

The Heavens Rent Open

On Tuesday, January 6, we began the liturgical season of Epiphany, the season in which we celebrate the coming of Christ, the light of the world and the manifestation of God's love. Throughout this season, churches for centuries have remembered those pivotal moments in the life of Jesus when it became apparent to different people or groups that he was not simply a wise carpenter from Nazareth but was in fact God's only begotten Son, the fullest revelation of God Godself to humankind, God with us. The day of Epiphany itself is given over to the celebration of the visit of the three wise men or Magi to the Christ child and his family, which we celebrated last week. Traditionally, the first Sunday after the Feast of Epiphany is a time to remember the story of Jesus' baptism by John in the waters of the Jordan River, when the Spirit of God descended like a dove from heavens rent open.

I hope that phrase sounded familiar to you as I read it from the Gospel according to Mark just a moment ago. We heard it just a little over a month ago from Isaiah, chapter 64. Do you remember? "Oh that thou wouldest rend the heavens, that thou wouldest come down..." Isaiah wrote those words on behalf of a deeply troubled people, the remnants of the Children of Israel, bereft of their nation, their king, even their Temple. They wanted God to come down and set things at rights, to drive out the invaders, to renew their land, to make Himself manifest to the nations in a way that would redeem Israel in the eyes of the world. But even as the prophet issued that plea on behalf of the pitiful remainder of Judah, it seems, he realized the presumption of such a request from a people "faded like a leaf," whose "iniquities, like the wind, (took them) away." Isaiah's prayer ends with a new request – that God should remember His people as a Father does His children and that the people should become as clay in the hands of the divine Potter. The prayer that God would rend the heavens and come down was deferred, if not forgotten.

But at last the prayer was fulfilled. Again, the Jews were a conquered people, although they had a king of sorts and a glorious new Temple to Yahweh was under seemingly endless construction. A new prophet was preaching on the banks of the Jordan, calling the people to repentance and confession for the forgiveness of their sins. Now, at long last, God did rend the heavens and come down but the results were hardly what any of the Jews, so full of messianic hope, might have anticipated.

What was begun that day and why might Mark have chosen to describe the event with this allusion to Isaiah, when Matthew and Luke use a completely different word? What was the effect of this rending on Jesus, on God, on humankind? What is the thread that weaves from Isaiah 64 through Mark 1 and Acts 10 that binds us into the salvation history of God's Chosen People? And how are we to respond to a world where the heavens are rent open and God has come down among us?

What began that day was of course the public ministry of Jesus, opening with the epiphanous recognition of the adult Jesus as the Anointed One and the manifestation of the Spirit of God as a dove. In Mark's Gospel, which tells us that Jesus took pains to keep his identity as the Messiah a secret, it's not clear who if anyone besides Jesus himself saw the dove and heard the voice. In Mark's understanding, the epiphany may have been for Jesus alone – his realization, perhaps, of the fullness of his calling and gift. But whether or not others shared the moment of revelation, Jesus is empowered by the event and the waters of baptism; the presence of the Spirit and the proclamation of his role as Beloved Son propel him first into the desert and then into his work.

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The rending of the heavens signifies what that work is to be. The Rev. Dr. Barbara K. Lundblad writes, “From the day he saw the heavens torn apart, Jesus began tearing apart the pictures of whom Messiah was supposed to be -- Tearing apart the social fabric that separated rich from poor. Breaking through hardness of heart to bring forth compassion. Breaking through rituals that had grown rigid or routine. Tearing apart the chains that bound some in the demon's power. Tearing apart the notions of what it means to be God's Beloved Son. Nothing would ever be the same, for the heavens would never again close so tightly.”

Like the prophet in the prayer of Isaiah 64, Jesus points to the reality of God as Father; indeed, Jesus insists upon it. But unlike Isaiah, Jesus need not pray for the heavens to be rent open, for the barrier between God and Creation has been torn and remains open. In his book, A Master of Surprise: Mark Interpreted, Donald Juel writes, “The importance of an accurate rendering of the Greek is difficult to overestimate. The image in Mark is strong, even violent, and the moment that is noted, the imagination begins to work. If the heavens are opened (as Matthew and Luke write), then they may well close again. If they are torn apart, however, then we may think of some permanent damage or rupture that cannot be repaired.” Scott Hoezee passes along one of those stories that preachers love to share. He says that in talking with a group of teenagers, a Bible teacher went to great pains to explain this different wording in the Gospels, pointing out to the students the violence inherent in the Greek word σχιζο or rend. “‘Get the point?’ the scholar asked the group. ‘When Jesus was baptized the heavens that separate us from God were ripped open so that now we can get to God. Because of Jesus we have access to God--we can get close to him.’” But one young man had his own view of the subject. “‘That ain't what it means.’ ‘What?’ the Bible scholar said, startled. ‘I said that ain't what that means,’ the teenager repeated. ‘It means that the heavens were ripped open so that now God can get at *us* anytime he wants. Now nobody's safe!’” Indeed, we are no longer safe from encountering God anywhere at any time, whether in the beauty and power of creation or in the faces of our fellow humans, all of whom bear the image of God, the Father of us all.

The unnamed scholar in Hoezee's story is right though. Not only can God get to us through the unremended heavens, we can get to God. Mark uses his unusual word, σχιζο, borrowed from Isaiah, again in telling the story of Jesus. He has used it at the very beginning of the story of Jesus' ministry and he uses it at the end of Jesus' ministry. Mark 15:38 tell us that at Jesus' death, “the curtain of the temple was torn in two (σχιζο), from top to bottom.” At Jesus' baptism, God tears the heavenly barrier between Godself and humankind and at Jesus' death, God tears the symbolic barrier between Godself and humankind, the curtain separating the Holy of Holies, where only the High Priest could encounter the Spirit of God once a year, from the rest of the Temple, where the rest of God's people waited. Juel writes, “the protecting barriers are gone and... God, unwilling to be confined to sacred spaces, is on the loose in our own realm.” Now, even in the physical absence of Jesus, God is still with us and we have access, through the work of Christ, to God.

