"Would You Care For More Water?"
+ Baptism of our Lord A +
January 11, 2009
Genesis 1:1-5; Acts 19:1-7; Mark 1:4-11

Grace, mercy, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen. The texts for this morning's message are the lessons for this day.

One of the key questions I learned as a catering waiter was to ask often, but not too often, "Would you care for more water?" As a waiter you want to be attentive but not bothersome, to make certain the customers are comfortable but not to be intrusive.

As the calendar of Sundays and Seasons developed over the centuries the servants of the church seem to have missed the subtlety of being attentive but not bothersome with this question of water and baptism. It’s as if the heavens were torn open and a deluge of Jordan River texts came pouring out of the lectionary. Three times in six weeks the Sunday Gospels have taken us back to the Jordan River to meet John the Baptizer with his message of repentance and forgiveness – a message brought home by a soggy splash of baptism for all of those who responded to it. And now here we are again with preachers like me struggling to figure out what to do with him again, because, he just won't go away. With the Presentation and a sermon on the ritual baths called mikvahs it is hard for this preacher to imagine having missed anything about him or his message this time around. Quite literally I thought "Give me a break from the Baptizer." But then the heavens were torn open – though first they had to be put in place…let me explain.

The pairing of our Gospel with the opening of the creation account from Genesis is no accident. "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." The ancient imagery was that God split open an immense animal and stretched the skin out to make the heavens and the carcass below was the earth. The sun came down below the outstretched heavens to give us light during the day and went behind it with some pin-pricks of light (we call them stars) peeking through. Above all of that – far away God was watching over it all, keeping the stars in their place, wind and weather so on and so forth. The heavens – even with their yearly movements were set, solid, a dome that separated us from God and the beyond.

Before the fall of humanity God had come and walked with His creation – talked with Adam and Eve in the cool of the evening, been known to them wholly, and they to God with nothing to separate them – totally one and united in love. Sin changed all that. God no longer walking with us – far above in the heavens seeing a broken, sullied, despairing, destructive humanity – a ruined creation. The only hope was that the heavens would be torn open and God would come to us again to save us as God had promised.

So the promise was shared. The hope of all humanity was placed in a Messiah to come. The way was prepared as God showed His heart of love and mercy through the Children of Israel – rebellious, hard-to-handle, quick-to-stray, slow-to-learn, but loved and cherished Israel. The heavens would part for a moment as angels would bring messages, as God's spirit moved through the prophets and gave them the very words of God to speak. An angel came to Mary to tell her
she would bear God's Son. Choirs of angels poured through the fractured skies of Bethlehem to announce the Son of God had come in the flesh to walk among us – to be one of us – to save us. Glory to God in the highest – and back to the Jordan! (At least that's how the lectionary seems to interpret it).

What is interesting as we arrive is to note that the place where John baptized was the same place where hundreds of years before, the children of Israel had ended their wilderness wanderings and crossed over into the Promised Land. That was their new beginning as a nation. For John's listeners his baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins was also a brand spanking new walking wet, gasping for breath kind of new beginning. That little historical geographical nuance might have been lost on many of his peasant listeners in those days, but it is yet another tie-in and explanation as to why today's first lesson was from Genesis and the story of creation. In the beginning, God created…and so on and then, with the appearance first of John as harbinger and then truly in Jesus, God was re-creating and making all things new.

And then it happened. "In those days," the Gospel says, "Jesus came from Nazareth and was baptized by John in the Jordan." He was, at that point, a complete unknown – a carpenter from up north in Galilee about 80 miles away. Nothing spectacular about that, no reputation yet as a preacher or worker of miracles. That's how the shortest, oldest biography of Jesus begins. No manger, no star, no magi – just "in those days Jesus came to be baptized by John." One of the other Gospels says that at first John refused, saying it was he who needed to be baptized by Jesus, but that little detail is completely left out here, giving us the barest details of a simple story.

But the thing about a simple story is this: it is either just that, simple, with not much to it or behind its simplicity is something so profound that no amount of words can do it justice. You do not understand it so much with your brain as you savor it with your soul. And it is left to us who see it, hear it or read it, to stay with it long enough that its unspoken implications begin to emerge, and we realize that Mark has just reported that the heavens have been torn open and God-made-flesh fully grown is among us.

Mark says that as soon as Jesus emerged from the Jordan, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. You cannot tell from the original language whether it was John or Jesus who saw the Spirit descend on Jesus, but Mark's choice of words to describe it are rather interesting. Two other Gospels say that the heavens "opened" but here, Mark used a violent word (not open, like you open a package) but a different word that means "torn apart" or "ripped open." *Schizo*

And that word difference bothered me until it struck me that it is the difference between someone opening the door to your home and walking in or someone ripping the door off its hinges and storming in. The first is an entrance. The second is an invasion—and that is what Mark is getting at.

The heavens are ripped open because God invaded humanity by sending His Son. Yes there is the tender sentiment of a baby born in a stable---its all as true as it is cuddly---but that baby (and
now as we see Him through the eyes of Mark) that adult, has come to stage an invasion that will rip apart the status quo as surely as God, himself, tore open the heavens.

Things are going to change. No, no just change—things are going to start all over as the pages of a broken history are torn away and God begins to recreate reality.

Okay, that's a drastic claim, but to claim any less is to minimize the meaning of God becoming, "Immanuel." God with us in human flesh and blood. That's pretty radical, don't you think? So radical, heaven cannot open politely as though God were sending an insurance agent or the Avon lady- it must be ripped open so that God can send a Savior - a son, born into the muck and mire of human guilt, grief and misery, not to fix the world, but to start all over again.

Everybody else got dunked by John in the Jordan to get clean. Jesus got dunked and got dirty; dirty with the sin and shame that John's baptism for the forgiveness of sins washed away. The trouble with John's baptism is this: it wore off. It wore off as soon as the water dried and the baptized went back to their old ways of thinking, speaking and acting. People came to be baptized by John as a sign that they had repented---done a 180 of heart, mind and direction. But they were just as human as we are and therefore just as likely to turn that 180 into a 360 and revert to their own sinful ways and deeds. The act of repentance was wonderful – cleansing – but a sacrifice – true payment for all sin needed to be made.

Which, interestingly is seen in the descending dove. This isn't the sentimentality of peace doves floating in the breeze or pigeons released at a wedding—that's not the point---doves were signs of peace; they were also sacrifices and like any sacrifice, they brought peace with God. The point of a sacrifice was to take one away from their guilt and restore them to grace.

Jesus became our sacrifice – the first of the baptized became the firstborn from the dead. As we are baptized into Christ so we are raised to new life – life eternal. It is for that reason, that Luther, when he wrote about our baptism, described it as a daily repentance, a daily turn away from self and back to God. We don't re-baptize people, but Luther did suggest that we begin every morning and end every evening with the sign of the cross; the sign first made upon us at our baptism and the last sign made over us as we are laid to rest. Every splash of water, from a morning shower to a sudden rainstorm or a melting snowflake is a reminder not that we were baptized, but that we are baptized—joined by water and the Word of God to Jesus. Jesus – whose presence we long for – the living water for whom we thirst.

"Would you care for more water?" Yes! Must be our answer – take me to the Jordan! Amen. Now may our creating and re-creating God immerse us in His grace, transform us by His Spirit and lead us to follow His Son to life.