

First Sunday after Epiphany
January 11, 2009
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Not a word about Mary and Joseph. No journey to Bethlehem to be enrolled for taxes. No shepherds abiding in the fields keeping watch over their flocks by night. No angels or singing heavenly hosts. No wise men coming from the East to pay homage. Mark begins the story of Jesus at the river.

"In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan."

Jesus simply enters the river along with everyone else and is washed in "I should be baptized by you." But no in Mark, Jesus simply goes into the water and was baptized by John.

Some of us might be concerned by this telling of the story. Why would Jesus need to be baptized for the forgiveness of sin? Jesus was divine and thus above all that separates us for God and each other. What was the point of Jesus being baptized? I recall great debates in seminary over this whole idea of Jesus being baptized.

But this is where Jesus spent his life. He spent his life among sinners - he ate with them, he touched them even the ones declared unclean, he talked to them, he healed them, he even called to them. Why should his baptism be any different than his life? Jesus went into the waters of the Jordan with everyone else.

Mark tells us that when Jesus came up out of the water he looked up and saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descended upon him like a dove. The heavens were torn apart, not opened as Matthew and Luke record, no torn apart; torn apart from the same Greek root as schism. It is not the same as opened. When a door is opened it can easily be closed again. When something is torn apart it is ragged and not easily closed, ragged edges are never able to go back together again like they were. Mark was very intentional in his use of words. He recalled the words of the prophet Isaiah, "Oh, that you would tear open the heavens and come down to make your name known to your enemies and make the nations tremble at your presence."

Now Jesus is standing dripping wet on the banks of the Jordan. Without any hint that anyone else saw it the Spirit descends on him like a dove and he hears a voice.

"You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Though we normally think of God speaking in a deep booming voice, that voice is more often heard in the movies than in Scripture. In Scripture God's voice is a whisper, a breath, as quiet as the still small voice that reaches Elijah in a cave.

Mark indicates that the voice that came from heaven and spoke to Jesus was intimate and direct. You are my Son, in you the Spirit is loose in the world in a new way. Mark reminds us, in Jesus the heavens have been torn apart and will never be closed again.

I recall as a child visiting my grandfather in the mountains of Virginia. You could go down the path at the back of his house. In the field beyond the house you could lie in the grass and look up at the sky. That sky seemed to me to be expansive beyond anything I could see back home in the city. I could lie very still and hear myself breathing. Sunbeams would reach down and it was warm, safe as if the very presence of God was being poured down out of the sky. I probably did not think much about the presence of God at that point in my life. It was in remembering that I knew with certainty that I was privileged to be in the presence of God when I lay very still. In the helter-skelter world you and I live in it is difficult to capture that feeling because we fill our lives with so much activity and noise. Stopping to be still and aware is not on our schedule. Even if I could capture those moments, I believe it would not be the same. The heavens have been torn apart and it is impossible to put the pieces back together again.

But the torn place is where God comes through. From the day when Jesus saw the heavens torn apart, Jesus began tearing apart the concepts of who the Messiah was to be. He would tear apart the social fabric of his day that separated people one from the another. He would tear apart the rituals that had become stale and meaningless. He would tear apart the power of evil and the notions that God was more intent on vindication than love. Nothing would ever be the same once the heavens were torn open.

With urgency God tears open the heavens to claim the Beloved. That is what God did, God does and God will keep doing in baptism. As we wander around in a world that is not okay, a world filled with evil and sin, God dives in again and again to save us from our foolishness and raise us to new life. It is God who takes the initiative. It is God who offers new life. It is God who extends the covenant of love and grace.

As a church we mark this covenant in Baptism. In baptism, we promise to rely on God to lift us above the struggles as we turn from evil and follow Jesus. As a church we promise to make this a world where everyone is respected and God is welcomed in. In baptism we acknowledge the heavens have been torn part and God is close at hand never to be shut out again.

Baptism signifies that one's freedom to be uncommitted is over. Wondering where you stand, confusion about who you are and who directs your life is no longer lurking in the shadows. Allegiance is made public as you are sealed with the sign of the cross and told that you are "Christ's own forever." In baptism we are bound to Christ and to each other as brothers and sisters in Christ. Baptism puts life into perspective and gives us purpose to make Christ known in the world. Baptism is a sign that God is present and active in our lives, the heavens have been torn apart never to be closed again.

Phillips Brooks best known for writing the Christmas carol, "O little town of Bethlehem," was about to leave for a trip to Europe. A friend suggested that Bishop should be very careful least he find a new religion and bring it back with him. He cautioned the Bishop that if such were the case he might have difficulty getting back through Customs.

"I doubt it," the Bishop replied, "in all likelihood any new religion popular enough to be imported would have no duties attached to it."

This Sunday on which we remember the baptism of Jesus and recall our own anointing as God's Beloved, stands as a caution against a too easy casual understanding of that commitment. Baptism challenges us to seek and serve God in all people. As the Beloved of God we are to strive for justice and peace among all God's people. We are to be faithful in worship and in prayer proclaiming by word and deed the good news of God in Christ.

May we this Epiphany continue to grow in our awareness of God's presence. May we strive to live more fully into our baptismal covenant realizing that in every generation God anoints a new people to be vehicles of love and grace in the world. The heavens have been torn apart never to be closed again.

Amen