Matthew 3:13-17
Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?' But Jesus answered him, 'Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness.' Then he consented. And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.'

Well Pleased

Rev. Linda Michel
January 15, 2023

I had recently watched and episode of the television series, "The Great British Baking Show," when I came up with the title for my sermon this week So many times the judges seem "well pleased" with the results of the contestants' efforts. The phrase stuck with me—it amused me to think of God observing Jesus's actions at the River Jordan then, like those merry British judges, announcing, "I 'm well pleased". Deep down, I suspect we all hope that at least some of the time God is well pleased with us. Seeking approval from our heavenly parent can mirror our longing for approval from our earthly parent.

Maybe that's why I thought of Prince Harry, I haven't really followed the drama surrounding the Duke and Duchess of Sussex; it seems so much of a manufactured crisis that really only affects enormously wealthy people. There are so many other deeply pressing concerns—war, poverty, various health crises, the economy, bigotry and hatred toward those perceived as other. The airing of the Royal Family's dirty laundry is an escape mechanism much as is "The Great British Baking Show." The distraction helps us avoid doing something about more serious issues. The Romans understood all about "bread and circuses."

That doesn't mean I don't have sympathy for Prince Harry. It must have been painful to grow up feeling you were born as a "spare." Sort of an "in case of emergency," should anything happened to your brother, the first in line of succession to the throne of Great Britain. Then there was the tragic death of his mother in an automobile accident. He was just twelve but not able to mourn publicly his mother who loved him unconditionally. Why is keeping a "stiff upper lip" considered a badge of honor?

It easy to believe that Harry has been looking for approval for most of his life. I can identify with that very human trait, maybe you can as well. As much as I loved and admired my own mother I have to say she wasn't one to show her approval at least to us kids individually. It took me a lot of years to realize that when she was well pleased by an accomplishment of one of my brothers or sister, she would share it with me but not them personally. We each grew up thinking the others were more favored because of this. No wonder sibling rivalry flourished. As I grew older I saw how she wanted each of us to strive to do our very best to succeed but not get an over inflated ego. I much prefer my children and grandchildren's parenting which involves a lot of praise for individual achievement but also an emphasis on being part of a loving family.

In today's text we see another family dynamic—not between siblings but cousins. John, known as "The Baptizer," may not have grown up in the same household as Jesus but there could have been rivalry had they had different parents. In the Gospel of Luke we have the beautiful scene between Elizabeth and Mary in which the older Elizabeth acknowledges the primacy of Mary's child while both were still in the womb. Although John's father, Zechariah was a high priest, John did not follow in his father's footsteps. His calling was to be a prophet rather than priest. Not sure he had a choice.considering his reaction to the presence of Jesus before either of them had been born.

It is likely that after he left home In his twenties John began his religious training in the desert with the Essenes although he was not part of their community of hermits. The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls has helped scholars recognize the parallels between John's mission and that of the Essenes. Both were priestly in origin, were ascetic, and had similar expectations about the end of the world. However, John was less concerned than the Essenes with purity and strict adherence to Mosaic Law. His message was more focused on the poor and marginalized who were called sinners by most of society. He also believed the ancient prophecies about God's judgement were about to unfold. His fiery speeches were meant to encourage the listeners to change their ways.

John's reputation for calling out the elite religious folk of the day made him popular among ordinary people. They made pilgrimages from Jerusalem and all of Judea to the wilderness and the Jordan to receive his baptism. Although we Christians have traced our own baptism rituals back to John's practice of baptizing individuals in the Jordan, it is more likely his act of baptism was more akin to the Jewish ritual of purification. It was
a rite of immersion in running water that symbolized repentance in preparation for the coming world judgment. This turning back to God meant one also must practice right living or the baptism would be meaningless.

John may have been a prophet but he was surprised to see Jesus show up with the others who had come for baptism. He could not imagine how Jesus might need repentance—in fact, he thought he himself should be baptized by Jesus whom he knew to be more than an ordinary follower. This is at the heart of the message. John may have been the last and greatest prophet of his day but he was humble. He recognized one greater than himself. Then there's Jesus, the very real human who may have been struggling with his own call. His willingness to let another baptize him signaled his acceptance of that call. In the moment of surrender, submitting to another, he saw the symbol of the Holy Spirit rest on him and heard the voice of God saying, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.'

Maybe like Jesus, like Harry, like me and countless others you have spent time wandering in the wilderness. David Lose, a theologian I admire wonders if too often we think that our wilderness wanderings are more personal than God had in mind. He suggests that we may often take our barren stages in life as all about our abilities to negotiate our trials, endure our burdens, push our way through hardships as if surviving is somehow the same as salvation.

Although stories of great heroes and she-roes journeying through the wilderness and making it out alive by their own sheer will and perseverance make for inspirational legends, they are not ones that inspire me. These characters seems lonely and sad to me. The stories that do inspire are ones about leaders who draw others into relationship to achieve a higher good. John the Baptist has been portrayed as a loner but there he was, drawing others, even Jesus, into relationship. As for Jesus, no

need to elaborate—he himself is relationship personified. In this baptismal scene we see the Three Persons of the Trinity, in mystic relationship.

We also know what happens to prophets. Their words are dangerous because they upset the *status quo.* Those who stand to lose power fear the prophet and do what they feel is necessary to silence them. Tomorrow we honor the legacy of one of the great prophets of our lifetime. Millions of lives have been changed because of the words and actions of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. His commitment to non-violence was inspired by Mahatma Gandhi whose teachings helped bring down the mighty British Empire in India. King believed the same model could be used to dismantle the overt structural racism of the Jim Crow era South. He knew it would take longer to do the same for the more hidden racism that afflicted the North. He lived in Boston while working on his doctorate, after all.

As powerful a figure as King is, he did not carry out the work alone. He was joined by a community of white and black, young and old, privileged and poor. Individuals who were drawn to his message of non-violent change. We have not yet fully lived into his vision where people are judged by the content of their character rather than the color of their skin. We have seen how there is increasing pushback against change, mostly from folk who are threatened by the gains made by folk who traditionally have been left at the margins of society. The good news is we are not where we were in the Sixties, either. The sculpture honoring the lives of both Dr. King and Coretta Scott King was unveiled on Friday. Fittingly, it is called "The Embrace" and stands in Boston Common. This is a sign that the city that has been dubbed "The Most Racist City in America" has come a long way from the tumultuous days when schools were forced to integrate. When I see images of the January 6 insurrection, I am reminded of a famous photo of a school choice protester in South Boston who used a pole, on which an American flag hung, to attack a Black man.

We continue to be in the Season of Epiphany. When we reflect on the message of the epiphany revealed in today's text, we can see how community is an essential part. Matthew tells us that everyone got to hear God proclaim, "*This* is my beloved son.", not just Jesus. Those present that day surely told everyone they knew about what had happened. They saw for themselves how God was present in the moment. We may not hear the voice of God calling out, "this is my beloved, with whom I am well pleased." We don't need that parental affirmation—it has already been revealed in Jesus, "the One in whom we live and move and have our being,"

Our task is to share the Good News, that there is no need for sibling rivalry, through Jesus we are all connected to God even though we may travel different paths and called by different names. The Good News is that we are not alone even in those wilderness times. The Good News is we need not fear what we do not know rather we can trust in our God who holds out the promise of eternal life for those who believe. In doing so, not only God but we ourselves will be well pleased.