

## Torn Apart!

### Mark 1:4-11 (NRSV)

*John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."*

*In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."*

---

Mark's Gospel was the first to be written. If it was the only one, if Matthew, Luke and John's Gospels hadn't come along later, the church seasons we just experienced – Advent, Christmas and Epiphany - might not exist.

There's nothing about the birth of Jesus in Mark. There are no shepherds, no angels, no wise men, no star, no stable. Bethlehem isn't mentioned and nothing is said about Mary and Joseph. There's no genealogy and none of John's cosmic wonder: "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God."

Mark doesn't seem to care about Jesus' birth and childhood. When Jesus first appears in the story, he's a fully grown man who "came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan."

Mark begins his gospel with Jesus entering the river with others to be washed in a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Now you may wonder why does Jesus submit to a baptism of repentance. He's the only one who doesn't need it. Why is the One who is said to be "without sin" being baptized along with God knows who? Why does the One who doesn't need forgiveness would want to associate with those who do. It's highly unusual.

Think of it as an act of solidarity, of identification, of his being Immanuel, God with us. Barbara Brown Taylor says that while we Christians talk a lot "about God's love for sinners, ... we ... go to a lot of trouble not to be mistaken for one of them." But, here at the Jordan River the opposite happens.

Jesus isn't content to just be a friend of sinners, he goes into the water and is baptized as one of them - as one of us. Then he spends the rest of his earthly life with them – and us. He eats with sinners, talks with them, heals them, and calls them. Maybe his baptism isn't that strange.

According to Mark, Jesus goes under the muddy waters like all the rest. And when Jesus comes up out of the water, he sees the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. He hears God say: You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

The story doesn't say if anyone else sees it - only Jesus - he sees the heavens torn apart. The Greek word is schizomai. It means torn or ripped apart. It's where we get the words schism or schizophrenia.

When Matthew and Luke describe Jesus' baptism, they say the heavens opened. But Mark is different. Torn apart is not the same as open. You can open a door and close a door and the door is the same. But when something is torn apart it's not easily closed again. The ragged edges never really go back together.

Biblical scholar Donald Juel writes at this moment the barrier between heaven and earth is removed. God is no longer a distant divine being sitting on a throne in the heavens. God comes to dwell among us. God "is on the loose in our realm" swooping into our world like a dove. And when it descends on Jesus, he becomes the one who incarnates and embodies God's presence.

Jesus stands in the Jordan, dripping wet, without a hint that anyone else saw the heavens torn apart or saw the dove or heard the voice that spoke intimately and directly to him: "You are my Son, the Beloved. With you I am well pleased." There's no clue that anything has changed. But now that the heavens are torn apart, they will never close again and that means nothing is going to be the same again.

It's in the torn place where God comes through, where God speaks and acts. It's in the torn place where God names and claims Jesus. From that day forward, Jesus lives as God's Son and begins tearing apart the pictures of what the Messiah was supposed to be.

He tears apart the economic fabric that separates rich from poor. He breaks through people's hardness of heart to bring forth compassion. He rips open religious faith and rituals grown rigid or routine. He shatters the chains binding those in the power of darkness, disease and distress. He tears apart any and all notions of what it means to be God's Beloved.

In Mark's story, we encounter this powerful word - schizomai - one more time. It comes at the end of Jesus' life when he hangs on a cross between heaven and earth. As he breathes his last, the curtain of the temple is schitzo. It is torn in two from top to bottom. It is torn apart as the heavens were torn apart at his baptism. It means the holy of holies - God's presence on earth - is no longer separated from the people. It means God's presence cannot be contained.

At the cross there is no voice from the darkened heavens. God is silent, because God's heart is breaking. But Mark records another voice - a centurion soldier standing at the foot of the cross, keeping order, waiting to pronounce death. When he sees that Jesus breathe his last, he says, "Truly this man was God's Son."

How did he know? Who gave him that word? Heaven knows. That soldier somehow heard the words whispered to Jesus at the Jordan. The word came through the torn place in the sky, through the torn curtain: "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Beloved, we watched in disbelief, anger and horror as the fabric of our democracy was torn apart this week when armed insurrectionists stormed the Capital building and tried to impose their warped will on all of us who voted in a fair and free election. Many of us are wondering - Can this ragged hole in our body politic ever be repaired?

For almost a year, we've been living with a global pandemic that has ripped apart our way of life, our security, our freedoms, our health, our economy, our ability to grieve and mourn or celebrate with family and friends. Many of us are wondering - How in the world are we ever going to get the broken pieces of our lives back together again?

Beloved, I want you to know, if there are other torn places in your lives, if you are living in some jagged relationship that needs fixing, if you are you facing some ripped situation that appears hopeless, you should not give up.

The good news is God comes near to us in the torn and broken places. God comes and speaks and acts when life is torn apart. Yes, God comes and names us and claims us as the Beloved, as sons and daughters of the Most High. And because of Jesus, there is no place in heaven or on earth where God is absent.

That is what we celebrate and remember today. In the waters of baptism, God comes and says to each and every one of us: "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior." (Isaiah 43:1-3)

Thanks be to God. Amen.

January 10, 2021 (Reaffirmation of Baptism)  
David Whiteley, Pastor  
Jemez Springs Community Presbyterian Church