Sunday, January 12, 2003
GOD'S PLEASURE
Mark 1:4-11

The story of the baptism of Jesus in Mark's gospel concludes with this remarkable statement: "As Jesus was coming out of the water, he felt God's spirit descending on him like a dove, and he heard a voice assuring him, 'You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.'"

God is pleased. God takes pleasure in creation, in Jesus, and in you and me. Amazing! Unfortunately, in the language of religion, the words "God" and "pleasure" are not frequently heard together. More often, you hear about God's displeasure, anger, or disappointment. Too often in religious contexts, pleasure is associated primarily with sin.

After reading this story of the baptism of Jesus and God's taking pleasure in it, I think I'm going to add a phrase to the words I use in the sacrament of baptism in this church. I'll say to the parents and the child who has been baptized, "You are God's children, you are loved by God, and with you, God is well pleased."

In 1981, the Academy Award-winning film Chariots of Fire was released. One of the main characters, Eric Liddell, was a devout Christian and a talented runner from Britain, competing in the Olympics after World War I. Eric was the son of missionaries in China and was very religious, as was his sister, Jenny. The year Eric was scheduled to run in the Olympics happened to be the same year he was needed to help his parents in China. In his sister's mind, there was no decision. Of course, he would answer God's call to serve as a missionary. After all, which was more important: to run in a race for one's own glory, or to serve the glory of God?

The decision was more complex for Eric. It wasn't "either/or." He cared for his parents and what they were doing, and he fully intended to help after the Olympics. Trying to explain to his sister, he said, "Jenny, Jenny, God made me fast, and when I run, I feel God's pleasure."

He ran. He ran in his own unusual way — arms flailing, head back, mouth open, hair blowing in the wind. He ran wholeheartedly with nothing held back. "When I run, I feel God's pleasure." He was saying that when he ran, he ran not for his own glory, but for the glory of God. And when you live in the same way, wholeheartedly, nothing held back, doing your best, and developing and using the gifts God has given you in a positive way, you are enhancing and experiencing God's pleasure, and you are giving glory to God.

I am reminded of a friend of mine who had been a beloved teacher and had used his abilities to inspire countless young men and women. He was energetic. He loved teaching. He took pride and pleasure in the accomplishments of his students. At his funeral, the minister said, "He lived with all the stops pulled out. He knew the pleasure of God."

I believe that each one of you hearing or reading this sermon has known the pleasure of God at some point in your life. It's almost impossible to make it through childhood without experiencing God's pleasure, although you might not have described it that way. That's because the word "pleasure" can easily be misunderstood. It's also because, as I mentioned earlier, some expressions of Christian faith tend to downplay the importance of human pleasure and God's pleasure. For some, the practice of religious faith always has to be serious. There's no room for fun, laughter, and enjoyment. Some people, even religious

people, live with the fear that someone, somewhere, might be having fun, and they resent it. Some are almost afraid of genuinely feeling pleasure. Maybe that's because not all pleasure has the same value.

It's important to note that God's pleasure, the kind of pleasure God wants you to experience, is different from two other varieties of pleasure. The first is what I prefer to call "manufactured pleasure," which leaves you worn out. It relies on canned humor, laugh tracks, and making fun of others. It's the pleasure sought through overindulgence. It's the temporary pleasure of buying another "newer" one. Manufactured pleasure promises a satisfaction it can never deliver. It is self-centered.

Manufactured pleasure is concerned with feeling good when you want to feel good. It is focused on sensation and immediacy. It often takes the form of drug-induced pleasure.

Negative pleasure is the pleasure you take when someone you envy or don't like fails. The German word for this is schadenfreude, which means taking delight in someone else's misfortune. It is this kind of negative or false pleasure that drives the sales of those tabloid newspapers you see at checkout counters — the ones with bold headlines highlighting the bad things that have happened to celebrities, allowing readers to gloat and think, "She only got what she deserved. It serves her right."

There are also those who seek God's pleasure by following all the rules, not because they get joy from it, but so they can consider themselves better and more loved by God than other people they know, who they are certain have not followed God's rules as carefully. They derive satisfaction from believing that God will punish those sinners while they will be rewarded.

However, Jesus taught that experiencing and enhancing God's pleasure comes through what he described as "going the extra mile" simply because it's the right thing to do and because you find joy in doing so.

