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Mark 1:10 "And just as (Jesus) was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven (saying), 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'"

The Gospel of Mark's story of Jesus --- begins at the river: "In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan." There's no birth narratives in Mark's Gospel and no list of Jesus' genealogy as there are in both Matthew's and Luke's Gospels. No mention of Bethlehem or the shepherds. No angels. No Magi. No star. No stable. No King Herod slaughtering the holy innocents. Not a word even about Mary and Joseph. Nor any of the cosmic wonder

that opens John's Gospel: "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God."

No, Mark's story is far more ordinary and direct. "In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan." Jesus entered the river with all the others to be washed in a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. This was a bit problematic in later thinking. In Matthew's account, John the Baptist argues with Jesus: "Oh, I should be baptized by you," he said. Some became worried about why Jesus submitted to a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. But there it is in Mark's Gospel. This is where Jesus would spend the rest of his earthly life -- - in the midst of sinners, with ordinary people --- eating with them, talking with them, healing them, calling them to follow him, telling them his stories. Why should the circumstances of his baptism be any different?

The narrator of Mark's Gospel doesn't say whether Jesus looked up at the sky before he went under the water that day, but when Jesus came up out of the water, wet from the Jordan, he did look up, we are told, and he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit (of God) descending on him like a dove. Still there's no indication in Mark's Gospel that any others saw this --- only Jesus. And Jesus saw the heavens 'torn apart,' not "opened" as in Matthew's or Luke's versions, but torn apart.

The Greek word here is a form of the verb *schitzo*, as in schism or schizophrenia. It is not the same Greek word as 'open' in Matthew and Luke's accounts. One opens the door. One closes the door. The door looks the same thereafter, but something that is torn apart is not so easily closed again thereafter. The ragged edges of the tear never go back together as neatly as they once were. Mark wasn't careless in using that word: *schitzo*. He may have remembered Isaiah's (64:1) plea centuries before when the prophet cried out to God, "Oh, that you would tear the heavens open and come down to make your name known to your enemies and make the nations tremble at your presence."

Now Jesus stood in the Jordan, dripping wet, without a hint that anyone else saw the heavens torn apart or saw the Spirit descending like a dove on him or heard the voice proclaiming him a beloved son of God. And there wasn't a clue that the nations were trembling either. But that did not mean that nothing had changed. Indeed after that moment everything changed. This is the acknowledged beginning of Jesus' public ministry, his baptism by John, a ministry that changed the world. And though we usually imagine God speaking in a booming voice, resonant and deep, that voice sadly is more often heard in movies than in Scripture. God's voice can also be just a whisper, a breath, as quiet as the still small voice that reached Elijah hiding in his cave. And at the Jordan the voice

that came from heaven and spoke, seems to have spoken only to Jesus alone. It was intimate; it was direct. "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." In you, my Spirit will be present on the earth in a new way. The heavens were torn apart, and they would never close again as they once were.

For the torn place in life is where God often comes through most clearly, the place that never again closes as neatly as before. From the day Jesus saw the heavens torn apart, he began tearing things apart, tearing apart the images of others about what the Messiah was supposed to do or be --- Tearing apart the social fabric of his society that separated the rich from the poor, the Jew from the Samaritan, women from men. Breaking through a hardness of heart to bring forth compassion and mercy to one another, even for our enemies. Breaking through religious rituals that had grown rigid or routine. Tearing apart the chains that bound some in demon's power. Tearing apart the notions of what it means to be a beloved child of God. Revealing the weakness of power, and the power of weakness. Nothing would ever be the same thereafter, for the heavens would never again close so tightly.

At the end of his life and ministry Jesus hung upon a cross midway between heaven and earth. And when Jesus breathed his last breathe, Mark tells us that the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom, torn apart just as the

heavens had been torn apart at his baptism. The holy of holies no longer separated the inner sanctuary from the ordinary people in the public courtyard outside. The tear could never be repaired. And though there was no voice from the darkened heavens that day of crucifixion, as God was silent, there was a voice not far off. A centurion soldier stood at the foot of the cross keeping order, marking time, waiting to pronounce death. When he saw that Jesus had breathed his last, then he said, "Truly this man was God's Son." Where on earth did he get that idea from? Heaven knows, for that soldier had somehow heard for himself, the words whispered to Jesus alone at his baptism in the River Jordan. The word that had come through the torn place in the sky, and now through the torn curtain: "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." So at the very beginning and at the very end of the Gospel of Mark, the sacred is torn apart. And the torn place is where God often comes through to us, the ragged place that never again closes as neatly as before.

Like most of us, my life has been torn apart at times, and battered and shredded in places. And it's always impossible to put the pieces back together again exactly as they were before. Things changed, but God is still present there, despite the tears. God is still present within the tears, I believe, in a different way perhaps than was expected. For the torn place is

where God comes often into our lives, the ragged place that never again closes as neatly as before. And perhaps it is at the moments of great tearing that we most long to hear again that voice of affirmation from heaven, reassuring us that we too are still beloved children of God.

Is there not a torn place in your life? For we all know what it is like to be hurt, suffering and pain and disappointment, it seems, are a part of the human experience, a part of life for all of us. So we will all know what it means to be torn or broken. Sometimes it is our health that 'breaks' down, or we suffer financial loss and go 'broke,' or our relationships with loved ones 'break up' or 'break down.' Or our institutions simply 'break,' as surely as the windows and doors at the nation's Capitol this week were broken. At some point in all of our lives, we will be 'broken' and torn in some way too, sometimes even shattered.

Indeed our world now has also been ravaged by this corona virus, so very many deaths, so very much suffering, so much anxiety and pain. Our nation has also been shattered by political divisiveness and bitter partisanship, by fear and by violence. We are as a people wounded. And we as people of faith must recognize that now is the very time that we must stand up and care for another, respect one another, forgive one another, heal our wounds together, gathered as we are with one another,

as the ordinary people, eating with one and another, talking with one and another, telling one and another our stories, just as assuredly as Jesus did. Discovering for ourselves the presence of God that always comes through those torn places in our lives, listening together with one and another for those reassuring words there that we are all still beloved children of God, all of us, for in hearing those words again, our torn and broken nation can be changed forever, and for the better.

AMEN