

Heavens Torn Apart

by

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Baptism of the Lord

Mark 1:4-11

⁴John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵And 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.

⁶Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷He 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. ⁸I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

⁹In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰And 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. ¹¹And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

According to Mark, this is the Inauguration of Jesus to his public ministry. And it is the gospel we need to hear at this moment just days before the Inauguration of a new President of the United States, and following the violent assault on the Capital Building this week, an assault on our freedom and democracy.

This past Wednesday, on the Feast of Epiphany, the Twelfth Day of Christmas, traditionally Christians celebrate the visitation of the Magi when Jesus was revealed as the Light of the World. What do we know about light? It illumines, it reveals and it also casts shadows. On Wednesday the light of truth about our national election and the light of God's love for the world cast a long shadow across the capital of the United States. Among all the shadowy images seared in our minds from the coverage of Wednesday's events, there is one that I lift up today which is directly addressed by this text of Jesus' baptism. It was the banner, among all the other banners of insurrection that said "JESUS 2020."

You saw those banners and what they said: Make America Great Again; Gun Owners for Trump; Donald Trump's image atop a muscular body holding a machine gun; Don't Tread on Me; Women for Trump; God and Country; and flying with all of those was the one that said JESUS 2020, aligning Christ our Lord, with lies about the election and the reprehensible, violent rhetoric of the current President of the United States. Inside the Capital we saw glass windows broken; guns pulled out and pointing; the Capital Police overwhelmed by the crowd of thugs; our elected officials crouched on the chamber floor; the Confederate flag unfurled in the hallway; a threat written on the desk of the Speaker of the House saying "We Will Not Back Down," and a banner proclaiming, JESUS 2020.

Friends, the Jesus of Nazareth, inaugurated in the waters of baptism is not on the side of these insurrectionists who stormed the capital building this past week; who were encouraged, fomented and stirred up by Donald Trump. From Day One to JESUS in 2021, His life and ministry in a politically charged world is counter to their violent and mis-guided tactics and we know that from the very beginning when Jesus submits to the waters of baptism, under the hand of John who singles him out as God's new leader for a world turning toward justice, righteousness and peace.

Just think about where and how Jesus' baptism took place. John the Baptizer leads the people out into the wilderness. The wilderness is the historic landscape where the people were once led out of slavery, where they were fed by manna from heaven, given the Law, promised a land, and corrected by prophets when they went astray.

In that wilderness, Jesus is submerged in water. Like the wilderness itself, the waters of baptism are deeply meaningful. Water is the source of life and cleansing, of course, but in the Bible water is also symbolic of the unknown, of chaos and death, of the fearful things that can only be tamed by God. In Genesis, God hovers over the primordial, untamed waters and with a divine word, creates order out of chaos. When the disciples get caught in a life-threatening raging sea, Jesus calms the water, evoking the power of God to be shelter in the storm. In the waters of baptism we both acknowledge God as the source of life, And we recognize our need for God in the untamed dangers of life and death. That's why we say that through the waters of baptism, we are raised to new life in Christ.

So at Jesus' baptism, in the wilderness – in the waters of unknown chaos and death; yet another baptismal layer of meaning is revealed. When he came up out of the water, Mark says, "Jesus saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him." The heavens are torn apart, ripped open. The Greek word is *schizo* which means

literally, “to tear.” It’s the word from which we get the English words schism and schizophrenia. It’s a dramatic word, a powerful word, sometimes even a violent word. When Jesus was baptized, the heavens themselves were torn apart; they were ripped open dramatically by the hands of God. This means that in the person of Jesus there is nothing separating God and humankind. In Jesus of Nazareth, God has fully entered the human experience, the politically charged world of the misuse of power, of economic disparity, of social dislocation, of racial tension, and of violent insurrection. There is no separation between earth and heaven, no line drawn between the two.

Jesus Christ is baptized in the wilderness of the human experience, is submerged in the waters of chaos, and by the power of God emerges as the newly inaugurated Lord of heaven and earth. His ministry begins to counter the social and political systems of oppression in order to lead us in God’s ways of non-violent freedom, justice and peace.

As the longtime and recently retired pastor of New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C., Roger Gench has written of Jesus’ baptismal inauguration to ministry: “When Jesus first shows up on the scene, he does not appear where we might have expected – not in Jerusalem, in the holy city, in the temple, the holy place, in the company of holy people.

Rather, he shows up in the wilderness and submits to John’s baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, which places him alongside sinners and broken people. He is baptized in solidarity with them, and throughout his ministry, he continues to cross boundaries, shatter expectations and consort with the wrong sort of people, compelling us to do the same....

God is on the loose in this world in Jesus’ ministry and in our own discipleship to Christ. God’s transforming power is on the loose in this world, challenging everything that distorts and disfigures human life and God’s good creation, and empowering us to lend our energies

to God’s project of healing the broken world.”¹

That is why this past Wednesday, at the nation’s capital among those acts of violence and symbols of white supremacy and political insurrection, the flying of a flag that said, JESUS 2020 was a sacrilege, a violation of the sacred, and an assault – not only on our country, but also on the true purposes of Jesus. It is a denial of the meaning of His baptism and of ours. Because Jesus standing in water, dripping under the cupped hand of John, means never again would there be some huge separation between God and God’s people, between God’s purposes of justice and righteousness and the whole human family.

For into a world just like ours, Jesus walked down to the river with people just like us: people needing to repent, to confess their wrong-doing, people seeking forgiveness, seeking a word of hope, hoping for a fresh beginning. They were making new resolutions about the kind of people they would be, trusting this wild eyed prophet John to point them toward a new God-given reality of love and grace and peace. In His person, the heavens have been torn apart, and we can never be separated from God again.

So, in the shadows of our current national turmoil, let us take his baptism and our baptism very seriously. Baptism is not just a family-friendly ritual, but a corporate inauguration into a life with God to make a difference and to be a difference in this world – for the good.

Later in this service, you will see a montage of the baptisms that have taken place over the course of this pandemic season when we have not been able to celebrate each one as a congregation in worship together. During this time, we have often invited small groups of family to gather with pastors and an elder representing this congregation to celebrate the sacrament of baptism at the front door of the sanctuary.

¹ Roger Gench, *Presbyterian Outlook*, Jan. 3, 2021.

Even while we are apart at this moment, I invite you to remember the visual impact of our church's front doors. If you read the archway up and around, from left to right, it begins with the first day of creation and then takes you through the whole biblical love story between God and God's people – Adam and Eve, the covenant made to Noah never to destroy the earth, the Tablets of the Ten Commandments, the Law and the Prophets, and then when you get to the very top of the arch over the center of the door there is a baby. A baby, flanked by his parents Joseph and Mary, whose story leads down the right side of the archway through Jesus' life, death and resurrection, to the birth of the church, and finally to a symbol of the whole of creation gathered at the throne of God.

That day – when the family of God will be gathered in praise is the culmination of Jesus' baptism which we celebrate today.

That good and glorious day will arrive, not through violence, or insurrection, or any political maneuver to rule with unharnessed power. That day will arrive when God's everlasting love, mercy, grace and peace rule in all and through all for the common good of all. You cannot be baptized without passing through that he and promise. Which also means we cannot be the church without carrying that story with us wherever we go, as those who are immersed in God's love for the world uniquely revealed in the baptism of Jesus of Nazareth.

AMEN.