

The First Sunday in Lent - Year B  
March 1, 2009  
The Reverend Robert P. Travis

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## “With You I Am Well Pleased”

Genesis 9:8-17, Psalm 25:1-9, 1 Peter 3:18-22, Mark 1:9-15

I want to share a story with you that I read in the late Tim Russert's book "Wisdom of our Fathers." It's called *The Dream*: I have been diagnosed with manic depression and have not had an easy life. At one point I was in such agony that I prayed to God to either help me get better or let me die. That night, my long-deceased father, who was killed in a plane crash when I was twelve, came to me in a dream. As I remember it, my eyes were shut as I envisioned his face in my mind. I didn't "see" him, but his comforting presence made the whole room feel safe. Gently he whispered, "This is not your fault...but it is your responsibility." I felt remarkably content during and after the dream. I had sometimes told myself the very same thing, and so had other people, but the idea that this depression was not my fault was now somehow more believable. I can't claim I immediately got better, but my father's presence and his words really helped. Step by baby step, I started participating in my life again. I knew I really had no other choice. I see a something similar to this story going on with Jesus in our Gospel reading today.

Here's this thirty-year old man, coming from his home town - a backwater, small town, to be baptized by his cousin John in the local river, as many were doing. I think he was troubled by a sense that his life was about to change. Maybe he was wishing he hadn't waited so long. Perhaps wondering what was to come next, perhaps feeling urged by a nagging sense of call.

The most striking thing happens to Jesus personally, when he comes up out of the water. This was a deeply personal experience, much like the woman's dream of her Father. The gospels say that only John and Jesus were aware of the heavens being torn open, and the Holy Spirit descending in the form of a dove on Jesus.

In creation the Holy Spirit brooded over the face of the deep waters, so this hearkens back to that, and has a sense to it of the rebirth in the Spirit that Jesus also experienced in his Baptism. But then His Father speaks to Him, maybe like some of us have heard our parents speak to us when they were not physically by us.

Maybe like this woman whose father came to her in a dream. Jesus' Father tells him, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." But look at when this happens. This is before Jesus begins his public ministry. This is before he does any miracles to pro-

claim the glory of God, manifest in him. This is before he teaches the good news of salvation. This is before he gives himself up to death on a cross and conquers death in his bodily resurrection. None of that had happened yet. And Jesus' Father says; "with you I am well pleased."

The Message version, which I find helpful sometimes, says God tells Jesus, "you are the pride of my life." Now I suppose you could say God was recognizing the pre-existent Son in Jesus, who had done many things, including the creation of the world. But from the perspective of the human-being standing in that river,

It must have been tremendously comforting, to know that his Father in heaven was proud of Him, when Jesus had not yet done that which He came to do. This is the unconditional love that God has for each one of us, this kind of love empowers us to do what we are each called to do, not out of fear or need to earn God's love, but out of gratitude for having already received it. God's statement, "with you I am well pleased" was not just comforting words of Love to Jesus, they were words of empowerment, and they prefigure what we all are to take from our baptism.

This was the beginning of the next phase, of Jesus' life, His baptism, and the anointing of the Holy Spirit, prepared Him for the next, and most difficult phase of His life. Like the woman whose father was present with her, even if she couldn't see Him, God was showing Jesus that He would be with Him, through all the trials that were about to happen. We can be reassured that God is with us through each phase of our lives as well, even though those phases have unique spiritual characters, and we would describe times of closeness and distance from Him, God's actual presence with us is unceasing, and unchanging.

Here was Jesus leaving his hometown, the village where his childhood, adolescence, and early manhood had been lived. He left the occupation which he had learned from his earthly father Joseph, and applied himself to, but for which He was not particularly known. (*If anyone has a table or chair made by Jesus, I'm sure we would have heard of it by now, but his carpentry was made in obscurity.*) He left his family group, with all its comfort, and warm attachments, and we see later that many of them were not to happy about his new calling, as they tried to convince him not to preach. Much like any family group, maintaining the status quo was preferable to personal development. He left the world of his family and villages purposes, into the "larger world of the purposes of God."

"An essential part of that journey we can all take – the acceptance of vocation, within the great purposes of God. It means allowing our lives to be lifted out of near horizons and enclosing walls, and set in the larger framework of the will of God."

We will be discussing this phase of spiritual development, and the others, throughout Lent at our Wednesday Evening group, "Fully Alive Now".

Many of you have already made that journey, that spiritual pilgrimage, “out of the walls of self-preoccupation into the wider realm of service to God’s children and God’s purposes.

Many of you have been engaged in your calling for decades, and know the joy of being aware of your belovedness to God your father. But I imagine some of you have yet to embark from the comforts of home yet to discover what God could have made you for. Be assured, that He made you for a specific purpose, and He is standing beside you with pleasure, and pride in His creation - With you he is well-pleased. That reassurance is yours to take into the desert with you. That knowledge can be your motivation, for taking the scary step into the unknown, and answering the call on your life.

Use this Lenten period to explore what God is calling you to do this year, and know that He will anoint you with His Holy Spirit as well. This is an abundant life, even in the midst of the scarcity we see all around us. Are you going to live it fully?