

## “What a Delightful Child!”

Sermon: Year C, Baptism of our Lord

Text: Luke 3:15–17, 21–22, Isaiah 43:1–7, Psalm 29

Preached: January 13, 2019 at Immanuel Lutheran Church, Evanston, Illinois

Oh God who takes delight in us, and claims us as your beloved children, call us now each by name. AMEN

I’ve been thinking a lot this week about the relationship between parents and children, and the nature of delight. I will be leaving shortly after worship today to go down to Texas. My mother, Jo Ann, was diagnosed this week with an esophageal cancer that is blocking most nutrition from reaching her stomach, and so she is nearing the end of this part of her life. I’m going down to help get her home from the hospital and get things set for hospice. When I spoke to her Friday, she commented on how ironic it was that she has found herself unable to eat, because, as she said, “I have always delighted in cooking and eating.” Indeed, my mom has always been a wonderful cook, and it brings me delight to remember things like her cornbread and pinto beans, the cornbread skillet-crunchy as it should be, the beans savory with spicy chili powder. I can remember her elaborately crafted frozen spumoni, made only for the most special of occasions. I can picture her slaving away preparing multiple dishes for church group luncheons that she has always delighted in planning and executing. From my mother I acquired my own delight in cooking. The two of us can sit and read cookbooks to one another, quietly delighting even in the sound of how good a dish might be.

My mother was a kindergarten teacher, and she has always delighted in children discovering and learning. I learned recently that she still had some of my kindergarten and first-grade artworks and writing, simply because she took delight in it. I remember vividly how delighted she was when one day, as she read to me before my nap, I announced that I knew how to read, and I proceeded to demonstrate that I had, in fact, figured out the mysterious system as she ran her finger along under the words she read to me. She still had my high-school trophies and ribbons from various speech events, simply because they brought her delight.

Those of you who read along with the Gospel text silently as I proclaimed it to you a moment ago may have noticed that what I said did not match the printed text you had before you. In the very last words of the scene, most translations of the Bible have the Father say, “with you I am well-pleased.” “Well-pleased”?? When was the last time you—or *anyone*, for that matter—used those words? Perhaps Queen Elizabeth would say it, I’ll grant that: “We are well pleased with the vote of Parliament.” But let’s face it, we don’t really even know what that means anymore. It’s formal ... contained ... restrained. It doesn’t begin to capture the essence of the original Greek word, *eudoxa*... and that essence is sheer delight ... laughing, joyous, uproarious delight.

I discovered as I began poking around that we heard this same word in the past few weeks, but again, the translators obscured it. It was on Christmas Eve. Can you guess where it was? It was in the angels’ song heard by the shepherds: “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among people, in whom God delights.” But it got rendered in our translation as “peace among those whom God *favors*.” All sense of delight is gone, the universality of the good news has suddenly been limited, and in its place we have a cold word that implies favoritism and partiality, with the blessings of peace reserved for the few. Why is it, I wonder, that we would be so uncomfortable with the notion of God experiencing delight? Why make it so cold and transactional?

I think in many ways we’re much more comfortable with the thundering storm god described in the psalm we sang today, the God whose voice shakes the wilderness, and can break the trees off at the roots, whose voice can cause a whole region to go skittering off in terror like a calf startled by a clap of thunder. God as Storm God. But there’s something about the intimacy of a God who takes delight in us that we try to avoid, that we try to sanitize. There’s something about the other that makes us squirm just a bit, or tug at our collars in embarrassment. We want God acting as a powerful king, wrathful, angry, stern. We have real trouble picturing God gushing over us in delight like a mother whose child has just learned to read, though, don’t we?

Luke’s picture of Jesus’ baptism is far from the stormy scene of the psalm we sang. The heaven is opened, yes, but there’s nothing to suggest that it is ripped asunder as with lightning. No, it is just suddenly ... open, and in that opening, communication between heaven and earth can take place. And God does not descend from the heavens in majesty and power on a fiery chariot. God is not seen sitting on a golden throne. No, rather the Spirit of God descends dove-like, floating, gliding downward, circling, soaring, quietly arriving and resting, unseen and unnoticed by most. The Spirit isn’t a bird, but look at it more as a picture, God’s free Spirit gliding, wheeling in freedom, then resting whisper-quiet on Jesus, just as the Spirit rested whisper-quiet on us at our own baptism.

