

Where it all started

Genesis 1:1-5 and Mark 1:4-11

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Baptism of the Lord

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Yesterday was a very important day on the church calendar. Some of you, either as individuals or as families, probably set aside time to celebrate and observe this important day. Maybe you had special meal. At the Volg yesterday, I saw cake baked especially for this day, something I had never seen before.

And some of you are scratching your heads right now and thinking, **“What did I miss?”** Or, **“Did the season of Lent really start that early this year?”** And the answer is no, Lent does arrive earlier than usual this year, much earlier, but yesterday was not the beginning of Lent.

In the West we don't make all that much of January 6, but in other parts of the world January 6 is ... Christmas. For Orthodox Christians – 250 million believers around the world, the second largest body of Christians – January 6 is Christmas.

For those of us in the West, January 6 is Epiphany or – sometimes – Three Kings Day. It's a day we celebrate or remember the visit of the Magi to the Christ child.

And then – and I don't really expect that I will convert anyone here today to observing the church calendar, but in case you're interested – the first Sunday after Epiphany is always ... the Baptist of the Lord. So, today is Baptism of the Lord.

This is the day Christians remember and think about Jesus's baptism by John in the Jordan, something mentioned in each of the first three gospels – Matthew, Mark, and Luke. And of course we think about our own baptisms on a day like today – and what Jesus' baptism teaches us about own baptisms.

Later this week I will call my 90 year old mother in the U.S., which I do most weeks, and she is going to say, as she always does, it's like the sun coming up in the morning, I know this question is coming: **“Doug, what did you preach about on Sunday?”**

And so, I will say, **“Jesus' baptism.”**

And then – I know how this is going to go, because it's happened just about every time – she will say, **“Oh, our preacher preached about that too,”** as though it's an amazing coincidence. Can you believe it? But – sorry, mom – it is no coincidence. Lots of Christian people today are thinking about Jesus' baptism. We are joining with Christians around the world to understand and make sense of God's word to us in this particular story.

Let's listen now to Mark's description of Jesus' baptism by John in the Jordan River. This is found in Mark, chapter one, beginning with verse 4.

⁴ And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. ⁶ John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷ And this was his message: "After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. ⁸ I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." ⁹ At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰ Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. ¹¹ And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Dear friends of Jesus Christ,

Over the years, one of the pleasures of reading the Bible for me – you've heard me say this before – one of the pleasures has been that I find something new and fresh and unexpected every time – or nearly every time. Even with familiar readings, like this story of Jesus' baptism, there is always something new to discover. I see something I never really saw before.

Last week, as I was reading this story and preparing for today, I found a New Testament scholar who points out that Mark's gospel begins and ends in the same way – in other words, with a violent and unexpected tearing open of something.

I don't think I had ever seen that before.

As Jesus emerges from the waters of the Jordan River, Mark tells us that Jesus looked up and saw **"heaven being torn open [rent asunder, which is the meaning of the word in the original language] and the Spirit descending on him like a dove."** The story doesn't mention that anyone else saw this, but Jesus saw it.

The heavens were torn open.

I'm not sure what that would look like, but there it is in the story, the most important detail, the only detail, really, that Mark mentions concerning Jesus' baptism.

And then – here is what I had never noticed before – in chapter 15, all the way at the other end of the Mark's gospel, Jesus is on the cross, he takes his last breath, and – do you know what comes next? The curtain in the Temple, we are told, and both Matthew and Luke mention this as well, the curtain separating the holy of holies from the rest of the space, that curtain is torn from top to bottom, at the precise moment of Jesus' death.

“Torn asunder,” the same verb, in the original language, that’s used here in Mark, chapter one.

The idea of course is that God lives in that space called the holy of holies, and only the priest is allowed to enter, on behalf of the people. And then suddenly – violently – that curtain is torn in half, from top to bottom. So, God is no longer separated from us, but instead breaks through into our space, whether we like it or not, just as God broke through in chapter one at Jesus’s baptism.

Pretty cool, right?

Let me tell you why I think that’s pretty cool. In fact, let me tell you why it’s not just an insignificant detail in the story. Let’s explore together why this is a central truth to our faith.

