think that we have a hard time hearing it.

Many of us may say, “I don’t think that God is well-pleased with me; He sees everything, and he knows my deepest, dirtiest thoughts. He knows how I feel about the person six rows behind/in front of me. I don’t think that God delights in *me.* Now Jesus is different: He’s someone God can delight in. He’s without sin. He is doing whatever God asks him to do 24-7. Me, on the other hand, I’m a professional sinner. In fact, rather than *delighting* in me, I think God is upset with me. I think He is disappointed. I think he has every reason to curse me and punish me. I don’t deserve God’s love or care.”

This is what we tell *ourselves,* but this is not what God tells us.

Consider this. I mentioned already that there is no mention in the Bible of any ministry that Jesus was involved in *before* his baptism. And there is no mention of Jesus hearing God speak to him before his baptism. We assume that prior to his baptism, Jesus was following in his father’s footsteps; he was likely a carpenter working out of Nazareth in Galilee. No voice from God speaking to him. No Spirit descending upon him like a dove. It is *at* his baptism that he sees the Spirit descend and he hears God tell him “you are my Son.” And it is immediately after his baptism that his ministry begins with him going into the wilderness for forty days to be tempted by Satan. There is a connection between this baptism and these words that Jesus hears and the Spirit that Jesus sees and Jesus embarking on his amazing ministry. What’s going on?

Consider what John’s baptism was about. The Bible describes it as a baptism of repentance and forgiveness. And while scholars have debated *why* Jesus, who we assume was born perfect, would have needed such a baptism (he had nothing to repent and no need of forgiveness), it’s universally accepted that Jesus *was* baptized by John. And while there may have been no need for repentance on Jesus’ part, it seems clear that beginning with his baptism, Jesus began a new life. He left his old career and began a new one. Jesus made a conscious decision that from that point forward, he was going to pursue whole heartedly the will of God. And when you consciously pursue the will of God, you need to be conscious of God’s voice. You need to open your eyes to God’s actions. WHETHER HE NEEDED FORGIVESS OR NOT, WHETHER HE HAD ANYTHING TO REPENT OR NOT, JESUS MADE THE CONCIOUS DECISION TO SERVE GOD ONLY. THAT DECISION IN ITSELF OPENS OUR EYES AND EARS TO GOD.

And what is the first thing Jesus sees God do? Send His Holy Spirit. What is the first thing he hears God say? “You are my Son, the beloved; in you I am well pleased.”

Of all the things that God could say to us, of all the instructions he could throw at us, all the wisdom he could bestow upon us, the first thing he wants to tell us when he finally has our attention is “You are my son/daughter. I love you.” The founder of humanistic psychotherapy, Carl Rogers, is known for an approach to therapy that involves unconditional positive regard. According to Rogers, the most effective way to treat a client is to make it clear that he or she is accepted, that the therapist looks at him or her in a positive way, regardless of what the client says or does. Rogers learned this from God (incidentally, Roger’s mother was a Pentecostal Christian). The first thing that God assures us of, when we’re attentive enough to hear Him, is “I love you. You are my child.”

I want the words to soak in like a good marinade, like gravy in bread on a hot turkey sandwich. I want those words to pickle you this morning, so that you never lose the taste of them. “You are my child, by beloved; with you I am well pleased.” We are made of the same flesh and blood as Jesus. We are just as much children of God as Jesus is. We have the same temptations, the same choices. And we have the same decision to make with regard to how we will live our lives: whether it be in a way that glorifies ourselves or in a way that glorifies God – that seeks to do what God wants us to do. We have the choice to move closer to God or to stay at a distance, but regardless of whether we are Christian or not, whether we repent or not, GOD LOVES US AND SPEAKS HIS LOVING WORDS TO US.

What about being well pleased? God may have been well pleased with Jesus, but he must not be well pleased with us. Look at our lives, what we’ve done and left undone. But remember that, at the time he heard God say to him, “in you I am well pleased,” Jesus hasn’t healed anyone yet. He hasn’t cast out any demons or preached or fed anyone. He hasn’t done anything *except made the decision to follow God’s will*.

What happens when we are baptized, or when we make this decision to repent, we are making the choice to MOVE CLOSER to that loving God – and while most of us were baptized as infants, parents who are here know that their child’s baptism served as a sort of baptism for themselves as they recognize the importance for themselves as parents to repent and correct their own ways, a decision which pleases God.

And it is that decision, my brothers and sisters, that opens our eyes and ears to God. When we make the conscious decision to move closer to God by embracing His will, we stand a better chance of hearing what He has to say to us.

The trouble people have is that they can remain out of earshot; they remain too far from God to hear his words of assurance and comfort. They are either too busy pursuing their own will or they have convinced themselves that there is nothing to love about themselves. And we can see quite easily the results of this spiritual deafness. Witness those who abuse others in order to get ahead with their own agenda. Witness any child who does not experience the love of a mother or father. They live their lives in great doubt and depression. They seek to fill that void with drugs or with money or with sex.

They lash out against the world, or they try to conquer it. It reminds me of that song, “Looking for Love in All the Wrong Places,” or the sad, poignant scene in Citizen Kane as the dying tycoon utters his last words, “Rosebud.”

This is where our journey starts: with knowing God’s love. With knowing how special you are to God. And then, assured of God’s unconditional, unfailing love, you are now equipped to do God’s will. Note that the first place the spirit led Jesus after his baptism was into the wilderness; Jesus is empowered to take on all the temptations that Satan can throw at him because he is so assured of God’s love.

And the most important thing you can do for God is let his voice be heard. Use your voice to speak on God’s behalf. Speak to everyone your words and with your deeds.

Telling them, “You are God’s son/daughter, his beloved! With you he is well pleased.” Practice it now with your husband or wife, son or daughter. If they tell you what a wretch they are and how God has no reason to be pleased with them, tell them that God loves them unconditionally, with a perfect love that has no strings attached. Tell them until it sinks in, until they make the decision to return to the God who loves them so much and they can hear God tell them directly.