

Heavens Torn Open

January 11, 2009, The Baptism of Christ (First Sunday after Epiphany)

Lectionary citations

Genesis 1:1-5

Psalm 29

Acts 19:1-7

Mark 1:4-11

As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. (Mark 1:10)

Baptism of Christ Sunday officially closes the Christmas season in our church calendar. Jesus has grown to be a man and is ready to begin his ministry. It is fascinating and significant that the first step he takes in this ministry is to be baptized by John in the River Jordan. Jesus' baptism by John is so unexpected and so difficult to explain that it must have really happened. Even those who regard most of the Bible as metaphor and symbol—stories that teach us things, but never “really” happened—accept the baptism of Jesus as a historical event. The reason for this universal acceptance of Jesus' baptism is interesting.

This event is universally accepted because it is an embarrassment to the church. It is embarrassing because it is difficult for the church to explain why Jesus was baptized, especially by John the Baptist. John's baptism was one of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Since it is an accepted belief of the Church that Jesus was without sin, there was no reason why Jesus should be baptized by John. In addition, when the church was starting up, the Jesus movement and the John movement were rival religious bodies. Most people would assume that if John baptized Jesus, Jesus was a follower of John. In fact, Jesus' baptism would be seen as an imitation rite, the way Jesus joined John's movement, something the early church would have emphatically denied.

Therefore, regardless of how you view the Bible, you can have the comfort that Jesus' baptism is just as real as Washington crossing the Delaware, Lindbergh crossing the Atlantic, and you crossing the street this morning. John baptized Jesus in the Jordan. If this event is an embarrassment, it is an embarrassment of riches because it is so full of meanings and implications for our lives in the church.

As I was meditating over this scripture, the phrase “he saw heaven being torn open” came back to me again and again. What that phrase tells me is that this event, the baptism of Jesus, is a boundary crossing event. Things that seemed to be forever separated—heaven and earth, spirit and body, God and human—were being joined together through this baptism.

The mystery of Jesus is how he could be fully God and fully human at the same time. Since he was fully divine, he did not need to repent and be forgiven. Neither did he need to receive the Holy Spirit. Jesus

did not need to be born again in the Spirit, since he was born by the Spirit. In this scene of baptism, more than almost anywhere else in the Gospels, the Trinity is evident. God is both one and three. One God, three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. These three persons in relationship provide a model for all loving relationships in our families and our churches. This scene of baptism shows us how these three will be working together in the project of salvation. The Father leads from above, the Son engages with us face to face here in this life in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, and the Spirit energizes and enables Jesus to perform acts of power—healing, feeding, and freeing. God has crossed the gap and has become even more deeply involved in our world and our lives than ever before. The baptism is God's public declaration that heaven and earth are no longer separated. God has crossed the gap in order to save us.

John as a prophet of God initiated this baptism. John was the baptizer, but his baptism was from God, as Jesus implies in Mark 11:30 when he responds to the religious leaders questioning his authority. *"John's baptism—was it from heaven, or of human origin? Tell me!"* Baptism has a "human origin" in rites of purification. Human beings can choose to prepare themselves to live in closer relationship with God by repenting, turning away from sin, and asking for forgiveness. We can lift ourselves up to God. However, the power of baptism comes from God reaching down to us through the Holy Spirit. The real meaning of baptism comes from its dual nature—something performed by human beings, but coming from heaven through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus did not need to be baptized. **We** need to be baptized. Jesus did not need to die and be resurrected. He did these things for our salvation, not for his own sake. In his baptism, like in so many others things, Jesus is our pioneer and role model. Jesus was the first to be baptized with both water and the Holy Spirit. John had baptized only with water. We are baptized with both water and the Holy Spirit because through his death and resurrection, Jesus created the Church, the Body of Christ. Paul emphasized the connection between our baptism and Christ's death and resurrection in his letter to the Romans. *"Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life."* (Romans 6:3-4)

On the day of Pentecost, God gave the Church the gift of the Holy Spirit. From that day forward, all those baptized in the name of Jesus were baptized not just with water, but also with the Holy Spirit. When we are baptized, God reaches across the gap and brings us into his family, the body of Christ. This family came into being through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ our Savior.