If you want to know what makes Christian faith unique, and what makes it different from all religions of the world, and frankly what is so compelling about it, I think we don’t have to look any further than these two stories: God tearing open the heavens – in other words, whatever separates us from him – and breaking through into our space, invading it, taking over.

Some of you have probably done far more reading and exploring of other faiths than I have. I never felt a need to find out, for example, at least not in great detail, what Buddhism teaches or what Hinduism teaches. For some people, though, there is a strong need or impulse to read widely – to make sure, I guess, that *Christian* faith is a better option than all the other options available to us.

And for people who get excited about comparative religions, there is always the temptation to say, **“Well, you know, all religions, in the final analysis, when you get right down to it, are pretty much the same. All religions teach pretty much the same thing. All religions, for example, show us how to find inner peace and contentment and so on.”**

Certainly you have heard that, or something very close to it.

But, do you know something, whenever I hear someone saying that, I want to say, **“No. I don’t think you understand. Maybe that’s true for other religions. Maybe other religions show us how to find inner peace and serenity and so on, but that’s not what the Christian faith teaches.”**

In fact, I want to say, **“Have you ever read the gospels? Do you remember the place where Jesus said, ‘I came not to bring peace, but the sword?’ What does that mean to you?”**

Look, before last week, before I started reading deeply about our scripture reading for today, I might have said that Jesus’ baptism was a happy family time. I might have imagined – because I like to imagine how these situations looked – I might have imagined that Jesus’ parents and extended family were there, taking pictures, everyone holding up their mobile phones to capture the event, even though there’s no evidence whatsoever that any family members were present. I might even have imagined a brunch afterward to celebrate...because of course that’s how we celebrate baptisms.

But this past week I was reminded, all over again, that Christian faith has this other – how should I say it? – unexpected, violent, life-or-death quality. Nothing to do with God is ever casual. Even baptism, which we think is so adorable, has this other meaning. It’s scary. Something happens in our baptism that we don’t control.

I come from a faith tradition – the Reformed theological tradition – that has made baptism so neat and clean. There is no clean up afterward. I dip my fingers into the water and then make the sign of the cross on the forehead of the person being baptized. And no one gets wet. I use so little water that you don't even need a towel.

No one feels ... how do I say this? No one, when we celebrate baptism in that way, no one experiences what baptism really teaches us.

We have moved so far from the original meaning that I wonder if it's even possible to get it back.

In baptism – I think you should know this much – in baptism we go under the water and we drown ... we die to our old selves. And then – this is the exciting part – we come up out of the water and we are raised to new life.

So, what we believe is that in baptism we die and then we are raised again to new life in Christ. That's baptism. Dying and rising. Death to life. That's what they were doing out there at the Jordan River, in case you were wondering what was going on way back in the first century. There were a lot of people who were sick and tired of the old and who wanted more than anything to be made new.

Tell me, how do you go out for brunch after something like that?

Think about what happens. You've been rescued from death and brought back to life. Who has an appetite after going through something like that?

We do our best – tell me if you see this differently – because I would really love to know, if you do – but we do our best to make Christian faith seem so bland, so unobtrusive, and frankly so boring. Unthreatening. Other people have pointed out that Christian *worship* in most places today – with its candles and flowers and soft music – puts us to sleep.

And of course they're right. Don't you agree?

There have been a few books in recent years about why men, in particular, have dropped out of church life. In the U.S. I think that something like 60 percent – that's six-zero, 60 percent – of church members today are women. And the percentage of men, according to these studies, keeps dropping.

And at least one writer – I'm not entirely convinced by this, but I think it's interesting to think about– one writer has made the case that men do not find much meaning in candles and flowers and soft music.

And just so you know, I have nothing against candles and flowers and soft music. Which may be one reason I still go to church. But here's the issue.

We have forgotten or neglected or chosen to ignore one of the essential truths of the Christian faith – so essential that Mark begins and ends his gospel with this truth – namely, that there is something violent and disturbing and scary about our faith and about our God.

I don't remember my own baptism because I was a tiny baby, but I do remember my confirmation.

