

## Opening the Heavens

A Sermon Preached at Georgetown Presbyterian Church

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Text: St. Mark 1:4-11

According to the book of *Genesis*, when Adam and Eve were first created and walked in the Garden of Eden they did so openly and comfortably, conversing easily and at first hand with God. This, more than anything else, is what made Eden Paradise. More important than its physical beauty and easy, immediate comforts, it was a place where there was no great separation between human beings and God, no unbridgeable distance between heaven and earth, for in that conversation, in that Word, God and humanity were joined.

All that changed, of course, in our first parents' disobedience. No longer were they open and honest – for that is what their original nakedness signifies; rather, they hid themselves and tried to be something they were not. First, they hid themselves from God, both by ducking behind bushes and then by false words, by lying about their own actions in eating of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. And they further did so in donning clothing, costuming themselves in order to give an appearance of who they were, rather than letting their real selves be seen. And thus they were expelled from the Garden. Heaven and earth no longer mingled, no word or conversation seemed to join them, and thus the heavens were closed to Adam and his sons, to Eve and her daughters. Heaven and earth were now separate, and each had their own ways, ways that no longer led to the other.

Of course, for human beings there were still haunting memories of what was lost and there were hopes for restoration and reconciliation, hopes inspired by the angels and God

himself, it is said. Jacob dreamed of a ladder between heaven and earth where the angels ascended and descended. The prophets foretold a time when God's Spirit would descend on all flesh and would be with women and men again, a time when by the Spirit, God's law would be written on their hearts, a time when their old folks would see visions and their young would dream dreams. But these were prophecies and hopes, and until they were fulfilled heaven was closed to Adam and the earth.

That is until this day that we now celebrate, this day when on the banks of the Jordan River, Jesus approached John the Baptist and was baptized. It was then, Mark tells us, as Jesus arose up out of the water, that the heavens were torn apart and the Spirit descended as a dove upon Jesus, and a loud voice from heaven proclaimed: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am pleased." One ancient church father, Hippolytus, described the event this way: "The region above was inaccessible..So it happened not only that the Lord was being baptized – he was also making new the old creation...A reconciliation took place between the visible and the invisible. The celestial orders were filled with joy, the diseases of the earth were healed, secret things made known, those at enmity restored to friendship."

Old Hippolytus is right, of course. In the first place, in Christ himself, who is God and man, heaven and earth have been joined. But they have been joined not only in *his* person, they have, furthermore, in Christ's ministry of which his baptism is the beginning, been joined *for us*: the ills and diseases of our earth are healed by heaven's word, for the blind begin to see and the lame to walk; the barriers between us – between Jew and Gentile, male and female, slave and free are torn down, and great things hidden from the time of creation are made known to us.

This is what we celebrate on this day when we commemorate the Baptism of the Lord and the beginning of his ministry. We also celebrate our own baptism, long ago as that might be, for

it is our own baptism that joins us to Christ in his death and resurrection and is the joining of heaven and earth in us. Our baptism in Christ, too, fills the celestial orders with joy as our earthly bodies are washed and filled with God's Spirit.

It is for that very reason important for us to understand how that happens. For what we celebrate in either Jesus' baptism or our own is not a past event, say, the way we celebrate our birthdays. Heaven and earth are not reconciled and joined by the waving of a hand, a sprinkling of water, and a declaration that it is so. Rather, they are joined in us, and in our baptisms, in the same way that they were joined in Jesus'.

For Jesus' baptism was not simply an event, and it was certainly not a merely symbolic one, as ours is not a mere symbol, either. Rather, Jesus' baptism began a ministry and as such it began a way of life. It was as a way of life that it opened heaven to men and women. If heaven had been closed to them up this point, it was not because God had refused to speak to his creation anymore; it was because humanity had lost any way to heaven. That was what had really happened in Eden. God could speak easily with human beings then because they know how to listen then; they wanted to hear, they wanted to hear the Word. And they wanted to go the way it pointed, and they trusted it. They could say then truthfully, as the psalmist says: "Teach me the way to go, for to Thee do I lift up my soul." But in choosing to determine their own way, to be the masters of good and evil themselves, they no longer listened, and they lost the way.

What then happens in Christ's baptism is that a man, Jesus, has found that way once more. That is why heaven is joined again to earth. And how has he found it? Simply by having the humility to offer himself in obedience to God's will.