Baptism is like so many things in life that involve change, growth, and transformation. We can prepare for them, but cannot force them to happen. You may remember being a child preparing for the first day of school. You can sharpen all your pencils, fill your 3-ring binders with crisp white paper, and even protect your textbooks with those nifty covers made from grocery bags. You can arrive at the classroom early; sit attentively at your desk, ready to learn. However, the learning will not begin until the teacher arrives and begins to open up the learning for you.

This brings up the issue of how we can prepare for baptism. Jesus was baptized as an adult. His baptism marked the beginning of his public ministry. He was not baptized as a child because baptism was not a custom of the people of Israel. In fact, his baptism marked his separation from the community and his commitment to creating a new community, the Church. Most people joined the early Church as adults and there was no separation between baptism and confirmation. Those denominations that practice "believer's baptism" feel they are closer to the practice of the early church by limiting baptism to adults or older children who can verbally profess their faith in Jesus Christ.

This is not our tradition. We sometimes explain child baptism by pointing out that the sponsors, parents, and congregation make a commitment at baptism to give the child a Christian upbringing. We also point out that children will have a chance to reaffirm their baptismal vows and make a personal declaration of faith at confirmation. These points are important, but not essential. We baptize children because we believe that baptism is an action of God through the Holy Spirit. That action does not require the baptized person to be able to make a verbal statement of faith. Baptism is the beginning of our journey as members of the Body of Christ. As members of the Body of Christ, we have been given the gift of the Holy Spirit. We should not hesitate to pass on this gift by baptizing our children, to give them the best possible start on their Faith journey. Starting out the journey knowing that they are baptized gives our children the assurance that no matter what mistakes they make and wrong turns they take, they belong to God and his church no matter what happens.

Baptism is an unconditional covenant between God and his people. Unlike some of the Old Testament covenants with their blessing and curses, Baptism is 100 percent blessing. In the Old Testament, the chosen people would be blessed if they kept the 10 commandments. If they broke them, they would be cursed. Baptism is a free gift of grace. There is nothing we can do to undo our baptism or return the gift. No child was ever harmed by being baptized. Instead, someone baptized as a child is given the blessing of knowing that they were a beloved member of the Church from their earliest days.

Baptism and Holy Communion are the two sacraments of this church. As sacraments, sacred acts, they are mysteries that recall the entire history of the relationship between God and his people. In baptism, we

- reenact the creation of the world when the Spirit of God passed over the waters,
- remember the deliverance of Noah and his family and all the animals from the flood, when Noah released a dove to fly over the water, and
- recall the deliverance of the Children of Israel from slavery by passing through the waters of the Red Sea.

All of these are times when God came down from heaven and stirred up creation through water, fire, and the Holy Spirit. God has shown again and again that he is not a distant King, silent and indifferent in a far-off heaven. Instead, he is a loving father, deeply involved in the life of the being he created in his image. For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. That Son came into this world as one of us, fully human. Yet he is also

something unimaginably greater than we are, he is fully God. This was shown to us at his baptism, a baptism more powerful than any that John or any other human being could perform; a baptism where the heavens were torn open. Yet through his death and resurrection, Jesus now gives that baptism to each of us, adopting us as his children, members of his Body, the Church. There is a story told about an anxious Martin Luther, the Reformation leader, "as he struggled through the lonely months of his safekeeping in the Wartburg Castle. 'I am baptized,' he would scribble on his desktop, and remember his baptism as he battled back despair." Whenever we stray, whenever we feel weak or discouraged, let us all say to ourselves, "I am baptized, I belong to the Father, I have received the Holy Spirit through the Son. I am baptized, I am baptized. I am baptized." Amen.

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