

God Tears Apart the Heavens!  
Baptism of our Lord, January 8<sup>th</sup>, 2012

We just spent time with our three kids over Christmas. And every chance I get, I try to remember to tell each of our children that I'm proud of them. Each of them is an adult now, using their gifts, making a difference. I'm proud of them, and I want them to know that. We get the story today of God our heavenly Parent saying to the Child that has been sent to this earth: I am so pleased with you. And I commission you for your work in this world.

This is the year of Mark's Gospel in the lectionary. And I know it doesn't seem like it, but this is Mark's Christmas story. Mark doesn't have the birth story that Luke has in Bethlehem, where the angels proclaim: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom God is pleased." Mark begins with John the Baptist proclaiming a baptism of repentance out in the wilderness east of Jerusalem, and with an adult Jesus being called and commissioned.

And in Mark 1, God declares to Jesus, "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased." Remember when God spoke words like that over creation? God spoke creation into being, and then God said, It is good, and on the last day, It is very good. I am pleased with all this!

And how does Mark's Gospel start? The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ....What God is doing in Jesus is a new beginning, it's a new creation, and it is very good!

Mark the Gospel writer says that the day Jesus was baptized, the heavens were *torn apart*, and the world has never been the same. That's different language, by the way, than in Matthew and Luke's account. Those gospel writers say that when Jesus came out of the water after his baptism, the heavens were *opened* to him. When a door opens, and a door closes, we don't see much difference afterwards around the door frame, do we?

It's different when something gets torn apart. That has a different feel to it! When something is torn apart, it's hard to put back together in the same way. When something is torn apart, there are jagged edges that don't fit together anymore. When a child on Christmas morning tears apart the wrapping paper on a gift, it would be difficult to put that paper together again like it

was when that package was under the tree. It's hard to smooth it down and use it again next Christmas.

When Mark says the heavens were torn apart, he uses the Greek verb *schizein*, from which we get the word schism, a very harsh division, and schizophrenic, where there is a division in a person's mental condition; there is a split mind. Mark says that when Jesus is baptized in the muddy waters of the Jordan River by John, things are split apart so that God can come through in a new way! And we see that new way in Jesus, as he announces the kingdom of God in his words and his actions.

That word *schizein* is used at the end of Mark's Gospel as well when the temple curtain is torn in two when Jesus dies. The Holy of Holies was a place into which only the high priest could enter once a year. There was a veil that kept the presence of God separate from the people. And now that veil is torn apart when Jesus dies on the cross. His sacrifice on the cross makes God accessible to everyone! We all have access to God's presence and power in Jesus.

But apparently God needs to tear things open to get our attention. Later in Mark's Gospel, after Jesus has healed people and fed people and cleansed people of demons, the disciples still don't seem to get it. And he says to them: Do you still not perceive or understand? Do you have ears and fail to hear? Do you have eyes and fail to see? (Mark 8:18) And at the end of the Gospel, they are falling asleep when he is asking them to stay awake and pray with him for awhile.

We followers of Jesus have a hard time staying with him. We have ears and do not hear. We have eyes and do not see. Jesus heads off in this direction in our world, and we want to be over here where it's more comfortable. Jesus is over here with the unlovely, and I'm over here making judgments about them. Jesus is taking risks to stand up to power, and I get complacent in the way things are. Jesus is calling me to be born again every day, and I say about my character flaws and shortcomings, Well, that's just the way I am. God tears open the heavens at Jesus' baptism, and sometimes something needs to tear apart in our lives for God to get our attention. We have ears that do not hear and eyes that do not see.

A thirty-something woman came to a pastor and said she needed to talk. They made an appointment, and the woman said, When I was seven or eight,

my mother gave me a book of Bible stories. I loved that book, and I read it over and over again. In fact, I read it so much that my mother feared I was going to become some kind of religious fanatic.

So one day she took that book away and told me to read other things. I didn't want to upset my mother, so I left the stories of God behind- all through high school, all through college. Years later, my life was falling apart. But what I want to tell you about is what happened on Good Friday. I know it was Good Friday, not because I went to a service somewhere, but because I had the afternoon off from work.

My hopes for a music career were fading, and the man I loved had just broken up with me. That afternoon I went into my apartment, locked the door, turned off the lights, pulled down the shades, and put some music on the stereo. I can't remember what it was- maybe it was Bach, maybe St. Matthew's Passion; after all, it was Good Friday- I lay there in the darkness, trying to forget everything but the music.

And all of a sudden the room was filled with light. I can't explain it. The room was dark. I wasn't near death or hallucinating. I wasn't sick. The shades were down, but the room was filled with light.

