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January 7, 2018

Baptism of the Lord

Genesis 1:1-5

Mark 1:4-11

## TORN APART

We have journeyed through the great drama of the nativity story of Jesus. We have heard of Mary's dedication and openness to God's novel plan presented to her by an angel. We have imagined going along on Mary and Joseph's trip to Bethlehem, where they only found the simplest of shelters for the most significant of births. We've thought about that sharing by angels of good and joyful news with shepherds, who then got to go see what the angels were excited about. We have heard about the infant Jesus getting dedicated in the temple. We know the story of the magi who looked up and saw a sign in the heavens that something special was happening on earth.

The stories from Luke and Matthew's gospel accounts are rich indeed. We take note, however, that the Gospel of Mark includes not even one detail about Jesus' birth. And yet, it too has a compelling start that includes someone we also heard about during the season of Advent. That's John the Baptist, operating out in the wilderness, someone who understands that he is called to prepare people for the Lord's coming, and he does so through his calls for people to turn anew to God's ways. He then also has a part in preparing Jesus for his ministry by baptizing him. As that happens, we hear of Jesus seeing a sign in the heavens. It is as Jesus is coming up from the water, that he looks up and sees the heavens torn apart with God's Spirit descending upon him.

He saw the heavens torn apart. But before they were torn, God's own heart had been torn. Have you ever been looking on as someone you loved suffered? Perhaps it was in a hospital or in a rehab facility. It could have been in a lawyer's office or the unemployment line. It might have been at the cemetery. We know of the dreadful suffering caused by civil wars in Yemen and Syria. The natural disasters that struck the U.S. in 2017 were the most expensive in our country's history.<sup>1</sup> There are those who struggle with depression or with addiction and find

themselves in a hole that is difficult to escape. The suffering of those around us tears at our hearts. God intimately knows and loves all of those the world over who have been suffering and dying. It tears at God's heart, just as it did when two thousand years ago, people were misusing their power to abuse others, when people were even using religion as an excuse to kill others or using it to separate God's own beloved people from one another. God's heart was torn.

Jesus looked up and saw the heavens torn apart. If you open a door, you can close the door. It is as it was before. But if something is torn apart, it can't really be closed off again. Centuries before, the prophet Isaiah had cried out to God, "Oh that you would tear open the heavens and come down!" (64:1) That is what happened in the life and ministry of Jesus. The heavens were torn open and God came down.

God used Jesus' baptism as part of his preparation for a ministry where there would be even more things torn apart. Jesus would do what he could to tear apart the social fabric that separated the haves from the have not's. He would tear at the religious assumptions that those who were considered outsiders should stay outside of the workings of God's love and grace. He would tear away at the narrow and confining definition of what was holy. With all the tearing that was going on, God came and was present in a new way. With all the tearing that is going on, God comes and is present in a new way.

Jesus was given God's own Spirit to carry out a ministry demonstrating the healing and redemptive presence of God. At his baptism initiating his ministry, he was also given clear indication that he was God's beloved son with whom God was pleased. The very voice of God expressed it. Our baptism is indication that the heavens are not closed off from us. I'll be interested in your reaction to the art installation that will be hanging over the baptismal font the next few weeks. Thanks goes to the Salls for their work on it. For me, it is a reminder of the blessings of heaven that are poured out upon us through baptism. The very same Spirit that was at work through Jesus is given to you and me. We too are identified in the waters of baptism as beloved children of God. But with the giving of the Spirit, we are called to proclaim that God has come down to those who know torn places in their lives. Let's be clear about this though - if we are part of

a church that seeks to offer healing, we do so out of our own woundedness. We don't try to pretend that we have everything all together, because we don't. But, by God's grace, we don't have to. We have had our hearts torn. As we make ourselves vulnerable to others in pain, we will feel the tearing within us again. However, in baptism, God gives us the identity as God's own children, God gives us the power of God's own Spirit, and God helps us to see heaven's openness that has been torn open by God's own hand, so we can then tear into the challenges and problems of the world with everything we have.

At the end of his life, Jesus hung on a cross, suspended between heaven and earth. We would affirm that God had taken on the suffering of the world. And Mark tells us that when Jesus had breathed his last, the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom, torn apart by God just as the heavens had been torn apart. (15:37-38) It's the same word for 'tearing' used in the original language as had been used to describe the ripping of the heavens. In that holiest of places, the temple curtain had been used to keep regular people out of the space that was considered to be where God was most present in the world. Mark's gospel account had started out in the wilderness and had moved to the very center of religious life. Now, in neither place would there be separation from the presence of God.

Is there a torn place in your life? How are we to understand that? Even if this event took place before you could remember it, think of your baptism. Think of your identity that was proclaimed through it, labeling you as one of God's beloved children. Think of God's Spirit that has been given to you. Think of the tearing of the heavens and the tearing of the temple curtain. All of that changes how we understand the torn places in our lives. The torn place may still be there, but God is there too. Jesus' baptism became the catalyst for heaven rending, Spirit descending, God announcing, identity giving action that led to Jesus' transformative ministry. As we have entered a new year, it is a great time to consider for what our baptisms might be a catalyst. The heavens have been torn so God's blessings can flow.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2017/12/expensive-weather-storms/548579/>