

4 And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. **5** The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. **6** John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. **7** And this was his message: "After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. **8** I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

9 At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. **10** Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. **11** And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

12 At once the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness, **13** and he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him.

Torn

This week I was torn between which lesson to preach on. I've preached on the OT lesson before. I've preached on the second lesson. I even preached on the beginning of Mark back in December. I was torn - undecided and trying to figure out what to do and what lesson to preach on. I thought yeah it's been a while but I really haven't preached on this portion of Mark in fact I barely made it beyond verse one, "*The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God,*" The lesson assigned for this Sunday actually extends Advent's reading by three verses which sounded good.

If you read the parallel gospel accounts of Jesus' Baptism (in other words you can go to Matthew, Luke, and John and read their record of Jesus' Baptism), usually when you read all four accounts and they all mention they same thing it's something important. But, in the other gospels John is the one who is torn. He is confused and unsure of what to do when it comes to baptizing the sinless son of God with a sinner's baptism. "You don't need this?!" *He asks, "I need to be baptized by you and yet you come to me?"* John was torn.

But in Mark's account we don't see that instead Mark draws our attention heavenward as the heavens are torn or ripped almost violently. It's as if we're back in Advent singing, "*O Savior Rend the Heavens Wide,*" but instead of asking for it to be accomplished it already has been torn. Mark from the very beginning makes us well aware of who Jesus is.

If you are torn, undecided, or uncertain as to who Jesus is, take a moment and examine what Mark is saying. If you feel torn because life is difficult and can't understand how a good and gracious God would allow such suffering especially if he is all powerful - look at who Jesus

associates with and what he does for them. While we may be torn when it comes to Jesus. Jesus tears away all that separates and restores us with God.

This is the beginning of the good news. Almost a month ago I preached on Mark 1:1-11. Since I knew you would be able to call me out for reusing a sermon and you remember everything just as well as I do. I consulted that sermon to figure out what I wrote. Last time I said, “Mark writes about good news in what would have been considered a very bad time using a term that would have sounded good for Rome but bad for God’s people.”

But after this good news came. John came with a baptism of repentance. Even if my sermons are forgettable John is an unforgettable, someone you’d never want your daughter to date. He ate locust and wild honey. I can only imagine him collecting grasshoppers and dipping them into a hive in order to add a little flavor. But Mark’s gospel isn’t about John, very little is mentioned of him other than the obvious. We don’t even see him argue with Jesus about being baptized.

We are moved immediately into action. And immediately he is out of the blocks. Mark is the gospel of immediacy. He isn’t torn so much as he is tearing through the beginning of the gospel. He skips entirely over Jesus’ birth and starts here with John but he doesn’t slow down. He doesn’t dwell on what isn’t necessary. What he does report is that Immediately as Jesus came out of the water, *the heavens were torn, the spirit came down as Jesus came up, and a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”*

It was as if Jesus stepped up from the earth and heaven came down and collided in the middle. God met man. Jesus is purely passive. He doesn’t do anything. John does the baptizing. The Spirit descends into Jesus. Then we find the second, “Immediately - the Holy Spirit tears him away from the Jordan River and places him in a parched desert to be tempted for forty days and nights. It’s almost as if Mark is torn on what to report. So he keeps it simple.

That’s a good suggestion for pastors everywhere. The season of Epiphany is like kicking back with a bowl full of popcorn and watching Jesus get to work. Certainly we want to do something but this is not our work. Our redemption, our baptism, is his work. But look at how easy it is for us to look to ourselves for hope. Some will even make the method of baptism harder to do. Because the more I do the better I feel. The less we make Jesus do for us the better we feel. And so, sadly baptism is often forgotten and rarely thought of. Some even make it a symbol, a sign of commitment which is rather a pathetic sign. It dries. You can’t see it. Perhaps if they want to go a bit further they should immerse with some sort of ink or dye so we can at least see a sign.

But rather than focus on what God is doing, or has done, we'd rather ask, "Well, what are you going to do for me now?" Like a spoiled child asking for another gift when the last one hasn't met their standards. Where are you when I need you? Where are you when I am suffering? We want to know all the details, what, when, where, how and why but Mark only gives us simple answers that often aren't satisfactory to our sinful nature.

And yet Mark is more interested in the telling us the essentials than giving every little detail of what we want to know. Look what Jesus is doing. He's taking on a baptism he doesn't need. He's entering the Jordan River. He's even being dragged out to the desert where he is tempted by the devil.

The Jordan is packed with history. Water crossings reminded people of God's deliverance from the Egyptian army, it reminded them of Joshua crossing the Jordan when leadership was handed over to him. It reminded them Elijah handing leadership over to Elisha and their crossing of the Jordan in 2 Kings 2. And now John, Elijah, is baptizing Jesus in the Jordan. Jesus is taking over. Jesus is also associating with sinners when he enters the baptismal waters. Here Jesus identifies with us and says, "These are my people." He then gets to work being tempted in every way as we are but remaining the sinless Son of God. He lived a perfect life. Then the heavens were torn again.

That wasn't the only time the heavens were torn open. In Mark 15:38 the temple curtain was torn, same word, and in many ways the same thing. Josephus, a Jewish historian born in 37 ad, (Wars 5.5.4) records that upon this veil was an image of the universe, the heavens. This curtain which according to early Jewish tradition was as thick as a man's hand, was torn in two, as God removed sin that tore us from him. That curtain that separated us from him was torn from top to bottom, not by man but by God. Here he tears open the heavens to come to us. When were these heavens torn?

Immediately when Jesus breathed his last. The heavens were torn. *He gave up the Spirit* (Matthew 27:50) The centurion's voice rang out, "*Surely he was the son of God.*" The voice from heaven echoed back with certainty. Through the work, the life, the death, the resurrection of his son we have peace with God. This is the beginning of the good news of Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God.

But like the jailer maybe you're still torn? What do I have to do? *Believe* that it's already been done. Like Paul said to the jailer, "You don't do anything. Believe the Lord Jesus and you will be saved. It's the same answer that Peter gave to the crowds on Pentecost when they ask, "What shall we do?" *Peter replies, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of*

Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.”

All those who are baptized have their sin and guilt washed away. There they receive Jesus' robe of righteousness. His perfect life is given to us. Baptism is a promise from God, a watermark, that protects his personal property so you can't be torn from him. It's not an outward sign. It's an inward promise, a full assurance, a hope that you goes with you no matter what.

The beauty of infant baptism is that you can't do anything. You can't make a decision. You can't commit your life to Christ. You simply receive the words and promises of God and immediately, at that moment, the heavens are torn, the Spirit descends into you, and the God's name is proclaimed over you, "My son," or "My daughter." Because of Jesus and his work I can say to you, "With you, God is well pleased." The basis for our salvation isn't in ourselves. And yes, we are forgiven for every time we've assumed it was because of something we've done. We're forgiven and reminded of our baptism.

So as we make our way through Epiphany realize there won't be a whole lot for you to do. There isn't anything undecided or uncertain about your salvation. You are no longer torn from God. If we had recliners I'd urge you to put your feet up, grab a bowl of popcorn, and marvel at the mystery of a God who came to seek, save, serve, suffer, die, and rise, so that you can have the full assurance of salvation. Don't be torn about this. Be absolutely certain Jesus has torn away our sin that separates and restored us with God. Amen.