This woman told this pastor it was a turning point, the first step back to the stories that had been torn from her hands as a young girl. It was the presence of God coming through the torn places in her own life. A year later she was baptized at the Easter vigil surrounded by a circle of candlelight. And God said to her, "You are my own Beloved Child." (from a sermon by Barbara Lundblad)

The appointed first lesson for the day is Genesis chapter 1, where "in the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." And what was there in the beginning? Darkness covering the face of the deep, while a wind swept over the water. In Hebrew imagery, that means chaos and disorder. But God like a wind sweeps over the water, and says, Let there be light! ...And there was light. The first thing God creates is light! And God saw that the light was good.

That woman I spoke about earlier was struggling in the darkness, and God said, Let there be light! And it's not always as dramatic as that, but God finds a way to tear open the heavens and come to us. I was having a difficult

day in early December on a Tuesday. dealing with Susan's mom's illness. I had an appointment that day with one of our members at his house. He's been having his own health struggles, and I thought we were getting together to check on him. So after some football talk, I said, So how are you?

My brother in Christ said, Oh, this isn't about me! I wanted you to get a chance to talk. How are *you*? I felt like the heavens were being torn open, and God's Spirit was breaking through, and I was being loved.

Later that day, I was sitting in my office at about 4pm, my load was lighter, but I was still feeling the weight. I heard a key opening the front church door, which means it's one of our members. Many of you come by late in the day to check your mailboxes, and often I look up and greet you. I asked this sister in Christ what she had come by for, and she said, Oh, I was just passing by, and I had this feeling that I needed to come by to check on you. How are you? And she gave me a chance to share my pain. The heavens were torn open, and God's grace was coming to me through two members of the body of Christ. I had a sense that I was loved and cared for.

Now, just because God calls Jesus beloved does not mean things will be easy for him. Remember that the Spirit drives him into the wilderness for 40 days where he is tested.

But Jesus goes knowing he is loved by the One who sent him. He knows he has been commissioned for his work. We are beloved, but it doesn't mean life will be easy.

And when our world tears apart, that's when God's light can find a way to get through! God's Spirit broods over our darkness, and finds a way to create light! And what is the message that God wants to get through to us? "You are my child; with you I am well pleased!"

I don't think we believe that sometimes. That would be true of Jesus, of course. God's voice from heaven says to Jesus, You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased. Of course God would be pleased with Jesus.

But would God say to us, With you I am well pleased? We aren't the people we are supposed to be. We don't meet God's expectations. We haven't loved God with our whole heart, and we certainly haven't loved our neighbors as ourselves. Why would God be well pleased with us? Because God looks at

us in our baptism and says, You're a new creation! We are hidden in what Christ did for us. We are buried and we rise again to new life in Christ.

And as we remember our baptism daily, the new life of Christ is formed in us! We are forgiven, we are offered a new way to walk, we are given Holy Spirit power to walk a new way. And God can take whatever parts of us have been torn apart, and shine through those events to help bring us healing. And we can help bring healing to the world.

One of our families is providing respite care for teens who need to leave their foster families for a brief period. Into these broken lives, lives that have been torn apart in many ways, God is allowing them to shine light. I read their Christmas letter the other day, and they mentioned that even the dog has a ministry, and that's the word they used, because the dog provides unconditional love. God finds a way to shine through that which has been torn apart.

I was at the Methodist church in Molalla for a funeral before Christmas, a woman named Debbie for whom we've been praying for a year, a friend of two of our members. As I sat down and looked over the bulletin, and read the story of her life, I noticed a sentence I'd never seen before in an obituary: "She had been a friend of Bill W's for 22 years." I thought, Bill W, that name sounds familiar.

But before it could register in my mind, I turned to the man next to me and asked, What does this mean, A friend of Bill W.? He said, That's code for being in Alcoholics Anonymous. And then it registered that Bill W was one of the two co-founders of AA, with Dr. Bob, and of course you didn't use last names because it's an anonymous group. She had been in recovery for 22 years.

And the man said to me, She changed my life. I think that they were probably in the same AA group together, and her witness changed his life. You know, the strange thing about things that get torn open is that they can't be put back together the way they were. But when things get torn open, the light can shine through. When things get torn open, God gets a chance to work in new ways. This wrapping paper got torn apart, and can't be put back together in the way it was. But because it's been torn apart, it can be used in a different way (show Advent mosaic made from paper). The light can shine through in some new ways.

Jesus wasn't baptized by John for the repentance of sins. Jesus got down into the water to identify with us, to say, I've come among you. And he heard God's voice say, You are my beloved. I'm so pleased with you. I pray that you hear God's voice today saying that to you: You are a beloved daughter of God; you are a beloved son of God. And as we live in our baptism, God tears open the heavens every day and finds ways to come to us: in this fellowship of believers, God comes to us in the Word of grace and mercy and challenge, God comes to us in the bread and the cup, God comes to us in the stranger and the poor and the lonely and the oppressed. And God says, Through what's been torn apart, let me shine. Amen.