

“The Heavens are Torn”

Mark 1:4-11

8 January 2006, The Baptism of the Lord

the Rev. Todd R. Goddard, pastor

Zion West Walworth United Methodist Church

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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.”

Prayer.

The heavens were torn.
Ripped apart.

It is not as if
the divide had not
been previously breached.
Through covenant and law,
at the hand of
anointed
chosen
prophets
preachers
kings
and angels,
our God has
worked a history
of intervention
- of loving intervention.

The heavens were torn.
Ripped apart.

Leaving an opening
for the Spirit
the Holy Spirit of God
to pass through
descend
and alight
upon him.
“This is my Son”
the voice called
from behind the jagged opening.
“My beloved
with whom
I Am
well pleased.”

The divide
between heaven and earth
has continued to be torn
ever since.
Two thousand years
and
fifty plus generations later
have shredded

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and left tattered,
like a faded
weathered
battle flag,
the barriers that separate
God's heavenly kingdom
from God's earthly kingdom.

The divide
is only a barrier of inconvenience,
one that only gives the illusion
of privacy
of being alone
of being on our own.
But in reality
God is present
- Emmanuel -
- God with us -
- just beyond
our perception.

The divide
can no more hold back our God
than a paper marquee
can hold back
a charging football team
being introduced
at a championship game.

The divide
is still being torn today.

Pastors, preachers, and priests
welcome to the font
young and old alike
to experience the same flood
experienced by Noah and Moses
to listen for the same water
that was turned to wine
to experience the same tearing of the divide
that our Lord
Jesus Christ
experienced at the hand of John.

We share

a common baptism
with Jesus
with one another
and with every other
child of Jesus Christ
who has come before us
and who will come after us.

Consider the tattered divide;
the rip that occurred at your baptism.
With the pouring water
the Spirit of the Heavenly Father
broke out of heaven,
tore into your life,
established a base camp
called faith,
took hold
and will never,
ever,
let you go.

Reverently I removed
the ledger from my shelf
opened to the pages
that list each of
the 120 people
I've lifted up to God
in celebration of their
baptism with water
and the tearing,
ripping
fire
of the Holy Spirit.

In the course of
twenty years of parish ministry
names rise off the page
with prayers of thanksgiving;
names separated by geography or distance
names separated by time and space
names separated by heaven and earth,
and very possibly, hell.

The great divide was breached

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and the number of God's children grew by
one
the fourth of November
Nineteen eighty-four.
Water whetted the matted hair
of adolescence lost;
Jeffrey,
who at the same moment
his soul was received
into paradise
when the respirator was turned off
and his parents cried out
in anguish.

The great divide was broached
and the number of God's children grew by
one
when water whetted the infant head of
Shawn,
conceived by parents joined in marriage
before God's altar
and me,
whose birth
was attended by my beloved wife,
Cynthia,
and the miraculous circle of life continued.

The great divide was broached
and the number of God's children grew by
one
when parents Richard and Jacqueline
brought infant daughter Sarah
and as a family
they experienced the Spirit's entry
and were welcomed by God's
baptismal waters.

The great divide was broached
and the number of God's children grew by
three
the Sunday
Elizabeth, Benjamin, and Felicia
were presented to me
standing above a furnace grate

that began to belch black smoke
gasping in disrepair!

The great divide was broached
and the number of God's children grew by
one
when I held Alexa in my hands
and poured the waters of grace
upon her head.
In later days a line would be drawn
between Alexa's parents and me
a line of pain and hurt
that continues to gnaw and burrow
in my conscious.

The great divide was broached
and the number of God's children grew -
Jessica, Richard, Kerry
Andrew, Amber, Trevor,
Kodie, Pamela, and Sean
and a whole host of
witnesses were added to Christ's kingdom.
They are more than memories
to a maturing and graying pastor.

Each is connected to me
and together we wade
into the river of life.
Each shares our common baptismal waters.
Each is a Christian disciple or saint.
Each is a child of God.
Each and every one of us
have been adopted by a loving Father
forgiven by a redemptive Son
saved by a compassionate Spirit
through the baptismal waters
touched by the same Holy Spirit
that descended
and alighted
upon Jesus in the Jordan.

The heavens were torn.
Ripped apart.
On this day

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we remember
we recall
our Lord, Jesus Christ
- a new Epiphany of our God -
how he stood with John
in the midst of Jordan's
rippling waters.
The heavens were torn.
Ripped apart.
And through the opening
we welcome the Holy Spirit
with praise and thanksgiving.

The Word of the Lord,
as it has come to me.
Thanks be to God.
Amen.

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