

**The Baptism of our Lord + January 7, 2018**

When Jesus comes up out of the waters, he sees something rather spectacular. He sees the heavens torn apart. And with the tearing of the heavens, God's Spirit descends on Jesus and the Father speaks to Jesus giving the divine stamp of approval: "You are my Son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased."

On the First Sunday in Advent, just a little over a month ago, we listened to the first lesson and it was a kind of pleading with God: "O that you would tear the heavens and come down!" Then we prayed, "O Savior rend the heavens wide." Throughout Advent this was our fervent prayer, "Come, Lord Jesus, and save us!"

Well, today our prayers are answered. The Baptism of Jesus signals the tearing apart of the heavens. Heaven is now broken loose and God has come to earth.

The Epiphany is God's manifestation or God's revealing among us and Jesus' baptism at the River Jordan is quite an epiphany. Jesus does more than make an appearance. This epiphany marks a big change for all the world. With the heavens torn apart, the barrier between God and humanity is removed. God is not sequestered in a far away heavenly realm. Nor is God hidden in a temple or a church sanctuary. God is not contained. The veil between heaven and earth is now lifted. The heavens have been torn apart!

Jesus is God wrapped in human flesh, bearing God's Spirit and the mystery of God is no longer labeled "top secret" but is now accessible.

This is good news! This is the Gospel witness .... Still, do we find ourselves speaking or believing that this rending of the heavens has not taken place? I think so, especially when we imagine heaven to be remote or light years away. Instead of the heavens being ripped apart we imagine heaven to be a door that is opened or closed and not easily accessible and only open to some.

How many thousands of St. Peter jokes have you heard? You know, Peter stands at the entrance to pearly gates, scrutinizing the folks standing in line, to see if they've been good enough or wise enough. Peter is the gatekeeper. These are jokes that are uttered so often that I cannot help but wonder if we still operate on the notion that God is far away, locked behind closed doors only reserved for us when we shed our mortal coil. With heavenly things, so far off we don't have time to deal with it now. But this way of thinking and living denies what took place at the Jordan River.

Jesus didn't see a mere opening in the skies. Jesus saw the heavens ripped apart. Doors are open and shut. Whatever is torn apart cannot be put back together again. Heaven *and* earth are filled with the glory of God. We can never wrap our minds and hearts around the mystery of God, this side of the grave, but we do live in the mystery and since the veil has been lifted, the barrier removed, the heavens torn apart, God is accessible and continues to be enfleshed. What occurs at Jesus' baptism lasts for more than a moment .... It marks the beginning of a God's life among us. A change that is irretrievable.

Once Jesus steps out of the River Jordan and steps on the earth, he commences to the holy work of casting out demons, healing the sick, forgiving sins, and loving the poor. Jesus touched these people and what they began to know and feel and received was nothing less than heaven come down to earth – the veil lifted, the barrier removed, the heavens torn apart.

When Jesus came up out of the waters, he saw the heavens torn apart.

And what do we see when we emerge from the baptismal waters?

There's no rule about it all. People experience all kinds of feelings and think of many things, but I've heard from many of you who have emerged from the watery tomb to know that a common theme runs through all your testimonies and that is this: you came up out of the waters to behold a waiting community – sisters and brothers, embracing you into this new life, this new community, this new way of living.

It may not have been as dramatic as what Jesus first saw, but you saw the same thing. In the community of believers you witnessed and you witness still the rending of the heavens. Here you see that the heavens have been torn apart. In the community gathered in and around the mystery of God among us, you begin to see and participate in a journey that lasts a lifetime.

Today is a great occasion to renew our baptismal vows. We do this together a few times a year, and as Vicar Pam reminded us last week, this sort of renewal of faith isn't the same thing as making new year's resolutions.

What's the difference?

Renewing our baptismal commitment is far more demanding. In fact, it costs our whole lives. Today, we recommit ourselves to God's holy work of removing barriers, rending veils, unhinging the doors that prevent people from loving one another.

I like to image the recommitment of living out our baptism to be nothing less than our shared witness to the things of God, our witness to the fact that the heavens have been torn apart.

Are we ready to recommit ourselves and join Christ in the holy work of extending the joy of the mercy of heaven to all? May we discern where God is calling us and leading us and can we take the risks anew? May we commit ourselves again to participate in God's holy work of spreading heaven's mercy to all, especially to a world in need?

Yes, these are big promises we make, but they are not insurmountable, because they do not rely upon human resolution. Notice how we respond. "Yes, and I ask God to help and guide me."

Yes and we ask God to help and guide us.

We've been invested with a power far greater than ourselves. We've been called to steward this power, this mystery for the sake of the world. This is no mere resolution dependent upon will power but a surrendering to God's spirit to awaken us. For through baptism, you've been enlisted in this holy work of God and the God who began a good work in you will be faithful to complete it.

Look around you. The heavens have been torn apart. And we go into the world and into a new year in peace to love and serve the Lord, knowing that it is so. Amen.