

The Baptism of Our Lord
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St. Paul's on the Green
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Singing Our Own Song

Isaiah 42: 1-9; Acts 10: 34-43; Matthew 3: 13-17

Having a baby changes everything, doesn't it? I often think the reason babies are such a gift – and why parenting is so stressful – is that they keep calling us back to who we were, before we became such confused and distracted adults. Babies *force us – to get back to basics* – they remind us: eat when you're hungry, sleep when you're tired, cry when you're sad, and laugh – way out loud – when you're happy. Hanging around babies changes us, making us do what we're called to do naturally – *to live in the present moment*.

So as we prepare to baptize the newest member of our Saint Paul's family, Madelyn Grace, let's thank her for helping us reaffirm who we are: a people who remind her and each other to *live in the present moment*. We promise to feed her and each other when we're hungry, while working to feed *all of God's people who hunger*. We promise to help her and each other to rest when we're tired, while working to help *all of God's people find decent places to rest*. And we promise to share her joys and sorrows, tears and laughter, here at Saint Paul's, as we share them with *every one of God's people we meet*.

So, do you get the feeling that there's a lot more going on here than a dab of water and oil on Maddy's head? You bet! And there's more.

In this simple sacrament, we make the incredible claim that as water is poured over Madelyn's head, God's abundant grace is *actually present*. And as Madelyn's forehead is sealed with the oil of chrism, we dare to believe that the Holy Spirit is *actually descending upon her*, and upon this community, renewing within each of us the deep commitment embodied in our own baptisms. As preacher Barbara Brown Taylor once put it so well, *"...whenever we welcome new members into the household of God, we begin with OUR OWN baptismal covenant. We say it WITH THEM, so we all remember what's expected of US."*ⁱ

"This is my child, my Beloved..." God says, *"... in whom I am well pleased..."* In welcoming Madelyn into this beloved community, we acknowledge our own belovedness, and we bind ourselves with *all the rest* of God's equally beloved children – the well ones and the hurt ones, the brave ones and the weak ones, the successful ones, and the ones who can't seem to get anything right – connected though the abundant grace of God, and sustained by the Holy Spirit.

So, if baptism all about *community*, it's also all about *authenticity*. As theologian Fredrick Buechner wrote, *"The grace of God means something like, 'Here is your life. You might never have been, but you are... because the party wouldn't have been complete without you.'"*

At the simplest level, baptism celebrates what will be an absolutely individual, unique relationship between Madelyn and God.

And at the same time, it's an invitation for each beloved child of God, each of *us*, to keep trying to become the unique person God is calling us to be. After all, Jesus didn't *have* to be baptized. He did it to demonstrate our own unique belovedness. In his Abba's words, he's telling *us*, "You are my child, my Beloved, in whom I am well pleased."

Just close your eyes and sit with that for a moment. Imagine Jesus gazing at you – all of you – the good, the bad, and the ugly – and saying, in the most extravagantly loving voice, "You are my child, my Beloved, in whom I am well pleased." .” And imagine yourself responding, “Yes, I am your child, your beloved, in whom You are well pleased.” That intimate relationship with God – of lover and beloved – is the miracle of Jesus' baptism, and every baptism that follows.

I recently re-read a favorite book, *A Path with Heart*, by Jack Kornfield. He describes a tribal ritual he stumbled upon in East Africa. A disclaimer – he uses the gendered language of this traditional tribe, but of course it applies equally to all of the beautiful genders and family constellations we celebrate here at St. Paul's.

“In this tribe...,” Kornfield writes, *the child's birthday is not the day it was born; it's the day the child was first a thought in its mother's mind. When the mother decides to have a baby, she goes off to sit alone under a tree. There she listens, as long as it takes, till she can hear the unique song of the child she is hoping for.*

Once she hears it, she returns home and teaches it to her husband; they keep singing it together, until the child is conceived.

The mother then sings this song to the baby in her womb. She teaches it to the old women and midwives of the village, so that throughout her labor, and at the miraculous moment of birth itself, the child is greeted with its very own song.

After the birth, all the villagers learn the song, and they sing it whenever the child hurts itself, or succeeds at something. The song is part of the wedding ceremony when the child marries, and...” Kornfield concludes, *“...at the end of life, their loved ones gather around the deathbed, and sing this song for the last time.”*

As we baptize Madelyn, we pledge to love her into discovering her own unique song by which God knows her. We encourage her to sing that song, way out loud, at home, and here in her new family, wherever she journeys throughout her life. And if you know Maddie, you know she's already learned that lesson here – in spades!

Sadly, most of us either never knew our unique song, or have long forgotten it. That's the real miracle of baptisms. As we make our pledges to Madelyn, let's open our hearts, slowly but surely, to help *each other* discover anew the unique song God planted there, when we were no more than a thought in our parent's mind. To remember it, and then to sing it out loud, sharing our freedom and joy with the world. Amen.