

In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen,

At Jesus' baptism by John in the Jordan River, God is fully present. In the three-fold, Trinitarian way the church has come to understand, God is fully present. In Matthew's account, God the Father is there, at least we assume that is the source of the voice from heaven which is heard. And, of course, God's Christ is there, present in the flesh of the young man Jesus. And the Holy Spirit is there, too, in the form of a gentle dove, which in its graceful flight lands on the very person of Jesus. In a Trinitarian roll-call, each personality of God's nature would raise its hand and say "present, Lord God!" God is fully present at Jesus' baptism. That's a good way, I think, to diagnose any moment which we would like to consider a sacrament. That's what makes a moment "holy", the full presence of God. In other words, is a wedding holy? Well, do we think that God is fully present? Can we discern any evidence that that is the case? Is an ordination sacramental and holy? Is God fully present there and then? Is God fully present at our holy communion each week, as we come together to God's altar for renewal and strength?

The two Gospel Sacraments and the five identifiable sacramental rites of the Episcopal Church should be familiar to many of you: Baptism, Communion, Marriage, Ordination, Reconciliation, Unction (or healing of the sick), and Confirmation. In each of these cases, there is some tangible evidence that God is present there. In each case, we pray that God is fully present. But sacramental moments are, of course not limited to these seven rituals: It would be our joy to find God fully present, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in all we do, in each moment of our life, in our waking and in our sleeping, in our solitude and in our relationships, in our marriages and in our parenting, in our work and in our play. It would be our great joy to know that God is fully present. We would be, like God in Matthew's account, "well pleased."

Wait...God is "well pleased"?! That's it?! God isn't jumping for joy?! God is fully present and there is no thundering bolt of lightning?! In our Psalm this morning, God's voice breaks the cedar trees and splits the flames of fire; the voice of the Lord shakes the wilderness. The voice of the Lord makes the oak trees writhe and strips the forests bare. And in the temple of the Lord all are crying, "Glory!" Why doesn't Matthew report something like that?! Here is Jesus at this monumental moment of his life, the event which will shape the rest of his life, the kick-off of his earthly ministry, the beginning of his great mission, and God is only, what, well-pleased?! In fact the Greek word which Matthew chooses to describe God's mood is eudokeo, or "content". Isn't it kind of a let-down in the narrative to find out that God is simply "content"?! This is a holy event, isn't it? Jesus has walked all the way down from Galilee to Judea to get to this meeting. John the Baptist has been waiting, more or less patiently, for Jesus to show up, standing knee deep in the Jordan River, and God, as our Psalm reminds us, sits enthroned above the waters, waiting for this very moment, and the best we can make of its holiness is contentment?!

Films and movies and TV shows have promoted thinking that all of life has some kind of "sound-track". Now, for me, that's often a "laugh-track", canned laughter. But for many of us, it's a music track. As if certain types of music can push the story along, can enhance particular types of situations. I was watching a show the other evening in which one of the main characters was shot and transported to the hospital. All the other characters rushed to follow and then were waiting to hear whether or not their hero had survived. They were pacing, they were crying, they were looking dazed and forlorn. And through it all, there was a soundtrack of ominous music, which only made the situation worse, but was somehow, according to the producer anyway, appropriate. And I got thinking, what if they actually played music like that, ominous and foreboding, all the time in the Emergency department waiting room?! It certainly would help the mood, wouldn't it? And when I told Gale my idea, she reminded me just how much she hates horror films, and the soundtrack of increasing crescendo as the unwitting victim is cautiously walking up or down a darkened stairway, for example, and the music has us all freaked-out and shrieking "don't go there!!"

Well, certainly one would think that the baptism of Jesus would rate a dramatic soundtrack. Trumpets blaring, or something! When Luke tells us about Jesus' birth, he, at least, has a host of angels singing in the background. And, of course, in the various Jesus films which have been produced, there's always a music

soundtrack. It's something we have come to expect. It's something we almost take for granted. We only notice it when it's absent, as if something were missing, or as if the event wasn't really that special. It didn't even rate the usual music. Now, I love music, even good soundtracks...a little better at least than the laugh-track I hear in my head so much of the time...and I'll admit that we usually try to pick a closing hymn, and Colleen chooses a Postlude which will stay in your head even after you leave this place each week, But the fact of the matter is that holy moments with God, sacramental moments, don't really need added and invented drama or dramatic effect. No need for ascending crescendos of music. No need for special effects. No need to make a huge production out of it. Sacramental life is just real life. It's enough that God is well pleased.

God is well-pleased even though Jesus hasn't even yet begun his ministry. He hasn't yet chosen disciples, he hasn't yet told any parables, he hasn't yet wrought any amazing miracles, and yet he is beloved... and God is content. God isn't jumping up and down with joy, you understand, and the mountains aren't shaking from their foundations, mind you, but God is well pleased just the same. God was happy enough that Jesus was born, even though as an infant he couldn't even speak coherently, let alone preach. God was pleased that Joseph was able to protect his child from the tyrannical King Herod. God is pleased that Jesus grew in wisdom, stature and in favor with God and neighbor. God is pleased that Jesus, as a young boy, discussed spiritual matters with the temple elders, you remember. Long before the Sermon on the Mount, before the feeding of the five thousand, before the crucifixion, even, and the resurrection, God isn't disappointed. God is satisfied, content, and well-pleased.

I love this little conversation between Jesus and John the Baptist, which we heard in the Gospel this morning. Jesus shows up, as John might have been expecting, and then asks John to baptize him. Now, there on the bank of the river there are random people waiting their turn or just watching what's going on. So, John pulls Jesus aside for a private moment, and says, 'Look, I know who you are; you should be baptizing *me*, not the other way around! Are you sure you want to do it this way? It doesn't make any sense, does it?' And Jesus replies calmly, "Let it be so for now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." In other words, 'let's just do this, okay? This is the right way to go about finding our destiny. This will demonstrate to these onlookers just how important your work here has been, John. And we'll all know if God is well-pleased.' And, sure enough, God becomes fully present, heaven opens to reveal the relationship between God and humankind, and the voice, the loving and contented voice, says "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Now, as your resident preacher, one might expect that I would be up here at this pulpit enthusiastically motivating you to go out and save souls, to proclaim the greatness of God's Kingdom, to fight for justice among all peoples, and to witness about your faith until you are blue in the face. And that expectation would be fair. But today, as we begin this new year together, the epiphany I most want you to experience, the light I most want you to see, the wisdom I most want you to receive, is that you are beloved and that God is well pleased with you. Even before you have fished for people, before you have proclaimed, before you have fought, before you have witnessed, before you have shared the stories, or scheduled a sacrament, you are beloved and God is content. We will, by the way, do all those things together, but first know this: God loves you. As the Body of Christ, we will be like the servant Isaiah describes, who will faithfully bring forth justice. and will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his teaching. We will strive to be like that, but first we will hear the voice of God say: Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights.

The Lord God sits enthroned above the flood, says the author of our Psalm, while we, like Noah's family, are gathered here in this ark, patiently waiting to begin our new lives in a restored land, tossed about by chaotic waves for now, but knowing all the time that we are beloved of the God who will see to our salvation. Our holy journey is always just beginning, full of grace and truth, and with God fully present to hold our hands along the way. Amen.