

Sermon: Baptism of our Lord: 1/8/12  
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One of the most distinct memories I have of elementary school is of the events that unfolded each year on the next to last day of school. The teacher would put us to work doing various fun activities, and one by one, we would take our textbooks forward and sit in a chair by the teacher's desk. The teacher would carefully look at each page of the book and either gave the all clear or tallied up the list of fees if a book was damaged in any way. The worst possible scenario was if a page was torn beyond repair. After all, a book without all its pages wasn't very useful for future students.

Because I knew what was coming, I tended to worry all year. What if I tear a page? What if I have to take home a dreaded letter asking my parents to remit a certain amount to cover costs? Would such charges be taken from my allowance, like some sort of primitive school levy? When day of reckoning finally came, nothing was better than hearing, "You have taken good care of your textbooks. Thank you!" Nothing was worse than hearing, "Uh-oh! It looks like we have a problem!" From this experience, I first learned that tearing an item beyond repair is not a good thing!

It is a lesson I think we can all relate to on some level. Have you ever accidentally shredded an unpaid bill or ripped uncashed check into tiny bits? How many of us have snagged our favorite clothing and ended up with non-repairable tear? Who among us has heard a doctor say, "This has been torn, will need surgery, and may never be as strong as it was before?" How many of us have experienced relationships torn apart by lies, addictions, and deep hurts?

Indeed, if something is torn beyond repair, or can never be reconstructed in same way again, we experience momentary, or even long lasting, anger, frustration, grief, and anguish. Yet, I wonder. Can something being torn apart actually be a good thing?

Yes, it can, and we see a hint of that in today's gospel text from Mark (1:4-11). This is the story of Jesus' baptism in the River Jordan. As the text wraps up, we hear that the heavens are torn apart and the Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus. The phrase "torn apart" doesn't really capture the full meaning. In the language used to write the New Testament, what we read in English as "torn apart" actually means "ripped to shreds" or "torn beyond repair".

God, in ripping the heavens to shreds, eliminates all boundaries and takes away all that separates us from Him. God does so primarily through Jesus Christ. Because Jesus is fully human and fully divine; because Jesus is a part of the Triune God; we see that God is not some distant, far away ruler, inaccessible in the heavens. No! The heavens are torn open and God shows up in our very midst.

What is fascinating is how this theme is echoed at the end of Mark's gospel. At Jesus' crucifixion, the moment he dies on the cross, the temple curtain is also torn apart and is ripped beyond repair. You see, the curtain in the temple blocked off space only priests could enter. This space called the "Holy of Holies", and it was the place where the priests went to pray that God would forgive the people. Because Jesus died to save us from our sins, the tearing of the temple curtain is symbolic. Now all people can approach God directly and humbly ask for forgiveness.

Thus, tearing apart and ripping to shreds is a good thing! God, through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ comes fully into our midst. I think that is why it is so important that Jesus is baptized. After all, he didn't need to be. He lived without sin, so a baptism for repentance of sins was not necessary. However, part of what Jesus did was come to share in our human experience.

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So, Jesus goes to the River Jordan and stands among sinful people. If you've ever seen pictures of the Jordan, you know it can be, well, sort of dirty looking. Now imagine the crowds the gospel describes clamoring to its shores to be baptized by John. The banks would have been muddy and messy and the water would have been stirred up. Yet, Jesus is there amidst the filth, muck and mud, standing with the people. One might say he comes into the midst of a people whose lives are torn apart by the power of sin, suffering, and all sorts of every day turmoil. Through his presence, he brings peace, restoration, healing, hope, and forgiveness, embodying God's love, mercy, and grace to its fullest extent.

Where are the muddy shores and stirred up waters for you and me? Where are the places our lives are torn apart by suffering and sadness, seemingly beyond repair? Where are we hurting the most? The good news is that Christ is there, standing with us and reminding us to turn to God. Nothing stands in our way, not even sin and death, and nothing separates us from God.

It is precisely because God tears open the heavens and comes into our midst as God comes to us through the holy words of scripture, the water of the baptism font, and the bread and wine of communion; it is precisely because God reminds us that Jesus is His beloved Son; that we turn our attention to Jesus and listen to him.

As Mark's gospel unfolds, we hear Jesus calling to us, teaching us, and telling us to serve others instead of seeking our own power and wealth; to go to the poor, the needy, the sick and the suffering and share God's love; to give freely of our resources so that all may have enough; to announce the good news of God's love to all people and to welcome others, even those the world has declared the least among us. Yet, this only scratches the surface of all Christ calls us to do!

We are to listen intently to all Christ says! By listening, we learn what God would have us do. By learning, we grow in our faith. By growing in faith, we see how God strengthens and empowers us to follow Christ. Then it comes full circle, for we cannot follow if we are not listening.

May God, the one who always comes into our midst, help us to listen! May God bless and strengthen the fruits of Trinity that have come from listening, like Kate's Cupboard; Feed Your Neighbor; the Lutheran World Relief Quilting Group; Bible studies, the Prayer Shawl ministry; and the countless other ways we love, serve, and welcome in this place, doing it all for the glory of God. May God also help us to listen to the new ways God is calling us to minister to others, especially those whose lives are torn apart by poverty, hunger, violence, illness, and suffering.

After all, each of us knows on some level what it feels like to be ripped to pieces. Yet, we are also those who know the good news and cling to the knowledge that God shows up, stands with us throughout our lives, and promises that on the day Christ comes again, sin and death will be no more. On that day, the torn apart places in our lives will be restored and made new, for God will raise us to glorious new life. This is the message of hope we share! This is the good news we proclaim!

While we share this good news; while we wait for Christ to come again; we will still have to deal with the frustration of torn possessions. But thanks be to God for torn heavens, heavens so ripped apart that they cannot be repaired again! After all, torn heavens mean that God is always with us, present and active, sharing in our daily lives. Torn heavens mean that we can turn to God with the peace of knowing that nothing stands in the way. Rejoice! The heavens are ripped apart; the heavens are torn to pieces; and God is here! God is here!  
Amen.