

Message for Baptism of Our Lord, Year B (1/10/2021)
Mark 1:4-11

“Just as he was coming up out of the water, [Jesus] saw the heavens torn apart....” Did you notice that detail in Mark’s account of the baptism? “He saw the heavens torn apart,” not “opened” or “opened to him” as Luke and Matthew report. “[Jesus] saw the heavens *torn apart*.” That seems important.

“O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,” the prophet Isaiah cried out centuries before the scene at the River Jordan in today’s Gospel, “so that the mountains would quake at your presence – as when fire kindles brushwood, and the fire causes water to boil – to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence!”¹

I have mixed feelings. On the one hand, torn heavens are a terrifying prospect; images of quaking, burning, and trembling don’t inspire comfort. On the other hand, wouldn’t I welcome such an inbreaking of divine power if it put the enemies of God to flight? Wouldn’t I love to witness the mighty presence of God come crashing down from the sky “to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke”?²

Wouldn’t I cheer to see God swoop in and set things right with the world once and for all?

¹ Isaiah 64:1-2.

² Isaiah 58:6.

Still, tearing is a troubling image. Tearing or ripping evokes a rupture that can't be neatly repaired. Think of a piece of clothing. An opening along a seam can be fairly easily closed, leaving no trace of the hole. But, a tear in the weave of the fabric is more difficult, if not impossible, to mend. **Tearing means that things have so changed that they can't be put back the way they were, and that kind of change is frightening.**

When the heavens are torn at Jesus' baptism, onlookers would be within their rights to wonder what might happen next, what calamity might follow. And, God certainly comes down to make God's name known. But, rather than earthquake and flame, God's arrival is "like a dove"; instead of inspiring terror, God instills confidence: "You are my Beloved Child; with you I am well pleased."

The juxtaposition of torn heavens and the Spirit's gentle descent is arresting. It reminds me of a lyric in Leonard Cohen's song "Anthem": "There is a crack, a crack in everything; that's how the light gets in." **The scene at the River Jordan signifies that there's a crack in the barrier between heaven and earth, that God refuses to remain at a safe distance, confined to a realm beyond our lived experience. There's a crack in the barrier between heaven and earth, and that's how the light gets in.**

"[Jesus] saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him." This is God's response to the prophet's old plea, an unmistakable arrival on the scene to anoint the commoner from Nazareth to enact God's reign of

justice and peace on earth as in heaven. “The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.”³ God rends the heavens and sends the Spirit to rest on Jesus in order to establish him as “the fulcrum of God’s dealings with humanity,” to quote one interpreter,⁴ the hinge between God’s historical promises and their fulfillment in the fullness of time.

It’s uncertain in Mark if anyone but Jesus sees the heavens torn apart and the Spirit come down. What’s clear is that this transparency between heaven and earth quickly dissipates, and **the empowering love of God goes undercover for most of Mark’s Gospel, like a seed planted out of sight and growing quietly until the harvest.**⁵ “Only the demons know who Jesus is,” another interpreter observes. “The disciples stumble along, forever forgetting what they have seen and heard. The heavens seem not torn open, but sealed and silent – as they do so much of the time today.”⁶

Today, the heavens may be sealed, but our common life is torn. The events of recent days, months, and years have made that all too clear. The republic is torn, split into factions with radically different conceptions of America’s past and present and diverging dreams for our future. The truth is torn, splintered by an explosion of conspiracies, false equivalencies, and flat-out fabrications. Our capacity for mutual understanding is torn, shredded by self-righteousness and

³ John 1:9.

⁴ Lee Barrett, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 1, 236.

⁵ Mark 4:26-29.

⁶ Ted A. Smith, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 1, 241.

hostility. Justice and peace are torn, ripped apart by the abuse of power. There is a crack in everything, that's for sure. When do you suppose we'll see the light?

A better question, friends, is when will we *be* the light? **To be baptized into Christ means to be drawn into his death, his outpouring of sacrificial love for the whole world, and so to be swept up into his life, the full life that God intends for the whole world.⁷ We go down into the water and come up again with Jesus to hear the voice of God speak a word of love to us, too: “You are my Beloved Child; with you I am well pleased”; then to tread in the footsteps of Jesus everywhere we go.**

In a torn place, it's easy to forget who we are and what we're for. And, that's why from time to time we affirm our baptismal identity and purpose, trusting the Spirit to anoint us, just as it anointed Christ, to strive together to live as people of God. Today is as good a day as any to ask ourselves again, “Do you intend to continue in the covenant God made with you in holy baptism: to live among God's faithful people, to hear the word of God and share in the Lord's supper, to proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed, to serve all people, following the example of Jesus, and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth?” And, today is as good a day as any to reply with trust and trembling, “I do, and I ask God to help and guide me.”⁸

⁷ Romans 6:3-11.

⁸ “Affirmation of Baptism,” *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, Assembly Edition, 237.