

A Hole in the Heavens
Baptism of the Lord
January 10, 2021
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.'

Sermon

There was a man in my church in Iowa who loved maps. I've never really known anyone quite like him. His family would give him atlases for his birthday and Christmas presents. Next to his recliner there was a large wooden magazine holder that was filled with maps of states and countries he had visited. He kept them close so he could get them out and just look at them.

I like maps, too. Maybe not as much this fellow, but when I'm traveling a map helps me get my bearings... it gives me perspective. And I'm a guy who likes to have a sense of my environment... to know where I am in relation to other people and places. In that sense, we all need a good map, don't we? We all need some help with locating where we are now and having a sense of where we are going.

The thing about maps, though, is that they are not static documents. Maps are always changing: new roads are built, and old roads become obsolete... a river is dammed up to form a lake... hurricanes continually alter the geography of a coastline. You may have seen that aerial photo of the Choluteca Bridge in Honduras. A storm literally moved the river out from under the bridge so that it now stretches over completely dry land with the river off to the side. Maps are not static documents – they can't be. And in order to be helpful... to be accurate, they need to be continually updated.

Well, not to stretch the image too far, but we NOT ONLY need maps for geographical orientation, we need them for the living of our lives. And just as geographic markers change, so, do those maps. I mean, think how the pandemic has altered the maps of our family and work and church life. Think how much has changed – some of it permanently, some temporary... and think about what has remained the same.

And what about the events in Washington this week, how did they shift the maps of who we are as a nation... about the depth of division in our country? About political leadership? And not only political leadership, what have we learned this week about the map of Christianity? I'm sure you noticed in the images and footage that some of the rioters carried banners and flags with Christian symbolism... some with "Jesus 2020" printed on their signs. What have we learned about our faith communities... and about religious leadership in our nation? How has what happened this year... and now what happened this week shifted things on the maps of our understanding?¹

In his reflection this week in the Presbyterian Outlook, Roger Gench, writes that "Christians are ever in need of a map of the world from a biblical point of view." By that I think he means that we need a map that takes into account the sovereignty and providence of God... that takes into account the redemptive power of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Christ... that takes into account the continuing work of the Holy Spirit to heal and transform our world. Roger Gench is right, I think... Christians are ever in need of a map of the universe that is written by God... that comes from God... and he suggests that in the center of that map is the event we remember this morning.

You see, unlike Matthew and Luke, Mark begins his gospel not with the story of Jesus' birth, but with his baptism... and in that way, he makes sure from the getgo that we know just who Jesus is. Mark also tells us that Jesus' ministry begins at a spot on the map we would never expect — not in Jerusalem - in the holy city... not in a palace – the halls of wealth and power... not in the temple - in the company of holy people. Rather he shows up in the wilderness among all the sinners and broken people who came out for John's baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Though he is without sin, he insists one being baptized with them so that they might know he loves them, accepts them, and is one of them.

But most important of all: When Jesus emerges from the waters of his baptism, something happens that remaps the world... and not only this earthly world, it remaps the entire cosmos. For Mark tells us that as he came up out of the water, he saw the heavens being "torn apart" ... ripped apart... creating a hole between heaven and earth through which Spirit descends like a dove and announces: "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased."

Now, I know we Presbyterians tend to be pretty concrete and realistic... but this morning I want to ask you to suspend that for a moment and to tap into your spiritual imagination and visualize this... visualize the heavens tearing apart to reveal Jesus as God's very own beloved child.

¹ Roger Gench, Baptism of the Lord, in Presbyterian Outlook, January 8, 2021. This sermon is in large part inspired by and follows Gench's reflections.

Imagine this great fissure in the heavens... a great hole in the cosmic map of the universe that forever eliminates the boundary between heaven and earth.² And imagine this hole created at the baptism of Jesus... and which is there at our baptism... imagine it giving US our bearings... orienting OUR lives... locating US in the story of God's redemptive love for this world.

Well, in addition to that – to locating us – this hole also means that God is on the loose in this world. In Jesus' ministry... and in our own ministries... God is on the loose. Even in the midst of a relentless and devastating pandemic... even as our beloved nation is being rent apart by division... God's transforming power is on the loose in this world, challenging everything that would distort and disfigure this good creation... and empowering us to lend our energies to God's work of healing what is broken. This, my friends, is ultimately where we find our hope... our hope is in God and the promise eventually... eventually, God's will shall be done on earth as it is in heaven.

It is hard to state how important it is to return again and again to this baptismal place. For we sure are a people prone to lose our bearings... we're "prone to wander" as the old hymn says... and it is here that we reorient ourselves again and again to this center. And it is here that we hear the same voice that Jesus heard... a voice telling us the truth about ourselves... a voice claiming us as God's own beloved children... a voice anointing us and sending us out to love and serve God and our neighbors. I am told that in the Coptic Church there is a wonderful practice in which baptized Christians keep a little bowl of water on their bedside table. Each morning upon awakening, the person dips her hand in the water and makes the sign of the cross on her forehead, and speaks the words, "I am baptized. I am accepted. I am forgiven. I am loved. I am called to serve."

² Gench references Gordon Latrop's work in Holy Ground: A Liturgical Cosmology.