

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." And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him. Mark 1:9-13

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What me? Beloved?

Imagine with me. You are in the water, with your head below the surface just a second or so, and you come back up, hair flat and soggy, water clogging your ears, your nose dripping. Your instinct is to shake your head quickly, like a dog, to throw off the loose water drops.

But while you're doing that, a thought comes to you, clear as a bell: God. Loves. Me.

It's not a voice that you hear outside, but an inner conviction – calm and steady and peaceful: God loves me.

You're thinking about that voice, still wondering, "What?" when another certainty is lodged in your mind, and you know it's true: God is well pleased with me! *Well pleased. With me, right now.*

It's straightforward: God loves me.

God loves me.

It's very calm: God is well pleased with me.

And you shake your head, because it's hard to believe. But for a brief moment you know it's true – you glimpse it's true, like you glimpse a bird high above, wheeling in the blue sky, but when you look again, it's out of view. Or was it even there?

Your rational mind revs its engines with counterarguments. God loves *me*? Sure....

God's *well pleased*? Only if he doesn't know me...

God's pleased *right now*? Well, that's not going to last...

God? That's my own voice, my own fantasy. Who knows if God even exists?....

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Is it imaginable – God loving *you*? Did you really see the dove swooping against the white clouds, but now your eye can't find it in the sun and vast sky? Could the voice have been meant for you, and not just Jesus?

“You are my beloved child.
With you I am well pleased.”

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I think it was hard even for Jesus to believe that the words were meant for him. It took him 40 days, out by himself in the wilderness, before it could really sink in.

Forty days – the number the Bible always uses to convey a very long time. Remember, for forty days and forty nights, the rain fell onto Noah's ark, with its frightened passengers huddled inside.

For forty years, Moses and the Hebrew people wandered lost through the wilderness before they made it back to the promised land.

For forty days, Jesus is alone in the wilderness after his baptism, before he's ready to start up his ministry.

It's not just you and me: it always takes humans a long time -- forty days or nights or years - before we're convinced that God *will* keep us afloat over the deepest floodwaters. That God *will* lead us home though we feel utterly lost, wandering aimlessly. That God *will* give us *all we need* each time God asks something of us, as he did of Jesus, like showing other people that they are loved by God, too.

Yes, even Jesus had to spend forty days in the wilderness before he could do any of what God had asked of him. He couldn't start healing and teaching and preaching, until he'd spent the forty days in the wilderness, learning to trust that God's love really was true. That God was well pleased with him, already, before Jesus had done one thing. Before Jesus had ever healed one person, preached one beatitude, confronted one injustice, God had already said to Jesus, “You are my beloved. In you, I am well pleased.”

It took forty days for it to sink in that God's love of Jesus, and of you and of me, is because of *who God is*, not because of what *we do* or fail to do. God loves us because God is loving, not because we are.

It takes a long time for these things to sink in, for all of us. Sometimes it takes a whole lifetime.

So thank heaven that every year we get a season of Lent, 40 days for us, too, to try to wrap our minds around this truth: that God says *to you*, “You are my beloved child. In you I am well pleased. “

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There are wild animals in our wilderness. The wild animals of fear and doubt and despair circling, circling around us, especially at night when it's darkest.

Alone, in the darkness, we hear the prowling sounds so close – “You think you're safe in God's love? Hah! You are so vulnerable....”

And we practice saying, as we will later in this service, “Nothing can separate me from God's love, not even death.” We say the 23rd Psalm: “Yea, thou I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, Thou art with me”.

And slowly, as night after night passes and we rise another morning, the quiet calm voice can lodge a bit deeper inside us: God does love me. More of the psalms, the stories, the tunes we'll sing tonight become our story, our song, too: “What wondrous love is this, oh my soul, oh my soul? What wondrous love *is this*, O my soul...!”

Forty days to take it deep within. To lay your firm foundation on which you can build everything else that will follow. Forty days to set aside your own quiet, desert time – maybe four minutes a day, or forty, just to hear these words:

God loves *me*.
I am God's beloved child,
with whom God is well pleased, already.

Imagine the difference in our world if all of us trusted that we are already loved; and that every other person we meet is, too. God's beloved.

Then, what would the world be like? What would you be like?