

Mark 1:4-11; The Baptism of our Lord B; 1/10/21 Pastor Ellen Schoepf

I am going to be very honest with you. My heart is just breaking. My heart feels torn apart by what we saw last Wednesday as insurrectionists stormed our nation's capital. What happened makes me feel like my heart has been ripped apart. And it is all because of **words**, malicious words, lies that have been promulgated, and conspiracy theories that have been sold as truth, all of which create bubbles of delusion that imprison peoples' minds. **Words** incited this event. And, the **words** and **lies** that have been spoken destroy lives and yes, they can tear apart and destroy governments and countries! **Words matter!** Words can build up or destroy. So, again on this day, it is so comforting to hear some **words** that truly matter, **words** that are **life giving** as my heart grieves.

Today, we hear the beginning verses of **Mark's** gospel as he presents **his** version of the Jesus story. Mark's gospel does not begin with a baby and shepherds and angels. No. Mark's version of the Jesus story is very stark, and rather abrupt as it begins **at the river** when God literally **breaks** into this broken world through the person of Jesus. That is how **Mark's** telling of the Jesus story begins!

"In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan." Mark's telling of the Jesus story **begins**

as Jesus enters the river **with** others to be washed in the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. This gospel **begins** with Jesus' **baptism**. It begins with Jesus entering the historic waters of the Jordan River and doing so in **solidarity** with sinners, with you and me. And, this is significant because that is how he would spend his earthly life and ministry – living with, eating with, talking with, and healing sinners, while calling sinners to follow him. Anyway, what is truly **extraordinary**, is that when Jesus comes up out of the water, he looks up and sees the heavens **torn apart** and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. The heavens are not simply opened. They are **torn apart** as the Spirit is poured out upon Jesus. Mark intentionally uses the Greek word *schizomai*, which literally means *ripped apart*. This is a form of the verb *schitzo* as in *schism*. When something is ripped apart it is not easily closed again. When something is ripped apart, we may think of some permanent damage or rupture that **cannot** be repaired. **This** is the image Mark gives us, an image that is strong, even violent.

This is Mark's incarnation narrative—the ripping open of the heavens by God with a declaration that the One on whom the Spirit rests is **God's own Son** out of the heavens. The Son of God has pierced the barrier between heaven and earth; God has shattered the cosmos in the

incarnation. God shatters the heavens and the cosmos to enter human history in the person of Jesus! In this gospel, the incarnation of the Son of God is declared by **revelation** at baptism. Dramatically, abruptly—voice, dove, ripped open heavens—all announce that now the kingdom of God is at hand. **Now, with Jesus' baptism**, comes the beginning of new things, a new beginning in the history of redemption with the advent—the coming—of God's own Son. Indeed, the kingdom of God **has** drawn near. **The heavens have been torn apart and they will never close again.**

When Jesus came out of the water, dripping wet, we do not know if anyone else saw what Jesus saw. What we **do** know is that a voice came from heaven and spoke to Jesus. It was personal, intimate, and direct as the voice said, "You are my Son, the Beloved. With you I am well pleased. In you my Spirit will be present on earth in a new way." Yes, the heavens had been torn apart, God had entered the deep brokenness of the world through and in the person of Jesus Christ, and the heavens would never close again.

This ripped apartness, showing a God who is crossing and breaking through all boundaries, showing God **present** to **us**, is so significant in Mark's gospel. In fact, torn apartness bookends Mark's gospel. You see, at the end of Mark's Jesus story, we again find this same word used to

describe the ripping apart of the temple curtain at the very moment of Jesus' death. The ripping apart pattern that begins here at Jesus' baptism, ends with his death. When the heavens are ripped apart at his baptism, the Spirit enters Jesus, and a **heavenly** voice addresses him as "Son." And, at the end of the gospel, as Jesus hung on the cross and "breathed out his spirit," the curtain of the temple was torn apart from top to bottom, just as the heavens had been ripped apart. The holy of holies no longer separated the sanctuary from the people. The curtain could never be repaired. And, on **that** dark Friday, there was **another** voice that was heard. It was a voice **not** from far away but from close by, from someone present on the scene. **This** voice did **not** come from up in the heavens. It came from down on the earth. It was the voice of a centurion **soldier** who stood at the foot of the cross keeping order, waiting to pronounce death. When he saw that Jesus had breathed his last, **he** was the one who said, "Truly this man was God's **Son**."

In this person we call Jesus, all protecting barriers are now gone. And, in Jesus, we discover God is **unwilling** to be confined to sacred spaces. God is on the loose in **our** own realm, in our world. God is **with** us and things will **never** again be the same. And, it is in the **torn apart** place where God has entered, where God has come through, and that

place will never again be closed as it was before. In the person of Jesus, we see God **tearing apart** all the presupposed ideas humanity has created for what Messiah God should look like. In Jesus, we see a tearing apart of the social fabric that separates rich from poor. We see God breaking through people's hardness of heart to bring forth **compassion**. We see God breaking through rituals that have grown rigid and routine. We see God tearing apart the many kinds of chains that bind. And, as God continues to break into the broken torn apart places in our lives, I pray God breaks through the myriad of **delusions** that imprison **us, those falsehoods and conspiracy theories that seem to be controlling so many people's minds**. I also especially pray God continues to tear apart our preconceived notions of what it means to be God's beloved child so that we can know **God loves us as we are. We are God's beloved!**

And so, I ask you, is there a torn apart place in your life? I know there have been ripped apart places in my life, times when I have felt as though my very life was torn apart. And, right now my heart is deeply torn as I see our country torn apart. We all have torn apart places in our lives, places where the very fabric of life seems to be ripped apart. Right now, we as a Faith community, feel torn apart because of this virus. Our lives feel torn apart as we must live very differently during this painful time.

However, the gospel Good News to us is that it is **in those torn apart, ripped apart places in life where God is so very present**. God enters the ripped apart places in our lives and comes to us in water, in **Word**, in bread and wine, and says to us, ***“You are my own Beloved Child. In baptism, I have poured my Spirit into you, I am with you and you are mine. Everything has changed, and you have been made new.”*** Yes, **words matter**, and **these** words bring life giving **love** that **changes us!**

My friends, the gospel **Good News Word** to us on this day is that **you** belong to the God who created you and created all that is. The gospel Good News is that God has crossed **all** boundaries to name and claim **you** as God’s own. The gospel Good News is that **you** have been baptized into the death of Jesus. **You** have been baptized into the **Word** made Flesh so that **you might become the Flesh made Word and carry God’s redeeming, grace-filled Word to the world!** **You** have been baptized into the Word made Flesh so that you might become an **agent** of what you have received: **You** are now God’s agent of grace, love, forgiveness, and mercy in this very torn apart world, even in the ripped apart aspects of our present lives. **Live into your God given identity as a baptized child of God!**