In the church I attended, the church my parents brought me to, it wasn't called confirmation. It was called a catechism or communicants class. But what I remember best about that experience is that the night

before, the night before this wonderful thing was to happen in church – it was a Saturday evening – one of the elders of the church stopped at my parents’ home and dropped off a box of offering envelopes with my name on it.

Think about this. I was 18 years old. Maybe 19. I was older than most confirmands because I am slow learner. But I had finally made the decision to be confirmed. My parents were so pleased...and relieved. In fact, they were beside themselves with joy. I was pleased too, although I didn’t really know what I was doing. It just seemed like the right thing to do ... finally, to get this thing out of the way.

And an elder from my church dropped off a box of 52 offering envelopes, one for each Sunday of the year.

For the longest time I stared at that box. I just wanted to make my parents happy. I just wanted to make myself happy. Remember all that stuff about inner peace and contentment? That’s what I wanted for myself. My life was so upside down as an adolescent that I thought a little Christian faith would be good for me. There was even going to be a party after church. My dad was going to barbecue some meat on the grill. What a great day!

And what in the world was this? The church was making demands on me! I had no money. And so, I remember feeling irritated that the church would welcome me into its fellowship by telling me to give money. The nerve.

And to be honest, it was not the last time that the church has irritated me. My faith, I quickly learned, was going to require something from me. No, I take that back. My faith – I didn’t see this at the time – but my faith was going to require *everything* from me.

God had torn open the curtain separating himself from me, and God had reached into my space and claimed my life in a personal way. I was no longer living for myself alone. I was living for the God who created me and breathed the breath of life into me, and my life now belonged to him in ways I could not have imagined at the time.

That’s baptism. Forget the candles and flowers and soft music. Think of a radical makeover. One day you’re looking for inner peace and contentment, and the next day you’re following Jesus to the cross.

If you have come here today looking for inner peace and contentment and serenity of spirit, I’m not sure what to say to you. I can this much to you: I understand. I was there myself at one time.

But if you think the product of faith, the outcome of believing and embracing all of this stuff, is finding a kind of detachment from all the pressures and distractions of the world, then I have bad news for you. God has torn open the heavens. Your life will never be the same.

If you think your life is upside down right now, just wait until God gets a grip on you.

We didn’t have time to read any further into Mark’s gospel today, but if you were to read the next verses, the ones that follow immediately after the baptism, you would see that almost as soon as Jesus rises from the waters of baptism, he is driven by the Spirit into the wilderness.

Driven! Another one of those uncomfortable words. Opposite of inner peace.

I don't know about you, but I like gentle nudges. To be honest, I don't even like gentle nudges all that much. I don't like to be told what to do. But if I have to learn something, a hard lesson, let's say, I would like it to be gentle and understanding and unthreatening. I would like it if God would just put his arm around my shoulder and say, **“Doug, let me show you a few things you'll need to understand.”**

But no, Jesus was *driven* into the wilderness, he was thrown out there, he was given no choice in the matter.

The lessons he learned were not easy ones. They were painful. Here's one: Who's in charge of your life. Me or you? Those lessons, which are essential for every believer to learn, took every ounce of energy he had. By the time his ordeal was over, we are told that angels had to come and minister to him, had to nurse him back to health. It wasn't easy. It was exhausting.

If you have chosen Christian faith because you're hoping for an easy life, a tranquil spirit, then I have painful news for you. The lessons we learn are going to come at a cost. And they are going to leave scars.

But...when we emerge on the other side, when we are raised to new life, when we emerge from the waters of baptism – and this is the promise I want you to hear today – we will know a joy that is available nowhere else.

At the end of Mark's gospel, after all of the drama of the crucifixion, after the curtain in the temple has been torn in two, as Jesus' body hangs lifeless on the cross, there is a Roman soldier at the foot of the cross. He was there to make sure the execution came off without a problem, and that no one interfered – a terrible job, if there ever was one.

And when it was all over, do you remember what he said? These are remarkable words, and they are the words I find myself saying whenever I think I've been through enough and can't handle anymore.

He said, **“Truly, this man was God's son.”**

That's where I am today. The heavens have been torn open for me. God has invaded my life. And nothing will ever be the same. And do you know something? I wouldn't have it any other way.