I think that we are often puzzled by the story of Christ's baptism, for as we understand it, baptism is something like medicine for getting rid of sin, original and not so original, and the

sooner it is taken, the better. Why, in that case, should Jesus be baptized, we wonder, since he is supposed to be sinless? According to Matthew's version of this story, even John the Baptist who is preaching repentance balks when Jesus appears at the Jordan, saying it is Jesus who ought to baptize him. We concur in his judgement. But in Matthew's version Jesus also says why things ought to be this way: "So that righteousness may be fulfilled," he declares. Sinless or not, he has come to fulfill righteousness for all humanity and that means that he has also come to show the way to be righteous. As a man, which he surely is, that means that he will live as a man ought to live, and not as an exception to which the common lot of humanity does not pertain. His righteousness is not just for himself, it is for us, too.

All of us who have raised children have from time to time encountered some rather grand mess in the house. We have also met just as frequently a certain response when a child is asked to pick things, although he or she may not have been the one responsible for the mess, or at least not all of it. Strict logicians that they are, they respond by telling us that they don't need to do anything because it wasn't their fault. In response to *that* what one of us hasn't said to that apparently infeasible argument, "I don't really care whose mess it is, just be a help to us all and pick it up." We also, particularly if the child is an older sibling or husband who is whining this way, point out the need to be an example, that is, to do the right thing and teach everybody else by example how to do the right thing.

So we might understand Jesus' baptism. It wasn't his mess, but nevertheless righteousness demands that if righteousness in God's creation were ever to be achieved that we therefore be shown how to live. That meant starting by being willing to walk humbly into the water to be remade by God. If Christ had not shown us the beginning of this way, if he had chosen to make himself an exception because the mess wasn't his, I dare say that all the rest of

the way he tried to teach and exemplify we might be able to regard as also exceptional, and therefore as nothing that applied to us. But he did not make an exception of himself, and it is as a simple man that he has taught us a way for us as men and women. It is then by walking in that way, from beginning to middle to end, that we are remade in his image and partake of his death and resurrection.

In Christ the heavens are opened and humanity once more finds access to God. But that is because in Christ we find a way, a way of being transformed from rebelliousness to obedience. Now, this does not happen in a moment or by magic, or simply by good intentions – although good intentions are better than bad ones. It happens through learning to live rightly, it happens by living in Christ's image, beginning with accepting God's will as our own, which is what the baptism of repentance really is, and doing it not just for the mess we made, but like Christ, for the mess the whole world has made. For once we care as Christ did to make of ourselves a fulfillment of righteousness for the whole world, once we make no exception of ourselves, once we refuse to set ourselves apart from God and our neighbor, then, surely, real righteousness will be filled and heaven and earth will be joined, and they will be joined as Christ joined them, and the will be joined in Christ.

A great preacher of an earlier generation, Lesley Weatherhead, illustrated the nature of this righteousness well in an allegory in his book *Transforming Friendship* which depicts a conclave in heaven.

In the scene an angel drew near to the throne of grace, and God, seeing that she sought something, asked, "What is your desire?" And the angel said, "I would like to be a savior of men and women."

For the cry of their misery and pain and sin had sounded even in heaven.

“Suffer me to fly down from above and rescue them.”

And the host of heaven drew near to listen. And God said, and his voice was very gentle: “You would be a savior of humankind and yet your eye is bright and happy and your heart beats with joy that has never been dimmed. And your hands are clean and white. Have you not seen my Son?”

And the angel kept silence, for she was a very new angel and did not understand these things.

And God said: “Go for a season and dwell among people and see what you shall see upon the earth.” And the angel departed.

Now a long time afterward there stood one before the throne and her appearance was sad, yet from her presence there shone a great hope and a great joy. And God said, “Who are you?” And she said, “I am the angel whom you sent to dwell among the human race.”

And God said, “But your eye is dim with pain and your heart is broken and your hands are stained with blood.”

And the angel answered, “I have seen sorrow and pain and sin. The sons of men grind one another for wealth, and spill their brother’s blood for power, and trample their sisters so that they may know pleasure; and when I saw, my eyes were dimmed; and when I loved, my heart was broken; and when I strove to lift the fallen, my hands were stained with blood.”

And God said, pressing a bit: “And you have returned that your wounds may be healed?”

And the angel said: “No, Lord, for their sake I would cling to my pain. How else could I save them? Let me return, I beg of you, to the place of their anguish for I cannot raise them except as I stand and suffer at their sides.”

And as she spoke, there was a movement in heaven, and all the heavenly hosts thereof

turned and looked, and behold! a lamb standing as though it had been newly slain!

And God turned to the angel and said: “Go! Go! For you, too, have learned to be a savior of men and women.”

How else are we to be saved except that one would stand and suffer at our side? And how else are we to be saved except that we follow the one who does stand at our side, following him from the waters of baptism through all of life’s joys and sorrows to Death itself? And how else are we to be saved except that we in following that way do so not just for ourselves but for the whole world? And how else will the fragmented, warring world find life? And how else can heaven and earth be joined?