

“Torn Apart”
Mark 1:9-11
Baptism of the Lord

January 10, 2021
Westminster, Greenville
Ben Dorr

Have you ever made a big deal over a small thing?

I recall one of my previous installation services as a pastor, when I was beginning my pastorate in Indiana many years ago. The preacher at that service was a friend and colleague from Texas.

We knew each other well, having worked for almost 6 years together in Texas, and I was very glad to have him preach at my installation in my next call.

Now at a service of installation, you want everything to be just right...and of course, there was a typo in the bulletin.

Not a big deal, but it listed the text on which my colleague was preaching—1 Corinthians 13—it listed that text as the Old Testament Lesson. I was hoping he wouldn't see the mistake, hoping he would not notice.

Well, when it came time for the sermon, my colleague began by thanking the congregation, and then he explained how, when I worked at his church, I always taught a confirmation class and I always had the class memorize the books of the Bible.

Then he looked at me, sitting in the front pew, and he said: “Ben—1st Corinthians is in the NEW TESTAMENT.”

And it was funny and everyone laughed, a good way to break the ice. It can be amusing, sometimes, to make a big deal out of a small thing.

And sometimes it's a mistake to do it.
Sometimes we wish we hadn't done it.

Have you ever gotten angry with someone before, and then after you got mad at that person, you were embarrassed, because it was such a trivial detail that you got all worked up about?

A big deal over a small thing...

I'd like to do that this morning.

Not—get mad.

I'd like to make a big deal over a small thing, if you don't mind.

It's a small detail in our text.

Our text from Mark today describes the baptism of Jesus.

“And 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.”

This is very similar to the way that Matthew and Luke describe this event. But there is a difference. Matthew and Luke say that “the heavens were opened,” “the heaven was opened”...almost as if heaven has doors, and God gently opened the doors, and the Spirit calmly came down on Jesus.

It's not the way Mark describes the event.

Mark says that Jesus saw “the heavens torn apart.”

Why did Mark write, “torn apart”?

Is this a minor difference, a small thing?

Or is it a big thing?

To say that the heavens were torn apart is to suggest RIPPING and destruction...

Are those the words you think of when we talk about baptism?

No, no.

When we baptize someone here at Westminster, the child's parents—or the confirmand or adult being baptized—they receive a baptismal certificate. Most churches do this. Can you imagine going home with that baptismal certificate, and just saying, “Eh...who cares?”—and RIPPING IT?

Tearing it apart?

Of course not.

When I think of baptism, I think of baptismal gowns, passed down through the generations, very gently handled through the years....not tearing the gown, not ripping the gown.

So why does Mark present this STARTLING image in our text?

Maybe I'm just making too big a deal over a small thing—do you think I'm making a big deal over a small thing?

Before you answer that, let's do a little more exploring.

Torn apart.

Those words don't just suggest ripping and destruction.

They suggest POWER.

The power of God at work in Jesus's baptism...

When you think of the power of God at work in your life, what do you think of?

How would you describe God's power?

A colleague tells the story of another pastor who once went to visit one of his parishioners in the hospital.

The woman was suffering from a terminal disease, and the pastor went to visit her knowing that, at the end of that visit, he would pray one of those prayers that acknowledges the desperation of the situation.

A prayer that is already settled about what the outcome will be.
A prayer that asks for God's blessing and God's peace, but does not ask God for physical healing that will not come.

I've prayed that kind of prayer.
All ministers know the importance of that kind of prayer.

Well, this pastor went there prepared to pray that kind of prayer.
But the woman prevailed upon him to beg God to heal her.

And so, against his better judgment, he prayed a different kind of prayer. He prayed fervently for her healing, even while he understood that the only reason he was praying it was that this parishioner had ASKED him to do it.

When the prayer was over, he left.
And a few days later he was back for another visit.

This time the woman was sitting up in the bed.
The tubes had been removed, and the curtains were open.
She said to him, "You won't believe what has happened."

She said, "The doctors noticed some changes the other day, and called for more x-rays, and they have told me that they can no longer see any sign of a tumor! I'm going home tomorrow."

That pastor who prayed the prayer he didn't want to pray, do you what he said he did in the parking lot?

“I looked up into the skies and said, ‘Don't ever do that to me again!’”¹

Now was that the power of God?
Breaking into that woman's life to save her?
Tearing through a terminal diagnosis to give her new life?

I don't know.
Maybe it was, maybe it wasn't.
I have no idea.

What I do know is that it's not the only way in which Mark's Gospel teaches us to think about God's power.

Torn apart. Let's go back to that word.

The Greek verb that's used here is schizo...it's where we get the word for schizophrenic.

Do you know where else this verb is used in Mark's Gospel?

At the very end, Chapter 15:

“Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom.”

Torn in two—same word used here.
Think about this.

¹ As told by the Rev. Dr. Ted Wardlaw in his sermon, “The Danger in the Water,” July 20, 1997, at www.day1.org.

Heavens torn when Jesus is baptized...
 Curtain of the temple torn when Jesus died...

I wonder if Mark is linking these two events
 to help us understand what God's power is all about.

