

“He Saw the Heavens Torn Apart”
Mark 1:4-11; Genesis 1:1-5

Genesis 1:1-5

¹In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, ²the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.

³Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. ⁴And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. ⁵God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

Mark 1:4-11

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.”

The Sermon

Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.

And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart: in Greek, σχιζομενους, (schizomenous); from the root σχιζο (schizo),

as in “schism,” a split between strongly opposed factions;

or “schizophrenia,” a condition in which cognitive dysfunction tears someone’s reality apart from others’ experience of reality;

or the origin of “scissors,” which are a tool to separate something from itself.

You can picture God’s fingers grabbing, tearing, ripping through the heavens—and *the Spirit descending like a dove on Jesus.*

God has ripped open, torn apart the curtain that divides heaven and earth,

so there is no longer one side, where there is the realm of a distant God existentially separated from creation, and another side where biology and animal instinct and human emptiness and greed govern reality.

The barrier has been bulldozed. God has demolished any separation between the kingdom of God and the realities of our human lives.

And this man, Jesus, who before his birth was called Emmanuel, God-with-us, would carry the message into the world that the God who called us into being also calls us to care for our neighbors and the world, and to love our neighbors as ourselves—which means we are to love our neighbors *and* ourselves.

We are here to bring the testimony that God has not just quietly, spiritually slipped through the ether and in a wisp of the Holy Spirit moved gently and inconsequentially through the world, briefly, before retreating back into a murky, distant heaven, far enough away to be utterly harmless to our systems and completely undemanding of our lives.

We bring the testimony that God has demanded and achieved entrance past every boundary we thought we could use to seal God out.

That means that our systems of injustice, hatred and greed, and our habits of duncelike denigration and heartless exclusion of certain people, are now on notice:

that God is loose in *this* world; and the meanspirited, selfish, self-oriented powers of threat and violence and death do not stand a chance. They'll win some battles sometimes, and leave tears and destruction and broken hearts and anger and poverty in their wake—spiritual as well as material poverty.

But with God, nothing is impossible. And with God at loose in the world, even the worst among us is subject to transformation. And you and I have been created, appointed and empowered to play a role in that transformation.

Something is happening in the world right now. The Spirit is active, and you don't have to come to Montreat to be able to sense it—but it doesn't hurt.

Something is going on. Some membrane has been dissolved—not temporarily set aside but permanently crossed. God is here. God is doing something with these people who are in middle school right now.

You may know already that all physical matter, all the atoms including the ones that are arranged at the moment to make up your physical body, was once inside a star. We are borrowing from the universe every single one of the molecules that make us us.

But it is more than just molecules that make you you.

Everything you are—spirit, soul and body—was made by God. You are made of stuff that God made. That means you are awesome: you are fearfully and wonderfully made.

God imagined you, outlined you, could hardly wait to see you, eons before your atoms ever came out of that star.

And that same God was not going to let your life be subject to hopelessness in a world in which God couldn't reach out to you and *inspire* you—which means to put God's spirit within you.

Three years after John the Baptist had helped Jesus go under the water of baptism and come up again to see the heavens torn apart, Jesus followed his life's pattern all the way home to Jerusalem, all the way to the cross, where he would surrender his life so that you and I could have ours eternally.

When it was noon on that day, and Jesus was on the cross, darkness came over the whole land. At three o'clock, someone ran, filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink, saying, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down."

Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last.

And the curtain of the temple was, without explanation, εσχισθη εις δυο (eschizthe eis duo)—torn in two, from top to bottom, as if to witness to the world that the culmination and completion of Jesus' earthly ministry did not mean the separation had resumed.

The heavens are as open as they ever were, and God-with-us is a permanent situation.

From before the beginning of time, a wind from God—*ruah*—swept over the face of the deep, primordial darkness.

That same Spirit is now sweeping over you and me, infiltrating our systems, igniting the will to make the world a better place in the name of Jesus, inspiring you and me to consider how we intend to live our lives, to push past the limits of what we think we are capable of.

God has torn apart the heavens, so there is no boundary keeping you apart: you always have access to God, and God always has access to you.

God has reached out for you at great cost.

God has torn apart the heavens to get to you.

What do you suppose God wants with you?

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