

*January 11, 2015*

*Mark 1:4-11: **“Heaven Being Torn Open”***

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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Over the years I have noticed that if a child or young adult does not know the answer to a question, they will frequently respond with the answer "Jesus!" In one sense they are right. Jesus is the heart and center of the Bible. He is the key to unlocking its true meaning. He is "the final answer," as we might say. But I try to remind them that as we grow up, and find ourselves confronting more and more evil, it is vital that we grow from "milk to solid food," as it says in the book of Hebrews. There we read: "for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil (Hebrews 5:11-14)."

We don't dig into the Bible just to make people know a bunch of stuff, but we spend our time learning the details of God's Word for many reasons. We would like to be ready for our departure from this world. The apostle Peter writes: ". . . in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; (1 Peter 3:15-16)." It says in Psalm 119:11, "I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you." We need to be reminded of things over and over again because of our tendency to forget. There is much more that we could say here but hopefully this will be enough to demonstrate how the answer "Jesus" is correct, but far more reaching than that.

Oftentimes, the best and most important things require a lot of time and labor. This is true when it comes to our teaching on Baptism. This sacrament, what it means and how it is lived, is terribly neglected by those who might say: "All you have to do is believe in Jesus to get to heaven!" The statement is true, but in the minds of many it minimizes the undeniable fact that Baptism happens to be commanded by Jesus: "And he said to them, 'Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned (Mark 16:15-16).'" Baptism imparts the forgiveness of sins. And while a person may die and go to heaven before being baptized, to despise or neglect Baptism is to despise and neglect Jesus and all he gives. As Paul states in Titus 3:5, "He saved us . . . by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit."

Baptism is more than just an initiation rite into the Church. It is more than just a one-time event. It is an enduring reality in our lives. It is a regeneration, a renewal, a recreation that is ours now and forever. For Luther it was synonymous with the entire Christian life. He says in the *Small Catechism* that Baptism "indicates that the Old Adam in us should by **daily** contrition and repentance be drowned and die with all sins and evil desires, and that a new man should daily emerge and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever." Put all of these things together and Baptism is one of those teachings in Scripture that takes us into the realm of solid food.

Understanding our Baptism as a washing of regeneration or recreation has its roots in the Baptism of Jesus, which we are celebrating today in the church year. Mark tells us that the "heavens were torn open." This is a very exciting thing to consider because we know that our sin has closed heaven. Angels with flaming swords are seen at the entrance into the Garden in order to keep all sinners away from the tree

of life. Now we live in a creation that is a complete mess. Everything is returning to the chaos and darkness in the opening chapter of Genesis.

In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was without form and void and darkness was on the surface of the deep and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. God spoke everything into existence and it was “very good.” But not too long after this we read about another word. It was a word that did not create, but was designed to take everything back to without form and void and darkness. It was the word of the serpent who proclaimed, “Did God really say? You will not die! Eat what is forbidden and you will be like God.” And they ate that which was forbidden and the rest is history. Heaven is closed to all!

But we read in our Gospel lesson: “In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased (Mark 1:9-11).’” So what is Jesus doing here? How is this going to restore creation?

Jesus comes to the Jordan to be baptized with a Baptism designed for sinful humanity even though he is without sin. Jesus becomes sin for us in order to remake us. Jesus takes into himself everything formless and void and darkness so that the mess of ourselves can be made right. And as the Spirit hovered over the waters at the creation of all things, so do we find the Spirit descending with Jesus in the water in order to rescue us and make us a new creation. Again Mark says that John “saw the heavens being torn open.” Actually, a literal rendering of that verse would read: “He saw Heaven being torn open.”

I will not overwhelm you with the Greek term, but the word that is being used here for “torn open” is quite an unusual word. We get our word “schism” from it. Make no mistake about it, the Holy Spirit moved Mark to chose that word for a very important reason that is demonstrated at the end of his Gospel. Mark uses this unusual word one more time in the fifteenth chapter. There it says, “And Jesus uttered a loud cry and breathed his last. And the curtain of the temple was **torn** in two, from top to bottom.”

The curtain in the temple pictured the separation of the presence of God from mankind. With this idea of heaven being torn open in the Baptism of Jesus and the temple curtain being torn open at our Lord’s death, Mark connects Jesus’ baptism with his death for the regeneration of humanity. He does this that we might know with certainty that Jesus has taken our sin upon himself in his Baptism to his death on the cross so that with the death of sin we might enter into the presence of God in heaven and live with him forever. The division that separated God and man, heaven closed, is now torn open.

The application of all of what Jesus did in his Baptism as it is linked to his death was given to us when we came to the Baptismal font and continues in us as we die and rise with Jesus whenever we confess our sins and receive forgiveness. Our epistle lesson says all of this so beautifully. Paul writes: “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by

the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life (Romans 6:3-4).” Baptism is recreation of you and me. We are joined with Christ. That means that you are no longer formless and void and darkness but a new creation.

Because of these words of Paul, Luther would constantly say [and I am paraphrasing]: “Remember who you are! You are no longer that chaotic, disordered mess, dying in sin - you are a new creation. Dying and rising with Christ has set you free from your slavery to sin and death to live a new life.” Or, in the words of Paul, “Do you not know?” We tend to forget. And when we get caught up in this mess of a world, and when our sinful flesh is waging war against us, we are not to despair. We are Baptized! And we are to be living that Baptism every day.

C. F. W. Walther once put it this way: “Baptism is a bath that washed me not only once when I received it . . . but continuously washes me clean even daily for as long as I hold it in faith.” Indeed, it is the application of everything that Jesus did for us at his Baptism and death. Having participated in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ we are a new creation, and we continue to be that new creation even in a messed up world as we “walk in the newness of life” as Paul says. This is when sin is buried.

If you are looking for your Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, it is in your Baptism that heaven is torn open that you may see through the eyes of faith! If you would be with him, the curtain blocking your way to heaven has been torn open and you are in him through faith and are looking forward to that moment when you will see him face to face. You are a new creation even now though it is hidden from eyes that see. You believe it to be so. And, believing it to be so, you are looking forward to the new heaven and earth, the forever home of righteousness! May we never get tired of solid food!

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott