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*Well Pleased*  
February 18, 2018 (1<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Lent)  
Mark 1:9-15

Did anybody watch any of the Olympics this week? How about those snowboarders, aren't they something? And the skiers? And the skaters? Friday evening, we watched Yuzuru Hanyu from Japan win his second gold medal in men's figure skating, gasped at American Nathan Chen, the first Olympian ever to land five quadruple jumps in one routine, and marveled at the artistry of Adam Rippon. Even for the skaters who did not win medals, there was a shared sense of rejoicing in the sheer excellence of their athleticism. There's just something inspiring and heartwarming about these athletes who work so hard to be the very best they can be.

We may not know the thrill of competing in the Olympics, but maybe we've experienced the joy of "nailing it" in our own particular specialty, whether it's making a successful presentation or meeting a sales goal or even baking a pie that turns out just the way we wanted it to. There's a wonderful feeling of satisfaction in getting the job done, whatever it may be, or even in just being helpful to someone.

Jesus helped people. Jesus got the job done. Jesus did amazing things: healing people, feeding thousands, calming storms, walking on water. He did amazing things, and he said amazing things, but before he did any of those things, Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness with temptations, wild beasts, and angels, and by the way, wouldn't we have liked the author of the Gospel of Mark to say just a little bit more about that time? Like . . . what temptations, exactly? What kind of wild beasts, exactly? Did they hurt Jesus, or did his divine power tame them and make them his friends? Was he ever scared? And how, exactly, did angels minister to him, and what did they look like? If Mark was telling this story at a dinner party, there's no way we'd let him get away with skipping over juicy details like that. But all we really learn is that after this

40 day stint in the wilderness, Jesus emerges with total clarity of purpose, going to Galilee and proclaiming his message: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

Before Jesus enters the wilderness, something else happens. Jesus is baptized by John in the Jordan River. As he comes up out of the water, he sees the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending on him like a dove, and he hears a voice from heaven saying, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

I have emphasized this in previous messages, and I’m going to emphasize it again: BEFORE Jesus heals anybody. BEFORE Jesus teaches anybody. BEFORE Jesus feeds 5,000 people with five loaves and two fish, and BEFORE Jesus casts out any demons or walks on water or does anything impressive at all, a voice from heaven says to him, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

When we have babies, they can’t do anything. They can’t even hold their heads up by themselves. They are absolutely dependent. They contribute nothing. Yet when we hold them, and cuddle them and look at their tiny little fingers, what happens? Before they can do anything at all, we love them because they’re ours. Pride and affection burst forth from us. They are our beloved children, and with them we are very well pleased. And if they are grandchildren, then we are absurdly pleased beyond all reason. We sing silly little songs, and make animal noises, and dance around the room if it will get them to smile. We feel a sense of awe, just looking at them. I wonder if that’s part of what was going on with the heavens opening and the Spirit coming down and the voice that Jesus heard.

And even though none of us is Jesus, this voice is for us, too. 1 John 3:1 says, “See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are.”

We are God's sons and daughters. We are beloved. God delights in us, too. And we need to know this, because sometimes we, too, will find ourselves wandering around in the wilderness, and sometimes, we, too, will be tempted, and sometimes we'll meet wild beasts, and sometimes we'll need angels to come and minister to us, and we'll need to be to tell the difference. And sometimes, we, too, will have work to do, maybe something grand and important, or maybe something humble and helpful. And sometimes the work will be exhausting and difficult, and we'll need to remember who and whose we are, and how loved we are.

AND—we especially need to remember this for the times when we can't do anything at all, or we can't do what we used to do, or would like to do.

My daughter is a senior in the Jeff West School District, where the motto is: "Each student will be prepared to meet life's challenges as a productive member of society." And that's great. We can't sustain life without productivity. But we live in a world that IDOLIZES productivity. And the dark side of that is, when we're not productive, it's almost impossible to feel like we have any worth. For example, some of you used to work so, so hard at your jobs, or in the home, and you gave so much of your time and energy and talent to ministries here at the church and out in the community. And now you just can't do it anymore. You're doing well just to get here on Sundays, or maybe even just to watch our worship on a DVD or online. And it really gets you down.

For some of us, we are indeed productive, but it's never enough. Somebody else is doing more, and they seem to be doing it better, and you don't like how you feel when you compare yourself with them.

Many of you know our office manager here at church, Lori Hennessey. Lori has a beautiful daughter named Katie with a medical condition that has left her unable to do anything

for herself. She cannot talk, or walk, or use her hands, and she receives all of her nourishment through a feeding tube. But as anyone who has ever met her can tell you, Katie is a blessing. She has the most beautiful smile you've ever seen. She loves children, and good movies, and having her head rubbed. When Lori's little grandson Logan comes up from Arkansas for a visit, the first thing he always does is run over to Katie, because he loves her and she is his special friend.

Today is the first Sunday of Lent, the season of 40 days before Easter, not including Sundays. The 40 days signify the 40 days Jesus spent in the wilderness, after his baptism. If we saw the heavens opening, and the Holy Spirit descending upon us, and heard a voice from heaven, we might head for the wilderness, too, and try to process all of that. If nothing else, Lent is about taking the time to let the truth sink in that each of us is a beloved and precious child of God, made in the image of God, regardless of our age and abilities. It's a pretty awesome thing. When we break a hip and have to move into assisted living and be the one to receive care after years and years of giving care . . . when you can't give financially anymore because you're afraid you might outlive your money . . . when we can't drive, and we can't cook, and we can't sing in the choir anymore . . . when we become the children and our children become the parents . . . even when dementia makes us forget who we are . . . our life still matters, our worth is not diminished, and we contribute something to this world just by being who we are, where we are. Whatever our age and stage, can we please hear this good news?

Of course it's not just good news—it's a challenge. It takes a lot of humility to let our worth come from abiding in God, and not from what we do and achieve.

One of the most meaningful things I've done since arriving here in the summer of 2014 was to officiate the funeral of Rachel Fagan, which we held here last Monday morning. Rachel

had been a member of First Presbyterian Church for 77 years. During that time she was a deacon, a Sunday School Superintendent, a helper in our office who probably put in more hours at this church than anyone before or since, and a faithful worshiper who attended both services every single Sunday, arriving 30 minutes early just to prepare her heart and mind for worship by meditating and soaking in the beauty of our Tiffany windows. That's just some of what she did. She had no family—no children, siblings, spouse, any of that. This church was her family. So when Rachel couldn't take care of herself anymore, Team Rachel of the First Presbyterian Church stepped up and became the family Rachel needed. They took her to her doctor's appointments, got her into Aldersgate, did her laundry, helped her sell her house, brought her bag after bag of Christian romance novels and word searches, her favorites, and made sure she got plenty of cards and gifts for the holidays.

And the great gift Rachel gave was to let us. She let us take care of her. She enjoyed the attention, and the love. She was a blessing when she helped, and she was a blessing when she accepted help. She was in every stage of life a beloved child of God, as indeed are each of us.

So . . . our invitation today is to listen. To listen and believe God's voice saying to each human being in every time and place, "You are my child, the beloved one. You belong to me. You are made in my image." And then to believe it about everyone else, too, and to treat them accordingly.

