

JANUARY 11, 2009  
BAPTISM OF OUR LORD  
“GOD’S INVASION”

Let us pray: Thank you, gracious God, for letting your delight in Jesus expressed at his baptism overflow into ours, that your “Yes” to Jesus becomes your “Yes” to us as our baptism becomes the surest sign we have of your love and affirmation for us. This I pray in the power of your Spirit received in baptism. Amen.

The Gospel according to St. Mark from which we’ll chiefly be hearing this newly begun church year really has no Christmas story, no “**proper**” Christmas story as my Welsh relatives would say—no angels and shepherds, no Bethlehem stable as in Luke’s Gospel. No magi, no slaughter of the boy babies of Bethlehem, no flight into Egypt as in Matthew’s Gospel.

In fact, if St. Mark were the only Gospel we had, we might be forgiven for assuming that the man Jesus became the Son of God at

his baptism, as we hear today in the next to opening verses of Mark's Gospel, when Jesus received a private epiphany granted him by God, as he — and only he, Mark seems to be emphasizing — saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending upon him like a dove, while he heard a voice from heaven that spoke these words; "*You are my Son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased*" or as another translation I prefer puts it, "*in you I take delight.*"

I think that those who created our three-year cycle of lectionary-readings selected the opening words of the first Genesis creation story to be heard this morning to remind us of how God's voice had at the very beginning of beginnings created the heavens and the earth by the divine Word which simply said, "*Let there be...*" and there was — as a "*wind from God*" which we can also translate as "a spirit — or breath--from God" swept over the face of the waters. All the ingredients, you see, of Jesus' baptism by John were right there

present in the narrative of the very beginning of creation, including God's own declared pleasure and delight over what was occurring: "*God saw that it was good*" is Genesis' way of putting it. "*With you I am well pleased,*" the Voice from above declares as Jesus emerges spluttering from the waters of Jordan in which John had dunked him.

And so, you see, Mark's "Christmas story," if we want to call it that, is not about the birth of the baby Jesus at all. It is, rather, the story of Jesus being "born anew" via the watery womb of baptism emerging into the affirmation of God's Voice and the Spirit's warm embrace. I always think it's wonderful the way in which each of the four Gospels tells the good news of Jesus from quite different, and yet ultimately, complementary perspectives. And St. Mark especially helps us to see how crucial Jesus' baptism was—and by implication ours as well—to the good news of the story of salvation.

For Mark—the tersest of the Gospels—there’s a crucial detail of his telling of the story to which we need to pay attention, one easily missed since on the surface his version appears not all that different from the other evangelists. And that crucial, easily overlooked detail, is one concealed in these seemingly innocuous words: *“and just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens **torn apart** and the Spirit descending upon him like a dove.”*

The Greek word translated as “torn apart” which the older RSV translation “undertranslated” with the words “the heavens were opened”—is the word “**schizomenous**” from which our English words “**schizophrenia**” and “**schism**” and “**scissors**” derive—a word that has the sharper edge than merely “to open” but connotes a “violent division” or a “cutting apart” or a “splitting” or even “ripping open.” Matthew’s telling of the story which we heard last year on this day uses much

gentler language in translating another Greek verb as “the heavens were **opened**.” A small but interesting difference in choice of verb, don’t you think? What might Mark, whom many scholars think is the earliest of the Gospels to be written, trying to tell us?

It’s the late Lutheran NT scholar Don Juel, whom I’ve mentioned to you before, who died a few years ago of cancer way too young, who first drew my attention to the fact that this rather violent Greek word “schizo” meaning “to tear apart” or “to rip open” occurs one other time and this very near the end of Mark’s Gospel, the two serving symbolically as a sort of pair of **bookends** to Mark’s Gospel. They’re words that we’ll hear this coming Palm Sunday as we read together the Passion according to St. Mark, when at the very climax of Mark’s Gospel, Jesus utters those most heart-rending and soul-chilling words from the cross “*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*” And then Mark says, “*Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last.*” It’s

then that we hear what we can be forgiven for thinking of as these anticlimactic words, “*And the curtain of the temple was **torn in two** from top to bottom.*” The second and final appearance in Mark’s Gospel of the verb “schizo” — meaning “to tear apart” or “to rip open.”