The pivotal story of Jesus' baptism, told in Matthew, Mark and Luke, and obliquely in John, is mentioned again in our passage this morning from Acts. Here, Peter, relating the story of Jesus, includes Jesus' baptism as the beginning of Jesus' story, just as Mark does. The passage is unusual in Acts because it is not written in Luke's usual, careful and literate Greek. Scholars have called the writing here “rough, full of grammatical errors,” “filled with Aramaisims,” “it

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looks very much like a message originally preached by a person whose native language is Aramaic.” What we likely have here, in other words, is a direct quotation by Luke of Peter. This little sermon comes at the end of an important episode in Peter’s ministry. He is in Caesarea, at the home of Cornelius, the Roman centurion, at Cornelius’ invitation. Although it is against Jewish law for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile, Peter has come after being convinced by a vision from God that he must include the Gentiles in his ministry. Perhaps you remember Peter’s dream of a sheet, lowered down through those still-open heavens, carrying all sorts of ritually unclean meat which God directs him to eat in spite of dietary laws. Once again, the heavens rent open have carried a word from God which changes everything.

“I truly understand,” says Peter to his new Gentile friends, “that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.” Whether or not he knows it, Peter has picked up on the insight of Isaiah, who understood what heavens rent open would come to mean. “We are all your people,” Isaiah realizes at the end of his prayer to God. For Peter, there can be only one appropriate step to take with these Gentile believers whom he now realizes are as much the heirs of the promises of God as he himself. “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” Peter sees that just as “God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power,” so has God anointed these representatives of other nations. As a sign and a seal of their relationship with God, Peter invites them to join himself and their Lord, Christ Jesus, in baptism.

Baptism had long been a significant act in the Jewish context. At the time of the New Testament, it was practiced as a rite bringing Gentiles into the Jewish faith community. It was a symbolic cleansing of these proselytes from the uncleanness that they carried as non-Jews. John the Baptizer had upset this understanding by proclaiming that all humans were in need of cleansing from sin in the eyes of God and so John instituted his baptism of repentance. The early Christians retained this idea of John’s but added to it by making baptism a mark of the believer’s identification with Jesus. Most of those of us who have experienced believers’ baptism will remember the words adapted from Paul’s writing: “buried with Christ in baptism; raised to walk in newness of life.” In baptism, we recognize both our own failings and God’s gracious extension of love through Christ to us. Another phrase commonly heard in conjunction with baptism is that it is an “outward and visible SIGN and SEAL of inward and invisible grace.” The Presbyterian pastor R. Charles Grant remarks, “As a SIGN, baptism announces what we believe God has done for us in Jesus and what God does with us every day of our lives. As a SEAL, baptism is an occasion for us to affirm and reaffirm our faith in and commitment to the God we see at work in Jesus and in the church.” Just as Peter did, we invite all who would identify themselves as believers in our God and in God’s Christ to join us in this deeply symbolic act. It is for us an expression of the New Covenant between God and humankind as potent as the bread and cup which we share on a regular basis.

At the baptism of Jesus, the heavens were rent open and God came down. Because of Christ, the heavens have remained open and God has continued to move among us, God’s Beloved Children, and we have full access to our God as Father. Because the heavens are rent open, we now can see that every person whom we encounter is a Beloved Child of God, carrying the image of God from their very creation. Because the heavens are rent open, we, like Peter, can see that God shows no partiality, whether it be among nations or races or denomination or gender

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or any other facet of humankind's created nature. Not even our openness or lack of openness to the love of God differentiates us in God's sight, for "God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us." And now, part of our calling is to recognize this oneness of the human family, showing not partiality but impartial love to all of those we encounter in our lives. And, I believe, we should remember that God's lack of partiality is yet another expression that all the earth is the Lord's. There are no places, no countries, no locales that are not God's and where we cannot find God if we will take the time to look and listen. A few years ago, Cormac, Cardinal Murphy-O'Connor, offered the opinion that the painting of "The Baptism of Christ" by Piero della Francesca should be taken down from the National Gallery in London and placed in a Roman Catholic church because it is a work of faith and piety rather than a work of art. I cannot agree, for the heavens have been rent open and our God is on the loose everywhere. All places are filled with the sacred presence; all places are fit for the worship of Christ Jesus. Whether it is our active living as baptized people or works of art by great masters, we should spread signposts to God's limitless presence wherever we can.

And because the heavens are rent open and the Spirit of God descends upon all of God's people, we should also remember what Peter said about the results of the Spirit descending upon Jesus: "God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; (and) he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him." My sisters and my brothers, God is with us, also, and has anointed us with that same Holy Spirit and with power. Now, as the Body of Christ called the church, both together and individually, it is up to us to go about doing good and healing all those who are oppressed by evil, in all its forms. Let us trust, and not be afraid, for the ETERNAL GOD is our strength and our might. The Spirit of the Living God hovers over us like the dove of peace, awaiting our invitation to shape our lives like clay, to fill us with power and to employ us in the ongoing work of creation, bringing the Beloved Community to life in our broken, hurting world. The unleashed, unstoppable God moves in the spectacular beauty of the diversity of our gifts, our minds, our talents, blessing and hallowing our lives and the lives of those for whom God calls us to care. The heavens are rent open! For the awesome gift of God with us, thanks be to God!