Then come those words: “This is my Son, the Beloved, in whom I delight.” This would have sounded very familiar to Jewish ears, and would have had great meaning. The words “You are my son, today I have begotten you” was the formula spoken at the coronation of a king of Israel. This is God affirming a relationship, the words of a covenant, the words of a promise. But God goes beyond simply establishing a formal relationship, and calls Jesus the Beloved. This is the apple of God’s eye, the one in whom God takes delight and pleasure. And with those words, “in whom I delight,” Jewish ears would have heard echoes of the Prophet Isaiah, where God speaks of his beloved servant on whom he places his Spirit, a servant in whom God will delight, and who will bring forth justice to the nations, but who will do so with a gentle concern for each person. The one in whom God delights will care for the broken, for the starving, those who are bent over, those who barely cling to life. The one in whom God delights will open the eyes of the blind, bring prisoners out from the dungeon, will be the one who will be light to the peoples. This beloved one will go about setting things right, because God delights in each person, and in fact every creature and thing God has created, as well.

The passage from Isaiah that we read today assures us that we are precious in this God’s sight, and honored, and loved. This is a God who gently tells us not to fear, and promises that when we pass through deep river waters, they will not overwhelm us. When we walk through the fire, the flame will not consume us. Notice that we are not promised that we won’t have to walk through deep water or through fire because we are God’s children—but we are promised that this God who loves us will be right there with us in the middle of it, and our trials will not destroy us. The God who sits enthroned above the flood is the same loving God who wades into that flood to hold our heads above water. This is the promise my mother clings to. This is a God who shouts like a protective parent to whoever or whatever holds us in captivity, bellowing out “Give them up! Do not withhold! Bring my sons from far away, and my daughters from the end of the earth—everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made.” There is no place on earth that we can wander that is too far away from this God who formed us and made us, this God who names us, and calls us daughters and sons. There is no captivity so strong that it can resist this God’s love for us.

But do we really believe that our God delights in us, that God calls us Beloved, and claims us as precious children? Do we believe that the God whom Jesus addressed as “Abba,” “Dad,” can shiver in sheer joy at the sight of us? Dare we believe that Abba can call us precious, and honored, and say, “I love you,” with a love that would give anything to ransom us from captivity to the things that bind us—a love that *did* give up everything in order to do so? Or do we prefer the demanding God whose only face is discipline? Yes, God is justice...but God is also love. Do we love the God who professes love and delight for us, or do we only fear God? Is God a loving mother to us, who giggles a bit as she coos our names, or is God a tyrant before whom we tremble? We look at tiny children, and it’s easy to believe that God could delight in such a precious baby...but can we believe that God delights in each of us in the same way, with all of our baggage, with all of our brokenness, with all of our doubts, with all of our struggling?

But you see, the good news announced at Jesus’ baptism is not only for him. It is good news for us, as well. As someone has pointed out, the heavens do not close at the end of this story. The communication between heaven and earth remains open, and what Christ Jesus has done by his life, death, and resurrection means that the relationship established with us will remain forever. But as Brennan Manning points out in his book, *The Ragamuffin Gospel*, “We need a new kind of relationship with the Father that drives out fear and mistrust and anxiety and guilt, that permits us to be hopeful and joyous, trusting and compassionate. We have to be converted from the bad news to the good news.... [...] The trusting disciple has this childlike confidence in a loving [parent]. Trust says, in effect, ‘Abba, just on the basis of what you have shown me in Your son, Jesus, I believe you love me. You have forgiven me. You will hold me and never let me go. Therefore, I trust you with my life.’” And this is the Good News: This is a God we can trust with our lives in the middle of flood and fire ... because this God has given us birth, has called us by name, and absolutely delights in us.

And now, this is my prayer for you: May God grant you the trust to believe in God’s laughing, loving delight in you. May you remember that in baptism, you have been anointed and called God’s beloved. And then, out of that knowledge of being beloved, that awareness of God’s delight, may you help others know their own belovedness as daughters and sons of the most High God, who calls them by name, and delight in them.

AMEN