

“Torn”

Mark 1:9-11

Sermon January 10, 2021

Rev. Dr. Emily J. Anderson

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 1:9-11

Spirit of the Living God, descend upon us this day as you did upon Christ in the River Jordan. Reveal your wisdom to us as we listen for your Word that we might forever testify not to ourselves but to the One who is our Teacher and Messiah. Spirit of the Living God, descend upon us, we pray. Amen.

All the gospel writers agree that when Jesus is baptized by John in the Jordan River, it is a decisive moment. In each case, it marks the beginning of his public ministry, and the confirmation of his identity as the Son of God. “This is my Son, the Beloved.”

The story shows up in all four gospels, and as you’ve heard me say before, that’s usually a good indication that we ought to pay attention.

This year in the lectionary, we’ll hear primarily from the gospel of Mark, and one of the things you may know is that Mark’s is the no-frills gospel, only about half the length of Matthew and Luke. Mark doesn’t add a lot of color commentary, he just tells the story and moves on.

What that means is that Mark has a marvelous economy of words. All the English teachers here will agree with me. He doesn’t throw in fluff just to add length, like we all did sophomore year when we had to write 10-page papers but only had six pages worth of content and hoped the teacher wouldn’t notice when we enlarged the font and the margins.

Instead, Mark says only what needs to be said, and then he stops. That means his words are chosen very, very carefully.

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So it makes my ears perk up when Mark says that as Jesus comes up out of the water, he sees the heavens *torn apart* and the Spirit descending on him like a dove.

Matthew doesn’t say that. Luke doesn’t say that. They only say that the heavens were opened. But Mark says that Jesus sees the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending.

The Greek word Mark uses is *schizo* – it means “to tear,” or “to rend,” or “to break.” It’s where we get words like “schism” and “schizophrenia.”¹

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We have experienced a tearing of our own this week, as we watched a schismatic mob breach the United States Capitol Building on Wednesday afternoon. It was a desecration of the People’s House, what one writer calls “the greatest of our secular temples.”² There was physical violence that led to the death of 5 individuals, including a member of the Capitol Police. We are angry and afraid for ourselves, our children, our neighbors, our country.

¹ Lindy Vogado, in “Join the Feast,” Jan 11, 2009.

² Steve Schmidt on Twitter

Most particularly, we are angry and afraid because rhetoric, and lies, and partisanship have torn the fabric of our nation in ways that will leave us permanently scarred.

We watched as “Jesus Saves” and “Jesus 2020” signs appeared alongside Confederate flags in the Rotunda, as if Jesus were a presidential candidate, or a symbol of a purified, divinely blessed America instead of the risen and living Lord of all who forgives sinners and frees captives and heals the sick and brings justice to the poor.

We are right to be angry and afraid.

The question we have to answer, however, is what we are going to do with that anger and fear. We may not have the power and influence of a president, but every one of us can do our part.³

In his second Inaugural Address, Abraham Lincoln pleaded with a divided nation for healing: “With malice towards none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation’s wounds.”

Jesus said it more succinctly: Love your enemies. And as Mr. Rogers taught us, “Love begins with listening.”

Let’s be clear: Loving our enemies does not absolve us or deter us from justice, or from our calling to stand in solidarity with those on the margins, or from calling evil by its name. Justice and mercy are both works of God.⁴

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Back at the Jordan River, when Mark talks about the heavens being torn apart, it’s not the same as the word “to open.” I open the door. I close the door. The door is exactly the same. But something that is torn apart never goes back together just like it was before. The ragged edges never fit quite like they did.

Mark knows exactly what he is doing using that word: *schizo*. He remembers Isaiah’s cry to God centuries before, “Oh, that you would tear open the heavens and come down...”⁵

Because you see what happens? As the heavens are torn open, the Spirit leaks through. The ragged places don’t quite hold like they once did. Like great-grandmother’s broken teacup, while it can be glued back together, it will never hold water again. As Leonard Cohen says, the cracks are where the light gets in. Where the heavens have been torn open, God’s grace seeps in and drenches our world.

