

Lent 1 - 18 February 2024
Georgetown Presbyterian Church
Jessica Tate
Too Close for Comfort

Mark 1:9-15

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."
12And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. 13He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.
14Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God,
15and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

This is the Word of God for the people of God.
Thanks be to God.

Author Glennon Doyle starts her book Untamed with a story about her family's visit to the Cheetah Run at the zoo. She tells of Tabitha, the cheetah who was born and raised at the zoo, alongside Minnie, a yellow lab whose constant presence in Tabitha's life helped to domesticate the cheetah.

As gathered families watch, the zookeeper opens Tabitha's cage and the cheetah sprints the length of the run at lightning speed and is ushered into a small fenced field.

Doyle watches as Tabitha stalks back and forth, tracing the boundary of the fence. She imagines the animal thinking, "Something's *off* about my life. I feel restless and frustrated. I have this hunch that everything was supposed to be more beautiful than this. I imagine fenceless, wide-open savannas. I want to run and hunt and kill. I want to sleep under an ink-black, silent sky filled with stars. It's all so real I can taste it."

Then, Doyle writes, she imagines Tabitha looking back at her cage, the only home she has ever known. The smiling zookeepers, the sweaty spectators, and her best friend Minnie the Lab. She imagines Tabitha would sigh and say to herself, "I should be grateful. I have a good enough life here. I'm crazy to long for what doesn't even exist."

“Tabitha,” Doyle writes, “You are not crazy. You are a freaking CHEETAH.”¹

At the beginning of Mark’s gospel Jesus is baptized in the Jordan. When he comes up out of the water, the heavens are **torn apart**. In Matthew’s and Luke’s versions of this scene they say the heavens open. But not Mark. For him, the heavens are *schizo*, torn apart, ripped, rended, and the Spirit descends into Jesus.²

I wonder what to make of this image of God **tearing** the heavens to come down to the River Jordan. It’s an awesome image, this tearing. The closest I can fathom is a storm where you can see bolts of lightning streak down from the clouds to the earth. That moment - when for a split second - it looks as though the sky is ripping in two. It’s awesome and frightful, the power in the bolts that part the sky.

It’s awesome and frightful the power, the untamed majesty of God tearing open the heavens and descending to earth.

The verb *schizo* will be used again toward the end of Mark’s gospel. Mark says the Temple’s curtain is torn — *schizo* — from top to bottom at the moment of Jesus’s death. New Testament scholar Brian Blount writes that “in this case the curtain was most likely the one that walled off the Holy of Holies, the place of the divine presence, [separating it] from the rest of the Temple. No one except the high priest entered it. And he only did so once a year in order to atone for the sins of the people.”³

I am sure the walled off room for the Holy of Holies was created out of respect and honor. I am sure our thinking of God as “up there” in the heavens is because we recognize God’s vastness and otherliness and our own smallness. But I wonder if it doesn’t also have the effect of putting God safely out of the way. Confining God to once a year atonement rituals or a single hour on Sunday morning. It boxes God in to something we access when we have need, but leaves us otherwise free to go about our daily lives, unencumbered by God coming close to us.

At the start of Mark’s gospel the heavens are torn apart. At the end of the gospel the Temple curtain is torn in two. If I understand the text, in the person of Jesus, in his life and death, any attempts we make to wall off God from our lives, to contain God, well, God has torn down those divisions and come close to us.

There is comfort in that, to be sure — to have Jesus close — healing us, forgiving us, teaching us, praying for us.

¹ Doyle, Glennon (2020). *Untamed*. Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

² Brian Blount in Blount, Brian K. and Gary W. Charles. *Preaching Mark in Two Voices*. Louisville: WKJP, 2002, p. 20.

³ Blount, p. 21.

But we would be wise to be wary, because the God in Mark's gospel who tears open the heavens is awesome, powerful, beyond our control.

Jesus has come close to us and he isn't interested in tweaking the status quo. He is bringing the kingdom of God here and now.