You see, the Gospel of Mark does not say that God's power ONLY
 shows up in big and noticeable events:
 like Jesus stilling the storm,
 or Jesus healing blind Bartimaeus...

According to Mark, it is not only in the miracles of Jesus,
 but in *the suffering* of Jesus
 that God's power becomes truly known.

And we get a PREVIEW of that in Jesus' baptism.
 Just look at what God says to Jesus at Jesus' baptism.
 Do you remember the words?

God says:
 "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

It's a powerful statement!

The first part of those words, "You are my Son"—it comes from
 Psalm 2, words used at the coronation of a king, words used for God to
 claim that person as God's own!

The power of God CLAIMED Jesus at his baptism.

And the second part: "with you I am well pleased"—it comes from
 Isaiah 42, which is one of the suffering servant passages in Isaiah.

In other words, at his baptism, Jesus is not only claimed.

He is called.
 Called not only to a life of performing miracles,
 and not to a life of leisure and smooth sailing.

But called to be a suffering servant.
 All **that** is PACKED into the baptism of Jesus!

And may I put like this?
 It's also part and parcel of your baptism.
 And of my baptism.

Like Jesus, we are both claimed and called.

Claimed by God's love, and called to carry that love...not just to the smooth places of our society, where things gently open for us. But called to go to the difficult places.

Our baptism means we're called to work for peace and justice in God's world, and to do so in non-violent ways, even when working for that justice and peace is difficult.

A few years ago, *The Christian Century* wrote about a Presbyterian pastor named Ralph Hamburger. Back in 2014, Hamburger received the distinguished alumni award from Princeton Seminary, which published his story:

Hamburger grew up first in Germany and later in the Netherlands. His father was Jewish, his mother a Gentile who did not practice religion.

As a young man, Ralph Hamburger had a hunger for God.

As war descended upon the Netherlands, he grew increasingly angry over the heinous campaign against the Jewish people, and worked

in the Dutch underground movement, helping many threatened people escape to places of safety.

After the war, he came to the United States “a broken man,” with deep grief, anger, and hatred of those who sought to exterminate the Jewish people.

What did he do with this anger and hatred and grief?

First, he joined a lay ministry of young people who served as agents of reconciliation, going to war-torn parts of Europe to join in physically rebuilding the country.

Then he went to seminary.

Then he served a couple churches in the United States.

And THEN he decided that God was calling him to serve churches behind the Iron Curtain. So the Rev. Ralph Hamburger spent the rest of his ministry IN DANGER of getting thrown in jail, all because he wanted to spread God’s love and justice in Communist-controlled land...²

Why not stay in the United States?

Why not practice his ministry in a safe place?

Do you think that perhaps the Rev. Hamburger understood the claim and call of his baptism?

I do.

I believe he understood something about the power of God, something I trust you understand as well.

² This story comes from an article by Craig Barnes, “Lesser-known Heroes,” in *The Christian Century*, December 22, 2014, as well as an article on Princeton Seminary’s website, “Meet the 2014 Distinguished Alumni Awardees,” at www.ptsem.edu.

When our baptism asks us to carry a burden, to carry a cross,
to suffer on behalf of someone else,
it is not a call that separates us from God.

It's a call that draws us closer to God's love!

As Isaiah puts it in our Old Testament text for today:

“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.

“When you pass through the waters...they shall not overwhelm you...when you walk through fire...the flame shall not consume you.”

Notice that we don't get to avoid going through the waters, we don't get to avoid walking through the fire, so to speak...but God will be with us every step of the way.

Now working for peace and justice in non-violent ways...it doesn't have to mean traveling to a foreign country. We can do it right here at home.

One of my colleagues tells about a time, early in his ministry, when he found himself “embroiled in a rather nasty theological fight at the denominational level.”

“As is often the case in such disputes, the opposing groups were not just debating parties; they were feared enemies, each side persuaded that the other sought to undermine the faithfulness of the church.

“During one of the most acrimonious seasons of this struggle,” my colleague learned that his 4-week-old daughter would need to be hospitalized for surgery.

It was, he says, “a dark and frightening time”.

The day before the surgery, my colleague received a telephone call from one of the leaders of the other group in the theological dispute.

“I groaned to myself” he says, “Not now, I beg you. Not now.”

The voice on the other end of the line then spoke unexpected words:

“I heard about your daughter...I want you to know that she, and you, are in my prayers.”

My colleague goes on to say that there was something about his voice that let him know this was not just the expression of pious sentiment.

“Something about the character of Christian love had...found expression” through that voice, in that phone call.³

Now what prompted that person to make the phone call?
I believe it was his baptism.
The power of God at work in his life.

Of course, the same is true for you and me.
In our baptisms, we are claimed and called by God.

³ Thomas G. Long, “The Senses of Preaching,” Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988.

We too are given the job of going to the difficult places of our world, whether it's across an ocean, or across a zip code, or just across the street...to share God's love.

If we do it, God's power will be at work in our lives, in ways that we never dream.

Now I asked you a question toward the beginning of this sermon, you may have forgotten it.

Did I just make a big deal about a small thing?
Or is the call and claim and love God gives us in our baptism...
is it, perhaps, the most important thing?

Amen.