

Mark 1:4-11
January 10, 2021
"The Torn Apart Heavens"

I have a favorite shirt. If you were a part of St. Matthew back in 2017-2018, my first year or so here under appointment as your pastor, you might remember it. It was a soft blue color, with a pattern of small checks. It was made of a 100% No-Iron cotton pinpoint fabric made in Hong Kong. It was, hands down, the most comfortable shirt I've ever owned, and it lasted and lasted for I'm not sure how long.

About a year and half ago, though, I discovered under the left side of the collar that the fabric had significantly frayed, not on the seam but near it. Had it simply come unstitched along the seam, I was told, it could be re-sewn. But as it was, the fabric itself was tearing, and was now torn apart, and torn apart -- I was assured -- in a way no one could ever sew it back again the way it was.

It was *that kind* of tearing apart that caught my attention on reading the Gospel lesson for this, the First Sunday After Epiphany, a day which we call "Baptism of the Lord". Going and receiving the baptism of John is the *first thing* the grown-up Jesus does. It is the *when, where*, and -- I think -- the *why* and the *how* of the beginning of his ministry.

As *important* as it was that Jesus went to be baptized by John, the *most* important thing is what happened "as he was coming up out of the water", namely that "he saw the heavens *torn apart*, and the Spirit descending like a dove on him" (v. 10).

The heavens "torn apart". Think about how that sounds. Hearing the verb in the Greek is helpful. It's *schizomenous*. *Sounds* almost *violent*, doesn't it? Almost *onomatopoeic* -- like a *shredding* or a *shearing* sound. So, this is God *tearing open* the heavens in order to make a world-changing impact in the life of the world, by sending the Spirit *down through* the torn apart opening.

And Jesus sees God doing this in such a way that -- just as in the case of my treasured old shirt -- the heavens cannot be "sewn" back together again. The heavens and the earth are now, and from now on, connected, opened to each other. Nothing we humans might *do* or *want* to do -- no barriers we might want to build between us and God -- will *ultimately* matter. The Spirit is now set loose in the world, and not just "on" Jesus but actually "*into*" (*eis*) him *infusing, permeating, occupying* and *controlling* him.

And now God *will* get what God wants for the life of the world, viz., the "kingdom of God" (1:15).

The promise to all who are baptized *in Jesus' name*: our **whole lives** more and more under God's own control and direction. Our **hearts** -- our *affections*,

passions, hopes and dreams; our **minds** -- our *perspectives*, our "*world-view*", on what is *good, right and true*. Note that John here, and later Jesus, both call people to **repent** using a word which, in Greek, literally means "change of mind" (*metanoia*); and our **bodies** -- our *hands and feet, what we're willing to do*, and *where we're willing to go* for Jesus.

Cf. Paul at 2 Cor. 5: "For the love of Christ *controls* us..."

And, then, after Jesus sees the heavens "torn apart", he hears "a voice...from heaven, "**You** are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." **Now** we know why the Spirit descends into Jesus. It is because he is "the Beloved". What this means is that Jesus is not just the Son of God (cf. Mk. 1:1), but is the **chosen** one, God's **chosen agent** for the redemption of the world.

It is in his baptism, then, that Jesus is given his **identity**, and also his **mission** in life. And the *same* is true for **all** who are baptized in Jesus' name, a ritual of Church which *signifies* that we are now **incorporated** into Christ -- *viz.*, into his Church, his **living corporate Body** -- and **recruited** into his mission. Cf. Will Willimon (RWYA, 1980, pp. 62-63):

The great heresy of American popular religion is the assertion that "religion is a private affair". . . The Christian faith is neither a set of lofty ideals and noble propositions, nor is it a system of ethics and guides for behavior. The Christian faith is a corporate endeavor, a way of life together under Christ...

So, this is the way baptism is supposed to "**work**" in the life of the Church, providing us our **fundamental identity** and **purpose** in life. The critically important question facing us, then, as the Church is -- always -- "**Is the Church's baptism working?**" Did **your** baptism "**work**"? Did **my** baptism "**work**"? Or, *i.e.*, with what -- *primary* -- **identity** have you and I been *living* across our lives? And what are the -- *primary* -- **purposes** we have been *striving* to fulfill?