He casts out demons and casts off calcified laws.

He heals the sick and sickens the powers-that-be.

He calls ordinary folk to follow and calls out the righteous.

He tells us: Repent and believe the good news.

Author Annie Dillard captures it this way:

“On the whole, I do not find Christians, ~~outside of the catacombs~~, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? ... It is madness to wear ... velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return.”

“Repent and believe the good news,” Jesus says.

There is a new thing dawning....and it upends business as usual.

Bring on the crash helmets.

“Repent and believe the good news.”

Repent is a churchy word with a lot of baggage. It conjures up images of hellfire and damnation and Bible thumping. Of preachers with megaphones on street corners. The ones talking about the end times and you better find Jesus because judgment is coming.

These preachers got the urgency of the verb right.... It is present in tense, active in voice, imperative in mood.⁴ If you dig into the recesses of your brain for your grammar lessons you may recall that present, active, imperative suggests ongoing urgency. The act of repenting is an urgent act.

But the street preachers miss some important things. The meaning of the Greek verb *repent* is “to change your mind.” To go a different way.

And the present, active, imperative isn't once and done. It's a continual act. One we need to embark on over and over again. Repentance isn't a single defining moment that we get right or we get wrong, with eternal consequences. *The mercy of the Lord is new every morning.* (*Lam 3:22-23*) the scriptures say.) What grace that “repent” is an ongoing invitation to change our minds, to change our ways.

Repent and believe the good news, Jesus says. Change your mind. Go a different way.

⁴ Gary Charles in Blount, Brian K. and Gary W. Charles. Preaching Mark in Two Voices. Louisville: WKJP, 2002, p. 37.

What way?

God's way, toward God's Promised Day.

Gary Charles, former pastor of Old Presbyterian Meeting House in Alexandria, says it this way: turn around and take hold of something better than you have now.

Turn around and take hold of something better than you have now.

I don't know about you, but that feels like a breath of fresh air and a seriously scary proposition all at once. Like the cheetah resigned to the life she knows at the zoo, while part of her yearns for the wide open savanna.

There is so much good in our lives, so much for which to be thankful.

And yet, something is *off*.

There are the big things: war, violence, systems of injustice, extreme poverty.

There are the things that feel intractable: polarization and demonization, sexism, racism, classism — all the -isms.

But there's also the million stressors in our lives — big and small. There's loneliness, depression, burnout. There's hurting and aching. There's relentless striving and insatiable need for productivity. There's cynicism and hopelessness.

Something is *off*.

If I understand the text, THAT is why God tears open the heavens and tears through the curtain to come close to us. So that in the person of Jesus God comes close and announces a new way of life, life in the Promised Day of God.

The first thing Jesus says in the gospel of Mark is, "Repent and believe the good news." Go a different way. Turn around and take hold of something better than you have now. Take hold of God's Promised Day.

I don't think he means we're tweaking our lives as they are. It's not about earning just a bit more money or being a little less stressed. It's not about giving just a bit more to charity or coming to church a little more often. It's about a whole new quality of life. A whole new way of seeing and being in the world.

Perhaps our Lenten discipline need not be about giving something up, but of taking stock of where we are.

Lingering when something feels off in our spirits, rather than ignoring it or numbing it away, continuing on with business as usual.

Perhaps our Lenten discipline can risk talking with a friend about what feels off and imagining it could be different. Or talking about what is life-giving and how we create more of that in the world.

Perhaps we can try a new thing or two to move just a bit closer to the kingdom of God.

Friends, here's what I know to be true. God has torn open the heavens and come close to us.

Turning the status quo on its head.

Breaking through all our habits and excuses and cynicism and hopelessness. Showing us the Promised Day of God is at hand.

Inviting us to brave the awesome, fearful power of God in our lives and in the world and take hold of something better.

These forty days are our chance to don our crash helmets, to unleash our cheetahs — to stay close on the heels of God in the world and risk a better way. For all of us.

Amen.