

Mark 1:4-11 (ESV)

⁴John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶Now John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷And he preached, saying, "After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. ⁸I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

The Baptism of Jesus

⁹In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens opening and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. ¹¹And a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."

Jesus' Baptism, Our Baptism

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union United Church of Christ, Cambridge, Massachusetts

Date: January 8, 2006

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Text: *Mark 1:4-8*

He saw the heavens being ripped open. It doesn't quite come through the English translation, does it. "He saw the heavens opening and the Spirit descending on him like a dove," is what the translation says. But what Mark actually wrote was that when Jesus came up out of the water, he saw the heavens being ripped open and spirit coming upon him through the tear in the fabric of the great dome.

We've become accustomed to a more gentle notion of baptism. A child, or occasionally an adult, comes to the front of the church. The clergy and deacons lead the congregation in a ceremony in which the baptized is brought into the community of God's people. Family members, godparents, congregants and, if an adult, the baptized swear their pledges to be a part of the community of the baptized. The whole experience is sacramental. Indeed, baptism is the single sacrament that unites the Christian family. No matter what church you were baptized in, other Christian churches recognize you as a baptized into their family. When new members join our church, even if they were baptized as, say, Episcopalians, their membership here is an affirmation of that already completed act. We ask new members to reaffirm their baptism and their faith as they join with us.

It is a moment filled with warmth. It is a sign of our togetherness. It is our way of saying to each other that we belong to one another and that we are glad to be on this journey with one another. There is hardly anything we do in the church community that is as affirming of our life together as our celebration of baptism or affirmation of baptism.

But I am struck by this description of Jesus' baptism in the Gospel of Mark. The heavens were ripped open. The word appears only a few times in the Bible. Always it implies action and tearing asunder. In the Greek Old Testament Abraham splits apart the wood when he prepares to sacrifice Isaac. In Acts of the Apostles it is used to describe serious division—the city was divided between the Jews and the apostles. Luke and Matthew soften their accounts of the baptism and use a word that is more comforting. They say that the heavens were opened or revealed. For Matthew and Luke, to paraphrase a former President, it is a kinder, gentler description. For them things are revealed; for Mark the heavenly veil is torn apart.

It gets even more interesting. The only other place that Matthew, Mark and Luke all say that things are ripped apart is at the crucifixion. Luke says the veil of the Temple was torn apart. Matthew says that the veil of the Temple was torn apart and that the very rocks were also split apart. And Mark, whose Gospel we are considering today, says "Jesus uttered a loud cry, breathed his last, and the veil of the Temple was torn in two from top to bottom."

Mark uses this provocative image only twice, when the heavens are ripped apart at Jesus' baptism and when the Temple veil is torn apart at his death. Mark quite clearly wants us to understand something forceful and unsettling about Jesus' baptism. Mark's account of the baptism of Jesus has a disturbing edge to it. And it begs us to grapple with what the beginning

of this story of Jesus has to do with the end of the story.

The Gospel writers always stand with one foot in the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament. Because the Gospel writers saw themselves in continuity with Judaism and indeed a fulfillment of it, they almost always interpreted Jesus through the scriptures they inherited. When Mark says that the heavens were ripped open at Jesus' baptism, he is almost certainly meaning for us to hear echoes from Isaiah 64, "Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains might quake at your presence."

At the baptism of Jesus, Mark is looking back at the prophet Isaiah, and ahead at the crucifixion. It is in this triptych that Mark wants us to understand who Jesus is and what he means to us. And we get the inescapable impression that whatever it is that Mark wants us to understand about Jesus, it has to do with something dramatically ripped apart.

In Isaiah we hear the people pray that God would rip open the heavens and come down and save them. But the passage goes on to say that the problem is the people, not the fact that God hasn't shown up. It says the people have ears but cannot hear, they have eyes and cannot see. In the end it just may require a splitting apart of the heavens for the people to see. Or at least it may feel as though the very heavens and the rocks have split when the people do see.

That is so much the point of the Gospel of Mark. Before then, the people have neither seen nor heard. And even during Jesus' ministry the people, even his own disciples don't quite catch his truth. And why not? Why don't the people get it?

Mark's rather surprising answer is religion. People don't get it because of their religion. That's pretty amazing. I thought religion was supposed to make you get it. But it was of the religious people of his day that Isaiah said, the people have ears and cannot hear, have eyes and cannot see. Very often, most often, the people used their religion to protect themselves from hearing and seeing what God is trying to get across. The prophets tell the people that God wanted them to hear the cries of the poor and the widow, that God wants them to have compassion for the downtrodden, and the people say, O God where have you been; break open the heavens and show yourself.

So there is no little irony that at Jesus' baptism, the heavens are ripped open. And the irony is doubled in that when the heavens are ripped open and no one, no one but Jesus himself even notices. Jesus sees the heaven split apart and the dove descend. No one else sees it.

