

## Tearing Open the Heavens

Sermon 85 | Greystone Baptist Church | January 10, 2021

Mark 1: 4-11

Wow, this has been quite a week. You know, since March of last year, when we stopped meeting in person, there have been moments when it seems like everything is going to be OK if we just hold on a little longer. And there have been moments, when the reality that we cannot sit in a room together to worship God, to pray, to hold one another in times of stress and pain linger... there have been moments when it feels almost cruel that we cannot be together as a family, to lift one another up simply by sharing sacred space.

I am sure many of you felt this on a personal level over the holidays as you had to make difficult decisions about how and when to gather with your loved ones. Just as we thought we'd made it through, we all felt it again on a public level as we witnessed the historic events of Wednesday, January 6<sup>th</sup>, unfold on our televisions and social media feeds.

Before anyone had time to manipulate and interpret the events for us, we watched with disbelief and hearts breaking for our democracy as freedom itself felt more vulnerable than ever before.

We watched as the Capitol building of the United States of America was broken into during what is typically a ceremonial gathering of elected officials to certify the results of a national election. Many of us, well-meaning, good-hearted, people of faith, Republican, Democrat, and Independents alike watched with shock and disbelief as the secular rituals of our democracy were brought to a halt by chaos, hatred, and violence pouring into the halls of Congress.

I suspect many of us might have prayed in those moments, perhaps prayers that echoed the words of Isaiah 64:

*Oh that you would tear the heavens open and come down  
to make known your name to your enemies,  
and make the nations tremble at your presence,  
working unexpected miracles  
such as no one has ever heard before (64: 1-2)*

Lord knows we need a miracle to save us from this mess we have created, enabled, denied, and ignored for so long.

As we watched, waited, and prayed, our national dreams, the American dreams of freedom, liberty, and democracy broke down before us.

Another, more severe wound in this already difficult season of life together.

There, from that place of brokenness, the pain of our physical separation and distance from our sanctuary set in. I wanted more than anything else in this world to be with you – as church family – sharing in brokenness, sharing in pain, sharing in grief... and returning to our sacred text and our living God in search of hope and renewal.

Although we have learned many times over during these last 9 months that the church is not the building, we have also come to know how much we need our shared rituals to ground us, to shape us, to center us, and to remind us that who we are in God's eyes is also who we are in our private and public lives.

As Christians, and more specifically as Baptists, we have two specific acts, the Southern Baptists called them Ordinances to get away from the Catholic term "sacraments" ... regardless of what we call them, we have two specific ritual acts that help us to embody the faith we believe in our hearts and profess with our mouths. It is a simple belief that demands control of every aspect of our lives and our person. Yet it is a profound belief that calls us into eternal relationship with God and a life of public devotion to the claim: "Jesus Christ is Lord."

Although this is an individual decision and a personal profession of faith, in the Christian tradition and also in the distinct Baptist tradition, it is a profession that was never meant to be kept secret. You may recall your own professions of faith that were followed by a lonely walk down the church aisle to be received into the Pastor's arms and then affirmed by the whole church. Then you probably remember that you were baptized not in a private ceremony (unless it was a special circumstance) but in the context of a worship service with the whole congregation gathered in the pews. This is not because the congregation or the pastor have any hold on your spiritual commitment, but it is because living your life for Christ and Christ alone requires support, encouragement, affirmation, and accountability.

Baptism marks the beginning of Jesus' Galilean ministry; and as we read the narrative from Mark's Gospel, it seems that God is answering Isaiah's prayer for divine intervention.

*Oh that you would tear open the heavens and come down...*

The Gospel says that as Jesus came up from the water the heavens were torn apart and the Spirit descended like a dove. God is answering the cries for help by anointing Jesus with a blessing of beloved-ness. "You are my Son, the Beloved." While the other Gospels provide a lot of backstory about Jesus, who he was, where he came from, who his ancestors were... Mark leaves all of that out and begins his story here. In Mark's story, it doesn't matter who Jesus was before he stepped into the water, all that matters is who he is when he comes back up from it. "You are my Son, the Beloved."

From that point on, Jesus belongs to God, Jesus is God incarnate, and Jesus spends the rest of his life doing the work of God: working to heal this broken world. Jesus is the answer to Isaiah's prayer: *Oh that you would tear open the heavens and come down...*

Jesus spent the next three years among the poor, the outcast, the sinners, the untouchable and undesirable people of Galilee working for healing and hope even when those things seemed like an impossible dream. This work often put him at odds with the religious leaders and politicians of his time, you see they couldn't imagine a society in which people could share freely with one another, refusing to let narcissism and greed rule their hearts and their lives. The Roman empire insisted that power must be won by violence and upheld by fear. But Jesus offered another way. A way of humility and generosity, a way of kindness and understanding, a way of peace no-matter the cost.

