

In the church, we tend to make the birth of Jesus a very important and special event—yet only two books in the Bible actually give us a Christmas story (Matthew and Luke)... Mark skips over it completely!

By contrast, there are at least six books in the Bible that talk about Jesus' baptism (the 4 Gospels + Acts and Romans). It would seem, from the witness of the Bible, anyway, that Jesus' baptism is a more important / (theologically) significant event.

Perhaps this should be a clue for us. Perhaps we should not only give more emphasis to Jesus' baptism (and its significance)... but to our own baptisms as well...

Mark wastes no time in getting us into the story. John the Baptist appears in the wilderness, predicts the coming of a powerful Messiah (whose sandals he is not worthy to stoop down and untie)... and then that very person shows up to be baptized. And Mark tells us that... "*As (Jesus) was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens being ripped open...*"

The Greek root that Mark uses here – *schizo* (from which we get "schism") – which means "*to rend / to tear apart or rip open*" – seems a strangely violent word to describe such a happy event.

This same word is actually used as a kind of bookend of Jesus' life and ministry in Mark's gospel. It is used again at the time of Jesus' death when something else gets "*torn apart / ripped open*"—the Temple curtain (the curtain that separated the Holy of Holies from the rest of the Temple space... the curtain that separated the people from God's presence). The Temple curtain gets "*torn in two from top to bottom*"... letting us know just *who it is* doing the tearing apart (15:38)!

In both cases—at both ends of Jesus' life and ministry—what had long been sealed is suddenly *torn open / ripped apart*, never to be sealed (or sewn up) again. Think about it: if the heavens are just "opened up" (like a door or a window), they can just as easily be "closed up" again; but if the heavens are "torn apart / ripped open"... there is "permanent damage"...

As one biblical scholar (Donald Juel) put it, it is at this moment that *the barrier between heaven and earth is removed*. No longer is God a distant, impervious God... sitting on a throne in the distant heavens... God is unwilling to be confined to sacred spaces. God now dwells among us... God is with us... *God is on the loose in our realm*...

The *ripped open heavens* point to the cosmic significance / theological importance of this event... this "epiphany" – revelation of God. The voice from heaven tells us exactly who Jesus is—the beloved Son of God... through him, the barriers between God and all of humanity are *ripped open / torn apart* – never to be closed again.

The entire story that follows, then, truly is "*the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God*" (as Mark titles / introduces his gospel in verse 1)... and what God did through him... for us!

In Mark's account, Jesus seems to be the only one who hears and sees these significant events surrounding his baptism. *And* those words of blessing from the Father are addressed specifically to him.

However, thanks to the storyteller, we also get to see the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending... to hear the Father's voice. In other words, from the beginning, we know more than the characters of this story.

Consider the power of those words of affirmation and blessing that Jesus heard that day as he prepared to begin his ministry: *“You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”*

We have no idea what fears or concerns... what hopes or dreams Jesus carried with him to the Jordan river that day; but we know that he left having seen the very heavens torn open... having received the gift of the Holy Spirit... having heard the blessing of God, his loving Father.

He probably needed that... considering what happened next. For no sooner is God’s love and favor for Jesus expressed... than the Spirit throws Jesus headfirst into the wilderness. *“And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan....”*

This hardly seems like a loving thing for God to do, right!?

God declares God’s deep love for his Son... and then, immediately, drives Jesus into the wilderness... into the realm of evil, darkness, and death. WHY?!?

Well... because confronting evil, darkness, and death is precisely what Jesus’ baptism (and his ministry) is all about!

I read the sermon of a colleague this week... who wondered if we’ve made baptism too easy / too comfortable... so much so that it has lost its significance / meaning... especially when we think about how Mark describes Jesus’ baptism...

The way we tend to talk about baptism, it would have made more sense if Mark had talked about the dove, gently cooing, or perhaps fluttering over the surface of the water.

But that is not how he talks about it. He talks about the heavens being *“torn apart”*...

A few weeks back, during Advent, we heard the prophet Isaiah cry out to God—*“O that you would tear open the heavens and come down”* (Isaiah 64:1).

Mark clearly understands that in Jesus, this is exactly what happened! God has torn open the heavens and come down.

And that’s why, in Mark’s judgment, the baptism of Jesus is such a radical act.

In Jesus, God has committed the act of breaking and entering the world... and Mark wants the world—us—to know!

Baptism is a summons to us... to be part of the barrier-shattering, redemptive work of God...

Think back to what we say in the affirmation of our baptism:

- We publicly renounce the devil and all the forces that defy God... we renounce the powers of this world that rebel against God... we renounce the ways of sin that draw us from God...
- And then we promise to live among God’s faithful people... to hear the word of God and share in the Lord’s supper... to proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed... to serve all people, following the example of Jesus... to strive for justice and peace in all the world...

We promise to live the way of life our Lord teaches us in and through his life and ministry... in and through his teaching and example...

If baptism is an epiphany (a revealing of God... which it is), then how we live into and out of our baptism should be shaped by that truth... and its charge – for us—each of us—to be an epiphany—a revealing of God—for others.

Do our lives do that?!

Dear friends, Mark writes his Gospel for people like us—

...people who want to follow Jesus, but struggle to do so – pushed and pulled as we are by the forces of evil and darkness at work in the world / in our culture...

...people who struggle to live lives of faith—lives of honesty and integrity and faithfulness—in a world filled with more lies and propaganda than truth... and voices that call out to us / demand our attention... that seek to shape us... and our self-perceptions, our interpretations of world events, our life choices, and on and on...

Amidst of all the noise and competing “authorities” and so-called “truths” – the voice of God breaks through the heavens to remind us who we are (and whose we are)... to deliver a powerful word of love, acceptance, and affirmation to us...

In the thundering whisper of Jesus’ identity, we hear the truth about ourselves, as well – that we, too, are beloved sons and daughters... with whom God is very pleased!

This is precisely what we are given in baptism—the truth about ourselves / the bedrock of our identity... our only reliable hope in the midst of the trials / despair / chaos / upheaval of this world.

This is why we are encouraged to “live wet” in our baptisms—to remember our baptism daily... to ground ourselves in its promises... and “call”...

In this sacrament, God gives us a way of life – a daily pattern of returning to the waters of baptism where we drown our sins / die to our self-centeredness and self-righteousness and our complicity to the world’s normal ways of doing things... and then rise again, forgiven and cleansed, given a fresh start to a new life in Christ.

In this sacrament, God gives us a calling... a responsibility – to shine the light of Christ in the dark places of this world... to speak truth to power... to name evil and sin what they are... to stand against injustice and oppression and abuses of power in all forms... to speak words of forgiveness... to heal divisions... to work toward God’s vision of justice and peace...

I don’t know what “wilderness” trials / temptations lie ahead for us – this week / this year... what struggles or challenges await us on the long, dusty road ahead; but I do know that we do not go it alone.

God is with us through it all.

God will not abandon us... but will walk with us – strengthening us... encouraging us... granting us grace sufficient to become the people God wants us to be... the people God calls us to be...