

God is well-pleased

[Luke 3:15-17, 21-22](#)

It's the first Sunday in Epiphany – it always seems a little anti-climactic to me – coming back to church after all the decorations and excitement of the Christmas season are over. A big thank you to everyone who helped to take down the decorations, and to the Membership committee who masterminded our Star Party this year. Yet I'm wearing white and when our color is white that means that today is a special day – today we celebrate a major feast of Jesus Christ – the day of his baptism.

*I wonder why Jesus was baptized given that he was not sinful and John's baptism was for repentance, but the gospel writer is not interested in that question. For him, Jesus' baptism is almost incidental to what happened next – when 'The heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."' Other people were getting baptized but it was only Jesus who was singled out like this.

I think there were at least two reasons why Jesus was baptized – firstly because repentance includes the idea of obedience – when we repent and turn back to God we are returning to a life of obedience to the guiding of God in our hearts – and secondly because baptism is an initiation. I think that when Jesus is baptized he is marking the beginning of his ministry – he is consciously turning away from being a carpenter living in the community of his family and friends, and taking on his ministry as the Son of God and redeemer of the world. He is being obedient to his calling and to his commitment – I think we make a mistake if we think that Jesus unwillingly submitted to God's will – since Jesus is the Christ,

it must have been a co-mingling of willingness – Christ, Creator and... yes, Holy Spirit.

*The visitation of the Spirit in bodily form is the sign of Jesus initiation into this new life - an itinerant, public life of preaching and living the reign of God in ungodly times.

*As his disciples we too have ministries. Each one of us is called to live the reign of God in ungodly times. Each one of us is called to serve God in whatever situation we find ourselves. For most of us it won't be a public, obvious ministry. It may not have a name or description beyond living the reign of God which means loving God with everything we've got and everyone else as much as we love ourselves. Living the reign of God brings the evidence of the life of the Spirit into every situation, every relationship. Paul defined the fruit of the Spirit as "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control."

These are the qualities which as disciples of Christ we are to bring to every interaction with every sentient being, including ourselves. And that is our ministry, as the Body of Christ in this place and as individuals. We are to minister Christ in this world.

*And our baptism is also our initiation into this sacred ministry. Which is why we remind ourselves several times a year of our baptismal vows. Now I know that most of you, like me, were baptized when we were far too small to remember a thing about it, and so it is as teenagers or adults that we consciously made the baptismal vows our own when we were adults. Many of us were not baptized nor confirmed in the Episcopal church and so the baptismal vows were expressed in different language or not made explicit.

So let's take a quick look at them now, to remind ourselves to what we are committed. The church gives us five specific vows, commitments to living the reign of God.

We will “continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers.” This is slightly odd language for the fundamental principle that living the reign of God means putting God first, abiding in God's love, and in this part of the family of God, we have a specific way of doing that. We base our understandings on the scriptures and the teachings that have been passed down from the Apostles through all the generations of the church; we make eucharist together and we pray. Within this vow is the understanding that we come to God as a community, that although our individual spiritual life is nurtured through our own practices of prayer and meditation, journaling, solitude and so on, we are committed to participating in the Body of Christ.

The second vow is “to persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord.” This is most fundamental statement, the basis of our baptism, that we turn away from evil and commit ourselves to Christ. This is hardly rocket science my friends, this is the basis of our life in Christ. This vow reminds us that it is not just a once-for-all commitment made outside of time that binds us to the Trinity, but it is also a daily practice, a daily renewal of our commitment. Because it is easy and very tempting to give into evil. Goodness knows there's enough of it about. We all have our own besetting sins – greed, pride, fear, laziness – whatever yours are – and we have sins and evil baked into our culture– sins of oppression, of racism, of believing we are better than others, of choosing cynicism over hope. And as we grow in our spiritual lives, the Holy Spirit tends to point out things we had never noticed before – so that sometimes it may seem that there are more

rather than less opportunities for us to turn away from evil and recommit to Christ.

The third vow is to proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ. I'm guessing this may be in some ways the most difficult for us. We tend to be uncomfortable with the way the good news has been shared by some other parts of the Body of Christ - how it has been shared in a way that seems like very bad news for some people. So much so that many of us are reluctant to describe ourselves as Christians... do I hear an Amen?

Yet we have vowed to proclaim by *word* and example. People of God, in these days of rapid communication, of sound bites and tweets, we gotta use words. But our words can be gentle. They can be sharing a prayer, an experience, a remind of God's unconditional love. Because that is the good news – that we can be reconciled with God, that God's love reaches put to everyone. How hard is that to share?

The next vow is “to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself.” And who is your neighbor? The despised Samaritan, and the one who is being victimized by bandits. Jesus doesn't let us off the hook easily on this one. Your neighbor is the one who is being oppressed – who is being denied voting rights, who is systematically discriminated against, who is denied the right to live in peace, who hasn't got enough to eat – and your neighbor is the white supremacist, the anti-vaxxer or the adamantly pro-vaxxer, the corrupt politician, the telemarketer and the person you simply don't like. We get to seek and serve Christ in all persons. Which means a lot of inner work. It means a lot of prayer and forgiveness and new thought patterns.

In today's world, this is deeply counter-cultural. I suggest that we each think of someone who we do not *want* to be our neighbor and pray for

that person or that group, that God will give them their heart's desire, because we know that all our hearts desire is Godself.

And finally, yes I know this is a longer than usual sermon, we vow to strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being. Working for social justice is not optional for the people of God. Working for justice and peace is at the very heart of our covenant with God. Why? Because it is living the reign of God right here, right now and bringing together heaven and earth.

Because that is what Jesus did. He brought together heaven and earth in a way never seen before. The Spirit descended upon him in the form of a dove. It was the dove that Noah released who let him know that the flood had subsided so the dove is a symbol of life and hope. And as the dove descended a voice came from heaven saying, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Remember the song of the angels? "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" That rather odd phrase "Those whom he favors" is the same verb as God uses here. Yes Jesus is God's beloved son with whom he is well-pleased, but so are we.

That is the message of the angels, "peace among people with whom God is well-pleased." People of God, God is well-pleased with you and me. And that is why we get baptized, that is why we choose to be marked as Christ's own for ever, because God loves us and longs for us to be in communion with God. Our baptism, our baptismal vows are our acceptance not of a whole load of rules, but acceptance of God's unconditional love and our willingness to live as if it's really true, as if God really is well-pleased with us.

Because she is.