“So what?” you ask? Well, here’s what according to Don Juel. The curtain of the temple, he explains referred most likely to the drapery which separated the Holy of Holies, the place where God was symbolically present, from the rest of the temple sanctuary. The sacred precinct where the Ark of the Covenant was kept was out of bounds for all mortals except the High Priest, who was allowed to enter it only once a year on the Day of Atonement, what Jews today call “Yom Kippur.” The curtain, it was thought, provided protection from God’s holy presence, for that presence could mean death for any who encountered it directly.

But, in addition, Juel explains, the temple was fitted with another veil, a larger piece of cloth that served as a kind of door in the summer when the massive gates were left open. This veil was embroidered with cosmic imagery, symbolizing an association with the heavens as themselves a kind of cosmic veil. The Jewish historian Josephus, a contemporary of the first generation of Christians, describes this curtain at the entrance to the temple as follows:

*Before these hung a veil of equal length, of Babylonian tapestry, with embroidery of blue and fine linen, of scarlet also and purple wrought with marvelous skill. Nor was this mixture of materials without its mystic meaning: it typified the universe. For the scarlet seemed emblematic of fire, the fine linen of the earth, the blue of the air, and the purple of the sea....On this tapestry was portrayed a panorama of the heavens....*

So, Juel suggests, the image of a curtain or veil suggests that “the ripping of the temple veil” might be meant by Mark to be

interpreted as symbolizing that something is finished with Jesus' last breath that was begun with Jesus' first gasp for air as he came up out of the Jordan when the heavens themselves are described as having been "ripped open," "torn apart," when the Spirit descended like a dove even as the Voice from the newly rent heavens declared its delight in Jesus.

For, as Juel notes, a pattern that began with Jesus' baptism now ends with his death. The image in Mark is strong, even violent, and the strong language stimulates our imaginations. If the heavens are merely "opened" as in Matthew's and Luke's Gospels, then they may well close again. But if they are "torn apart" or "ripped open" then we may think of some permanent damage or rupture that cannot be repaired.

This is why I've come to think that the baptism of Jesus is really Mark's re-imagined version of the Christmas story, as God "tears open" the vault of the sky which was traditionally thought to separate heaven

and earth in the ancient world's "three-story" universe, in which God's dwelling place in heaven was separated from the created order where humanity dwelt.

In other words, in Jesus humanity's domain of the created order was "invaded" by God, as the heavens were ripped open and the Spirit descended and the Voice of God was spoken upon a single human being by the name of Jesus, a rip in the separation between heaven and earth, God's domain and ours, that was repeated and made permanent in Jesus' death on the cross when God in Christ became fully one with us even in our death—that day, that Good Friday, as Luther so scandalously called it, when we remember and mourn "the death of God."

It's Matthew's Gospel that gives Jesus the name "Immanuel," meaning literally "God is with us," but Mark in his own more picturesque and symbolically vivid way is also wanting us, the readers and hearers of his Gospel, to celebrate the **utter solidarity** of God with humanity by joining us on our

human journey to and through death in the person of Jesus—Jesus of Nazareth, a particular first-century Galilean Jew whose good news begins with his baptism—as must ours.

In emphasizing the torn curtain, the ripping apart of the heavens at both Jesus' baptism and his death, Mark wants us to know the good news that the relationship between God and the created order has been changed decisively by God's own action of ripping apart the barrier that had previously separated humanity from divinity. The torn curtain of the temple, as the ripping apart of the heavens, symbolizes that God is unwilling to be confined to "sacred spaces" but is rather "on the loose" in our earthly realm, on the loose in the form of the Spirit—the breath—the wind of God, present at creation. And it all has been done by God's initiative—not by our trying to "storm heaven" like the builders of the temple of Babel who sought to build their way up to heaven's gates by their own

human ingenuity— but by God godself invading our world and becoming fully one with us— one of us—in the person of Jesus.

It was back on the first Sunday of Advent that we heard the Old Testament prophet Isaiah appeal to Yahweh, “*O that you would tear open the heavens and come down....*” —a plea which God not only heard but answered in the birth—and baptism—of Jesus. In the beginning of time God said, “Let there be ... and there was” and God declared it was good. And in the fullness of time God said to Jesus at his baptism “You are my child, my beloved in whom I delight” —and so we bask this day and every day in God’s invasive, overflowing delight.

The peace that passes all understanding keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.