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That word *schizo* appears in one other place in the gospel of Mark, in the very last chapter. At the end of his life Jesus hangs on a cross between heaven and earth, and when he breathes his last, Mark says the curtain of the temple is torn in two from top to bottom, torn apart just as the heavens had been torn apart. In terms of the architecture of the Temple, what that means is that the holy of holies is no longer off limits to the people. The curtain can never be repaired.⁶

And as that happens, a Roman centurion reiterates the truth spoken 16 chapters earlier at the Jordan River: “Truly this man was the Son of God.”

³ Miroslav Volf, from the Yale Center for Faith & Culture, January 8, 2021.

⁴ Roger Gench, in *The Presbyterian Outlook*, January 7, 2021.

⁵ Barbara Lundblad, “Torn Apart Forever,” *Day1.org*, Jan 12, 2003.

⁶ *ibid.*

All of that is to suggest that being torn open can be a good thing. At the precise beginning and the precise end of Jesus' earthly ministry, things get torn. The barrier that once separated the realm of God from the realm of humanity has been torn open and because of that, God is present with us in a whole new way.⁷

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That's my hope and prayer for our country this week. We have been torn apart, not only by Wednesday's events, but by a pandemic, and a deep political divide, and a long overdue reckoning around racial justice. They are wounds that need to be bound up, as President Lincoln said, but I hope we do not simply slap a bandage on them and pretend they never happened.

We talk wistfully about things getting "back to normal," but I don't want to go back to normal. I hope we come out of all this better than we were before. I hope we learn something from what we've been through.

Because all those torn places create opportunities for God's grace to leak through. It washes over us just like the waters of the Jordan wash over Jesus. And then it seeps out from us to one another.

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So come on down into the river with Jesus this morning. Let those waters rush over you, and wash away the anxiety and apprehension. Let the river push you around and knock off a few rough edges. Let it soothe you and carry you to places you might never have imagined.

Let the power of that river tear you open.

For good. For God. Forever. Amen.

⁷ Russell Rathbun, "Cosmic Crossing," in *The Hardest Question*, 2012.

Prayers of the People

Rev. Gloria Mencer

Jan 10, 2021

As we leave 2020 with enduring hope and as we go forward into 2021 with recent feelings of disbelief, anxiety and perhaps fear of the unknown, we cannot but call upon our God for help and healing.

God of healing, we pray for all who are infected with the coronavirus. We pray for all who are suffering, have lost loved and those who will yet suffer loss. We ask wisdom for the medical and scientific experts who are seeking ways to control the virus and we pray for equitable distribution of the vaccine. We pray for all who are on the front lines risking their lives so that we may live.

God of all nations, we lift up our beloved nation to you with great sadness and feelings that are too deep for words as we witnessed on January 6, 2021, the destruction of the United States Capitol building, the shedding of innocent blood, the loss of life, and the tragedy of dysfunction that threaten our democracy. These tragedies have reminded us that words matter and that the power of life and death is in the tongue. We are reminded by our ancestors that ceaseless vigilance and actions will forever be the price of freedom.¹ We pray for elected officials in our own country and in all countries around the world— for those who have been entrusted to exercise leadership on behalf of the common good give them wisdom to know what is good.

God of human creation and love, you created us to be 99.9% identical. Remove hatred and helped us remember that we need to see in each other a common humanity that reflects your image. Empower us with love in all that we do and use us to bring healing and unity to our hurting and divided nation and world.

Bless and keep us. Drive far from us all wrong desires, incline our hearts to do your will and guide our feet on the path of peace. In the Providence of the God who created us, in the Passion of our Savior Jesus Christ who redeems us, and in the Power of the Holy Spirit through whom God's will is done.²

AMEN.

¹ US Senate Chaplain Barry Black

² The Reverend Dr. J. Herbert Nelson, II Stated Clerk of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)