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Epiphany 1A (The Baptism of Our Lord); Primary Text: Matthew 3:13-17

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Every first Sunday after Epiphany, the church celebrates the Baptism of our Lord.

In Matthew's account, after John baptizes Jesus, a dove comes down,
and a voice from heaven says,

"This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

The people first hearing it likely would have heard the echoes of
the prophet Isaiah that Cecile read for us in the lesson today:

"Here is my servant, whom I uphold;
my chosen, in whom my soul delights."

Now Matthew has twenty-eight chapters. We're only on chapter three. The list of what Jesus
has yet to do is far, far longer than the list of what Jesus has done. Jesus has yet to
begin his public ministry.

He has yet to resist temptation in the desert.

He has yet to tell any parables.

He has yet to heal anyone.

He has yet to call any disciples.

He has yet to give the Sermon on the Mount.

Christians believe that Jesus is already the Messiah *before* he is baptized.

That's what the first two chapters in Matthew are "doing."

Thus the voice from the heavens is stating matter-of-factly a fact:

"This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

In other words, this is a revelation, and epiphany, if you will,

About something already true

That Jesus is divine.

So "This is my Son, the Beloved, w/ whom I am well pleased"
is not just about who Jesus is.

This statement is not only literary foreshadowing.

This is also about how generous the entire Trinity is,
far more generous than we often imagine.

God as a holistic divine entity is generous—

Now we might not think of generosity still being a possibility now, and I get that.
I even think it's understandable.

From what we see or hear on the news with the apparent normalization
of aggression, violence, discrimination, and degradation
That seems to be the MO of the world in general
and our country specifically at this moment in time.
God might seem silent, or stingy,
or lackadaisical, or absent.

And yet there are also many folks determined to reflect to us
Encouragement and abundance, hard work and presence that are of God
through their example and through their words.

Such as the mayor of Minneapolis asking the Minnesotans
to act in compassion, courage, and love,
While also acknowledging very real anger and fear.
He appealed to their better selves before they had done
or not done anything.

Of course the classic example of someone reflecting God's generosity is MLK,
Someone who believed in folks' ability to respect the dignity and worth of all. MLK
reminded folks of the words of the Constitution,
living up to the US's founding principles.

These are public figures with lots of clout. There's also more regular folks, too. The teacher
from the Alvin Ailey Dance Company, a renowned modern dance company that celebrates
and preserves the cultural heritage of African Americans, Who came to teach a bunch of
white teenage girls including me 30 yrs ago some of the choreography of Revelations—

We worked on Didn't my lord deliver Daniel
deliver Daniel then why not every man?
"Good!" she cried. "Well done. Keep going!"

Now I was there. I can tell you it was not that good. It was not that well done. She
knew there was little to be gained by correcting our form excessively. She knew that

sometimes a little encouragement can go a long way. Her encouraging nature, her generosity of spirit far more about her Than it did about us— and I still remember it to this day.

The voice from heaven believes in Jesus before Jesus has done a thing.
Could we believe that God gives us that benefit of the doubt too,
Not only so we can rest easy in our beds at night
But also so that we might rise to our best selves on occasion,
Not because we have to, not b/c we'll be punished if we don't
Not every day, b/c being our best selves
every day is exhausting and impossible—

Yet could we try to believe that God believes that we have the capacity to let our compassion, or our courage, or our care shine through sometimes? And could giving benefit of the doubt, that generosity start a wave of love that could interrupt the rip current of hate?

I know it seems impossible. It does to me too sometimes.

Then again, change always seems impossible until it's already done After which it suddenly seems inevitable and a foregone conclusion. Generosity is still possible. *Amen.*