There are dozens of ways for us to identify ourselves: in my case, *e.g.*, male, white, southern, educated, professional, married, father, middle class(?), etc. Oh, and *also* baptized, and ordained (I almost forgot). *Which* of these identities are *primary* for me, **not** in terms of what I **wish** were my primary identity but in terms of my **actual** life, lifestyle, relationships with others -- what I actually do with my *time, money, passion, prayers*? What **identity** is really **reflected** in my actual life? And what **purposes** are actually **reflected** in my life choices?

How about you? Who **are** you -- **really**? And **what** -- or **who** -- is the **real** source of your direction in life?

These questions, by the way, were very important to our Methodist founder, John Wesley. He devoted a whole sermon to it, in fact, which he called "**The Almost Christian**" (1741), which is a person who is "**almost** a Christian...having a **Form** of Godliness...the **outside** of a real Christian". He *contrasted* this with the "**Altogether** Christian", who "fills [the form] with love stronger than death both to

God and to all mankind – love that doth the works of God, glorying to spend and to be spent for all men...whosoever has this faith, thus ‘working by love,’ is not almost only, but altogether a Christian."

Or, i.e., someone living a *distinctive* life and lifestyle, on account of a **transformed identity** and **purpose** in life.

A United Methodist theologian by the name of Kenda Creasy Dean adopted Wesley's sermon title for a title of her 2010 book, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers Is Telling the American Church*. In her book, she raises the issue of what she calls "**consequential faith**" -- the kind of faith in Christ which really makes a difference in a young person's life. What her research uncovered -- and what *seems* like **good** news -- is that, by and large, our teenagers over several generations have been absorbing the brand of Christianity we have been modeling for them and training them in. The **bad** news, however, is that **this modeling and training bears only a passing resemblance** to a **fully Biblical** Christian faith, and that, not surprisingly, our young people find such a **system of faith and practice** to be of not *much* **lasting importance**, and so fail to evidence, as they become adults, very much in the way of "consequential faith".

I believe these **essentially baptismal issues** are *always* of central importance in the life of the Church, but especially in light of the unprecedented events this past week in Washington DC. A great many of both the people who were there in support of the outgoing President would tell you they were there *as Christians*, *as well as citizens*, and *also* a great many who were *watching* the events of Wednesday afternoon unfold on TV or, as I was, listening to them unfold on the radio -- with **tears** of -- shock? Outrage? Rage? -- and **condemning** those *other* Christians' **allegiance** to this one man, along with the **actions** they were willing to engage in on account of that allegiance.

So, in which group of Christians did their baptism "**work**"? In which group could their Christian faith and practice be seen as "**consequential**" of the modeling and training they received?

Another way to ask this is: Are we the **Church in America**? Or are we the **American Church**? Which identity -- "Christian" or "American" -- is **primary**, and *primarily* informs our fundamental **moral vision** and **commitments** in life?

Figuring out **who we really are**, and **what we are really about** as Christians, and as the Church in America -- really struggling with this question -- has, I suspect, *rarely* been more important than it is now.

So I was delighted to see on Facebook last night that one of the Associate Pastors I was privileged to work with, Rev. Ann Kovan (Marion District), was herself struggling -- fervently -- to **diagnose** the situation of the Church in America, saying:

The relationship between God and this nation is **broken**. And...it's the Church's (capital C—all churches') fault. American Christians have fallen for the oldest trick in the "Good Book" -- idolatry. Little by little, inch by inch, over time, American Christians have elevated our passion and faithfulness **to the nation**, and our allegiance to **human leaders** above that to God. What we are seeing now is the **rot** that oozes out of the fissure of this broken relationship.

What I want to leave you with today is this thought: if Ann is correct in her diagnosis -- that the relationship between Church and nation is "broken" or, i.e., "torn apart" -- then maybe the God who is willing to "tear apart" any opening possible in order to save us can enter in to the mess we are in and find a way to help us.

Without our present brokenness, i.e., we might never have sought for God to enter in and help. It's abundantly clear to me -- and I hope to you -- that we have no other options, however, left to us at this point.