

1 Epiphany - The Baptism of Our Lord – Year B – January 11, 2012 - Homily

Genesis 1:1-5; Psalm 29; Acts 19:1-7; Mark 1:4-11

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When I was learning to ride my first bicycle, I got rather cocky. Perhaps inevitably, I took a nasty fall off said bicycle, and took several inches of skin off my knee. The graveled area I'd been riding across ripped open the flesh leaving deep track like scars in neat parallel lines. Scars that I still have to this day, although they've faded quite a bit over the years as my body first healed and has since renewed itself several times over. Still for a long time, my knee looked like a plowed field, furrowed and ready for sowing with seeds.

Tonight's reading from the Gospel of Mark has the first of three events in the life of Jesus in which we hear about the heavens been torn apart. This reading describes Jesus' private experience of a divinely initiated ripping apart of the time-space continuum. It's like something out of Star Trek. It makes me think of a giant vortex in space that appears out of nothing and nowhere. Jesus' experience is private, but not private if you know what I mean. Since the narrator of the Gospel of Mark spills the beans, all of us who are privileged to hear or read this account of the beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ get to experience what Jesus saw and heard. We also get to reflect on what it all means. As Jesus is coming up out of the waters of the River Jordan, He sees the heavens torn apart, the Spirit of God descends on him like a dove, and then Jesus hears God's voice saying, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Let's take it all in, one piece at a time.

First, the tearing apart of the heavens. For those who have been following the lectionary carefully, this account in Mark's Gospel is the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophetic appeal to God in prayer, "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down" (Isaiah 64:1). We celebrate the fulfillment of this prophecy in Christ Jesus, God incarnate, the Word made flesh, God's Son made manifest in human form. The incarnation fulfills John's prophecy of the coming one who is to baptize us with the Holy Spirit, as well as God's promises to the Israelites throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. The meaning of the incarnation will become all too apparent in Jesus' life of obedient service to others, His suffering, death, and most importantly, His resurrection. It makes our own baptism into and through the waters of Jesus' baptism, life, death, and resurrection all the more significant. Our own baptism also marks the beginning of our transformed and Spirit-empowered life, filled with obedient service, self-denial, and not exempt from suffering. As I always tell our Baptismal candidates, God does not ask for much, just our whole self, and our whole life.

Along with Jesus' baptism, the other two events where the heavenly realm is opened, or torn apart are at Jesus' transfiguration, and at Jesus' crucifixion, where the Temple curtain is torn in two. The transfiguration reveals Jesus' spiritual identity as the ever-living Son of God most completely, but Jesus tells the small group of disciples who witness it to keep quiet until after He's been raised. The tearing of the Temple curtain opens the door to God and heaven fully. The new Temple is not a building made by human hands, or a building in one specific location. The new Temple is a person – Christ Jesus our Lord. As believers, as members of Christ's Body, and children of God, we too are temples of the Holy Spirit. Like Jesus, we too are in relationship with God the Father through our faith in Christ Jesus, and by the power of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit descends on Jesus at His baptism as affirmation of His identity as God's Son. What is not included in this text is that as soon as Jesus is baptized, He's driven out into the wilderness by the same Spirit to be tempted. During his own periods of temptation throughout his

life, Martin Luther didn't just affirm his Christianity, he constantly reminded himself, "I am baptized." It's useful for us to reflect on Luther's insightful prayer and the importance of our baptism. It's the strength of the Holy Spirit that we're blessed to receive at our baptism that guides us and keeps us strong in the face of earthly temptations. Our baptism defines *our* identity. Just as Jesus was declared as God's Son, the Beloved, our identity is defined by our faith in Christ. We are clothed in righteousness by virtue of faith in Jesus, named as a child of God, a brother or sister of Christ, and an heir of God's kingdom. At Jesus' baptism we see and hear the intersection of divine-human relationship. God the Father, who is Love, acknowledges and affirms Jesus as God the Son, the Beloved. God the Holy Spirit, who is the Love that flows between them, descends and rests on Jesus, such that the all members of the Holy Trinity are made manifest in this great epiphany moment. Love is alive in the world, and remains alive because we are sealed as Christ's own forever at our own baptism, and live out God's love in and through our own lives as Christ's Body in the world.

Jesus, the one without sin, stands in the River Jordan, humbly modeling the steps of repentance and obedience to God's will in solidarity with all of sinful humanity. Jesus, our Savior, goes on to live out His own baptismal covenant through a life of self-giving. He lives a life of obedient service that a few short years later will result in His death on a cross, and His glorious vindication through the resurrection. Our own baptism is the beginning of our life of faith, and our ministry in service to God. The heavens are torn apart to show us the lengths that God will go to in order to invite us into relationship with Him, and to reconcile the whole world to God's self through Jesus Christ, His Son, the Beloved. At our own baptism, our hearts are opened ready to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit so that we become beloved children of God. My knee still bears the furrowed scars of my cycling accident. My flesh has not remained the same after being torn apart. Nor can you and I ever remain the same after our baptism. We are irrevocably changed by the Holy Spirit, and are still in the process of being changed. Our transformation continues throughout our lives of faith.

The challenge for each of us is to make the Good News of Jesus Christ manifest to the world in our words and deeds, in the way we live, and the way we love and serve our neighbors as ourselves. This is the season of epiphany, a season of spiritual growth and transformation. It is a season for each of us to be renewed in body, mind, and spirit, so that we can deepen our relationship with the Lord, and serve Him and one another faithfully. May it always be so, according to God's will.

Amen.