You might discover God's pleasure while singing a cantata in a choir, digging mud out of a friend's flooded home, being a Stephen Minister or Sunday church school teacher, being a friend to someone who has no friends, or doing any good deed secretly. You are also experiencing God's pleasure when you rejoice in the good fortune of others.

Experiencing God's pleasure does not always come easily. A few weeks ago, a young man who is not a member of our congregation telephoned me at home in the evening. He said he was having a difficult time believing in God, especially in God's goodness. In other words, he was missing God's pleasure. He said he wanted to believe in God and, some of the time, he did. But when he thought of all the pain and suffering in the world and in his own life, he concluded that believing in God and God's goodness, and finding any pleasure in life, didn't always make sense.

I, too, am puzzled by why there is so much evil and suffering in the world. But I said to him, I am also puzzled by why there is so much goodness and genuine pleasure in life and in the world. I am continually amazed by the amount of goodness in people.

I am convinced that all of you, like the young man on the phone, want to discover and experience God's pleasure. You want the assurance that you are God's beloved child and that God is pleased with you. You want to hear what Jesus experienced: "You are my child, the beloved, and with you, I am well pleased."

The young man said he could grasp the concept of God, but he still wanted to experience the kind of believing that lets him know, in the deep spaces of his soul, that God is good and life is good even when he knows there is much that is wrong in the world.

I asked the young man to give me examples of the deep believing he was seeking. As I remember it, he said something like this: “When I can feel and know that I am loved, even while other things around me seem to say that I am unlovable, then I am truly believing. When I can feel gratitude enough to make me glad, then I am believing. When I know and sense that all is right with me, even when everything around me seems wrong, then I will know that God’s Spirit is a part of me.”

Then he added, “I know it is the testimony of our Christian faith that God’s Spirit is always a part of us and can be experienced in bad times and good, in sorrow and joy, but why does it seem to come and go?”

I told him he was asking the right questions and was headed in the right direction. He had used the words “discover” and “experience” God’s Spirit and God’s pleasure. He wasn’t talking about achievement or earning God’s love. He wasn’t trying to gain God’s favor by trying harder.

So, how do you discover and experience God’s pleasure — God’s Spirit descending on you like a dove? It’s mostly a matter of being open to God’s Spirit and allowing that Power to work in your life. As I said earlier, it’s going the extra mile when you are not required to do so. It’s joining with others to accomplish something good. It’s living to your full potential. It’s using, to the best of your ability, the gifts God has given you.

I especially like the phrase in the story of the baptism of Jesus that describes God’s Spirit descending on Jesus “like a dove.” It’s a beautiful metaphor. Some people search all over the world in exotic places and unusual religious settings for God’s Spirit in their lives. But they frequently miss the Spirit of God at home, in their everyday lives and ordinary, commonplace events. They miss the Spirit of God and the pleasure of God, descending on them quietly like a dove.

Remember, Jesus said, “The Spirit of God is in the midst of you, within you, and among you.” He said, “Wherever two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I also.”

A few weeks ago, we celebrated Christmas, which reminds us each year that we discover God in the commonplace. The shepherds and the wise men found God in a baby. When he was an adult, Jesus rediscovered the Spirit of God in his life, and it is described not in a momentous or earth-shaking event, but as “like a dove descending on him.” It reminds me of Elijah, who, in the darkest time of his life, was hiding in a cave and was certain that God had completely forgotten him. He discovered God not in the earthquake or the fire, but in a “still, small voice,” or as some translators say, in the “still, silent assurance” that God was with him. It was like a dove.

What the Bible is describing in all these stories is the gift of knowing God’s pleasure. It is the assurance from God that life can be all right even when everything in it seems all wrong. I am not talking here about some kind of magic that automatically makes everything all right in an instant. What the gift of God’s pleasure does is show you that it is good for you to live; that life

is a blessing; that it is truly good, wonderful even, for you to be breathing, all while knowing that many things clustering around you are not good.

To put it another way, the gift of knowing God's pleasure does not cure all your cancers, transform all your children into winners, or send you soaring into success. When you know God's pleasure, you can look earthly reality full in the face, see its sad and tragic edges, life's unfairness, and yet feel and know in your deepest being that life is good. It is right for you to be alive and participating in God's work.

Here are my suggestions for this new year: Do not be afraid to feel and experience God's pleasure. Do not be afraid to enjoy God's creation and life itself. Live with all the stops pulled out. Know that God is continually saying to you what God said to Jesus when the Spirit descended on him like a dove: "You are my child, my beloved, with you, I am well pleased." Amen.