After he is baptized, Jesus goes into the desert where he is tested, and then he begins his ministry of healing the sick of body and soul. At first, it goes well. People are amazed and his fame spreads. But even in chapter one some begin to question. They say, what is this, a new teaching. By chapter two, just barely into his ministry, after Jesus has done nothing but make people better, the scribes charge him with blasphemy. They say that he doesn't fast enough. They say that it is not lawful to pick grain or heal on the Sabbath. We haven't even gotten out of the second chapter of the Gospel, and plot is already in place, the end is already configured, the crucifixion looms at the hands of the recognized religious authorities of the day.

By chapter six, those in his hometown say he is too big for his britches. By chapter eight Jesus has healed countless illnesses and maladies from deafness to leprosy, from epilepsy to mental illness, from paralysis to apparent death; he has fed five thousand and then four thousand people on what appeared to be scraps; he has forgiven sins; he has calmed storms. Jesus has done these things and more, and the Pharisees show up and say, "If you're so great, why don't you give us a sign from heaven?" Jesus answered them, "Truly, I say to you, no sign will be

given to this generation.” Of course what he meant was that the very heavens have opened and you have not perceived a sign. As in Isaiah’s time, they could not see; they could not hear what was done in their very presence. Later in the Gospel Jesus in a moment of frustration tells his hearers, “Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes and like greetings in the marketplaces and have the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts, who devour widows’ houses and for a pretense make long prayers.”

Finally, of course, the authorities could no longer abide this challenge to their authority. More than that, though, they could not abide the fact that Jesus kept trying to uncover their ears and eyes, they could not abide that he threatened to reveal their hypocrisy and their pretense and their comfort and their denial.

And so they did what came naturally, they did what Jesus had ironically come to change about human ways. They did him in. They shut him up permanently. They nailed him to the cross. And as he breathed his last, again the heavens split apart. And as far as we know, only a lone centurion, a lone soldier even saw it. He was the only one, and he said in recognition of what had just taken place, “Surely this man was the son of God.” For everyone else, the story was over.

Now, of course, the story wasn’t over. Easter came. Jesus rose. He got the last word. And this time it was a word that was heard, or so it seems. Ultimately, it became the basis for the Christian church.

But a funny thing happened along the way. The church that grew out of Jesus’ resurrection fell prey to the same human faults that preceded it. Today, in Jesus’ name, war is justified. Wealth and privilege are seen as gifts of God, while poverty and powerlessness are characterized as God’s judgment. Hatred toward others is attributed to God. These are the most egregious examples. In the progressive churches we find most of them conveniently in the religious right.

But you know what? As egregious as those things are, and they are, and as much as we ought to unmask them and fight against them, and we ought to, my guess is that if were Jesus with us this morning, he would ask us to focus on where our ears might be blocked and our eyes closed. To turn it around, Jesus would want to know how the heavens were split open at our baptism. He would want to know what difference our baptism makes. He would want to know how the foundations of our beings shook.

Jesus would want to ask about our baptism, because, as Paul says, we were baptized into Christ. Recall the story of James and John when they ask to sit at Jesus’ right and left in heaven. Jesus responds to them, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?”

James and John respond without hesitation, without thinking, without any deliberation, “We are able.” And Jesus tells them, “You do not know what you are asking. ... The cup that I drink you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized.”

We who have been baptized into the church have given our assent to the same baptism, and to the same cup. And Jesus would want to ask if we, like he asked James and John, are aware of what we have done.

Jesus would be asking us two very related sets of questions. He would be asking, “Do you understand how different the world you have been baptized into is from the world from which you came? Do you understand that in this world into which you have been baptized, love

replaces hate, humility replaces arrogance, forgiveness replaces retribution, peace replaces violence? Do you understand that in this world into which you have been baptized these things are not just abstract and fanciful impracticalities? They are things by which you are to live your life. Do you realize how difficult these things are.

And then he would ask the second set of questions. Do you understand how uncomfortable these things make not just you but other people when you take them seriously? Do you understand how dangerous people will consider them? Do you realize that people will even use my name, will use the Christian faith, will use the name of God to condemn you for them? Are you aware that the human tendency that I came to expose was the human tendency to destroy what it doesn't like? Are you aware that human beings fear nothing more than exposing their tendency for destruction and that their reflexive response is to destroy that which would expose them? Are you aware that if you share my baptism, you will drink the cup I drank?

Our baptism, then, is something less domesticated than our ceremonies may thoroughly capture. Or maybe it's just that we don't see the heaven ripped open and understand even as we mouth the words of our consent. There is good reason for that. The baptism of Jesus, our baptism, is a world-shattering affair. Its dangers are not inconsequential.

And yet, like the woman at the well, once you have drunk from these waters, there is thirst no more. Once you have drunk from these waters, there is no desire to return no matter the difficulties. For in these waters, in this baptism, in this unmasking of the violence that we justify in our world and justify in ourselves, in this splitting open of the heavens is to be found peace, peace within us and between us, peace as far beyond the peace our violence and retribution can offer as heaven is from earth. Peace so far from what we have known that only in the splitting of the very heavens may it come to us. Amen.