As things started to heat up between Jesus and the powers that be, he probably knew the end was near. We know this because we've read his prayer from Gethsemane. At the end of his time of teaching and healing, he decided to do one more thing, to give his disciples one more ritual, one more practice to repeat and remember as they tried to fulfill their commitment to him even after he was gone. He gave them our second ordinance: communion.

These two practices have become our most important rituals. Baptism being the starting point of our faith, our identity, and our allegiance and communion being the practice that sustains us when the road gets weary. These are the rituals that remind us of who we are and whose we are and how we are to live those realities in this broken world.

Professor and theologian, Dr. Willie Jennings, used to tell his students at Duke Divinity School that when they baptized children and adults in their congregations they should remind them that they were leaving behind all of the identities and allegiances they once claimed, because with baptism there is only one allegiance that matters and that is allegiance to Jesus Christ our Lord. And with baptism there is only one identity that matters and that is "Beloved, Child of God."

Now I know I am treading on dangerous ground with what I am about to say, but I can't help but wonder – thinking about the state of our country today – if we all might benefit from another baptism. It seems that we have forgotten our first allegiance and our only identity and we have replaced those things with patriotism and partisanship, with socio-economic security, and with good old fashioned greed.

The earliest Christians understood that baptism meant dying to all of that stuff. They understood that when they went into the water after making their profession, Jesus Christ is Lord, they were “putting to death whatever in them that was earthly” according to Colossians 3 (v.5) and putting the clothes of Christ, renewing their bodies reviving their souls, and turning them into the image of Christ in this world. I can imagine Paul baptizing them into the water saying, “You are no longer a slave, you are a Christian” “You are no longer a Gentile, you are a Christian,” “You are no longer a Roman, you are a Christian,” “You are no longer a beggar, you are a Christian.” “You are no longer a foreigner, you are a Christian...”

I wonder if our words today need to say it plain like that... maybe then we might remember:

“You are no longer a banker or a software engineer, you are a Christian.”

“You are no longer rich or poor, you are a Christian.”

“You are no longer a parent, you are a Christian.”

“You are no longer successful or a failure, you are a Christian.”

“You are no longer conservative or liberal, you are a Christian.”

“You are no longer Republican or Democrat, you are a Christian.”

*Oh that you would break open the heavens and come down...* to remind us of this baptismal promise! We are all God's children. Broken and beloved. Called into humble service by the identity we identity we claimed in the profession, “Jesus Christ is Lord.” No one else, Nothing else, no matter the cost.

As Christians, when difficult moments come, like they did on Wednesday, January the 6<sup>th</sup>, we do not need to lose hope because even if the American dream is in shambles on the floor of the Capitol building, God's dream is still alive and well, waiting to break through in the actions of those who bear Christ's name as our garment.

You see the dream of God doesn't depend on political systems to make itself a reality, the dream of God is born when people of faith remember who and whose they are and when we take that dream out into the world, letting the heavens be torn open so that the sick are

healed, the strangers are welcomed, the outcasts are valued, the blind are given sight, and those who have been in captivity are finally set free... this is the dream of God and we have been called to make it our reality.

How can we do that? You might be asking.

Well, we start with what we know. The second ordinance, the last ritual Jesus taught his disciples. We start at the table. The same one where Jesus dined with Peter who would deny him and Judas who would betray him. This is the ultimate example of humility, selflessness, and communion. Even though the road forward would not be easy or pleasant, Jesus taught the disciples, all of them, with all of their different quirks and opinions, to sit at the table and share a meal.

Over the centuries Christians have found this practice so transformative that every Christian denomination has included it in their liturgical rhythm. Some Christians go to the table every day, some every week, others – like us – every month. We do it because it helps us remember who we are: We are Christians. And what we do: We do what Christ did, setting tables first, making sure that all are fed. This is the most basic and simple calling, and yet it could fill the rest of our lives, if we only let it.

And what a beautiful thing that would be! God's dream becoming our reality, spreading wildly and catching on as Christians remember that they are followers of Christ who came to lead with selflessness, and compassion, humility and peace, and joy and most of all unconditional love.

On weeks like this one, I need the water and the table to remind me that even though so many of our national dreams for peace, civility, liberty, and democracy seem are threatened... God's dream of love is still breaking through.