**January 11, 2015 – Epiphany 1 – Baptism of our Lord**

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Today, as we do every first Sunday after the Epiphany in our liturgical year, we celebrate the Baptism of Jesus. Unlike Matthew and Luke, Mark makes short work of the prologue about John the Baptist and the voice crying out in the wilderness by dispatching it in a couple verses. And there’s no birth narrative in Mark – he gets right to the point at the start of Jesus’ ministry.

And that ministry starts with his baptism by John in the Jordan.

*In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."*

Short, sweet, and to the point. One of the commentaries that I like to read when I’m preparing a sermon suggested that a preacher should preach the Gospel, not the feast day. Luckily, today, I get to do both.

All of the Gospels have some version of this story – the baptism, the heavens opening, and the voice from heaven. But only Mark uses the word *schizomenous* to describe the heavens opening. The NRSV actually got the translation right when it says “he saw the heavens torn apart.” The verb, *schizó*, means to rend, to divide asunder, or to cleave.

This is the same word from which we get schism, schizophrenia, and scissors. It’s a violent word, and it implies that once something is torn like this it can’t be repaired. The other notable place that we see this word is in the crucifixion accounts of all three synoptic Gospels, when they talk about the veil of the Temple being torn in two, from top to bottom.

In both accounts, there is a sense of the barrier between heaven and earth being torn violently aside, and God reaching through.

This is what our baptism truly is – God reaching through to change us. It’s not a small action. Rather, it’s a cataclysmic alteration of the universe. Every time someone is baptized, the universe is changed.

In the early Church, baptism was far different from what we experience today. For one thing, it truly was the entry rite into the Eucharist. Baptismal candidates, called catechumens, before their baptism, were only allowed to participate in the church services up to the end of the sermon, and at that time they had to leave before the Eucharist began. It was truly a mystery to them.

I want to read an excerpt of a piece written by the Reverend Aidan Kavanagh, who, until his death in 2006, was a Liturgy professor at the Yale Divinity School. His passion was rediscovery and renewal of the sacraments, and especially Baptism. Based on his research into the ancient practices of the Church, he wrote this fictional account of the 4th century baptism of a 10-year old boy named Euphemius.

*…Then a young male catechumen of about ten, the son of pious parents, is led down into the pool by the deacon. The water is warm (it has been heated in a furnace), and the oil on his body spreads out on the surface in iridescent swirls. The deacon positions the child near the cascade from the lion’s mouth. The bishop leans over on his cane, and in a voice that sounds like something out of the Apocalypse, says: “Euphemius! Do you believe in God the Father, who created all of heaven and earth?” After a nudge from the deacon beside him, the boy murmurs that he does. And just in time, for the deacon, who has been doing this for fifty years and is the boy’s grandfather, wraps him in his arms, lifts him backwards into the rushing water and forces him under the surface. The old deacon smiles through his beard at the wide brown eyes that look up at him in shock and fear from beneath the water (the boy has purposely not been told what to expect). Then he raises him up coughing and sputtering.*

*The bishop waits until he can speak again, and leaning over a second time, tapping the boy on the shoulder with his cane, says: “Euphemius! Do you believe in Jesus Christ, God’s only Son, who was conceived of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, and was crucified, died, and was buried? Who rose on the third day and ascended into heaven, from whence he will come again to judge the living and the dead?” This time he replies like a shot, “I do,” and then holds his nose. . . . “Euphemius! Do you believe in the Holy Spirit, the master and giver of life, who proceeds from the Father, who is to be honored and glorified equally with the Father and the Son, who spoke by the Prophets? And in one holy, catholic, and apostolic Church which is the communion of God’s holy ones? And in the life that is coming?” “I do.”*

*When he comes up the third time, his vast grandfather gathers him in his arms and carries him up the steps leading out of the pool. There another deacon roughly dries Euphemius with a warm towel, and a senior presbyter, who is almost ninety and is regarded by all as a “confessor” because he was imprisoned for the faith as a young man, tremulously pours perfumed oil from a glass pitcher over the boy’s damp head until it soaks his hair and runs down over his upper body. The fragrance of this enormously expensive oil fills the room as the old man mutters: “God’s servant, Euphemius, is anointed in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” Euphemius is then wrapped in a new linen tunic; the fragrant chrism seeps into it, and he is given a burning terracotta oil lamp and told to go stand by the door and keep quiet. Meanwhile, the other baptisms have continued.*

This is a little different from what we experience today. Over the millennia, we’ve tamed baptism. We’ve nicified it. We’ve turned the fiercely loving, and somewhat terrifying action of God in our lives into a nice little ceremony involving white lace and a splash of water and a touch of oil. And up until 1979, this oh-so-important sacrament was mostly practiced in private, and not as a part of the community. Happily, that part has changed at least.

Don’t get me wrong. I’m not necessarily suggesting that we go back to standing naked in a drafty room, having gallons of oil dumped over our heads, and full immersion until we’re nearly drowned. As wonderfully symbolic as that ceremony was, it’s not necessary. God can work with whatever we offer him.

A classmate of mine told me a wonderful story the other day. She was in charge of teaching the sacraments to the second grade Sunday School class at her field parish in New York. One day, they went into the church so she could demonstrate baptism on a doll, named Bob. After she was through, she said, “Now Bob is awfully little. Do you think he’ll remember his baptism?” “No, he’s just a baby,” the kids answered. “So does that mean that we’ll have to do this again, when he’s all grown up?” she asked. “No!” they all said, getting excited. “And why is that?” “BECAUSE GOD KEEPS HIS PROMISES!” they shouted. “My work here is done,” my friend thought to herself.

God keeps his promises. It doesn’t matter if we all go down to the river to pray, studying about that good old way, or if we stand in the back of this sanctuary and sprinkle a shell full of water and dab on a thumb full of chrism. God keeps his promises.

But that leaves us and our response to those promises. At our baptism, we are changed forever. We have come through death to new life and we are marked as Christ’s own. This is a HUGE thing. At Jesus’ baptism, the heavens were torn apart and the Spirit of God descended and God’s own voice was heard to say, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased!” This was an acknowledgement of who Jesus was, certainly, but it was also a responsibility.

That same responsibility is placed on us at our baptism – to go out into the world and show that we have been forever changed by God’s promise. To go out into the world and demonstrate the love of God in Christ Jesus, which we were promised by that earth-shattering sprinkle of water. To love one another and to go out into the world and show that each of us knows what it means to be a beloved child of God. God keeps his promises. We need to keep ours.

Amen.