

**“Heaven Split Open”**  
**Mark 1:4-11**  
**Sermon #84**  
**Baptism of the LORD**  
**Ordination/Installation of Ruling Elders**  
**44th Sunday in the COVID-19 Pandemic**  
**1.10.21**

**Mark 1:4-11 CEB**

**4** John the Baptist was in the wilderness calling for people to be baptized to show that they were changing their hearts and lives and wanted God to forgive their sins. **5** Everyone in Judea and all the people of Jerusalem went out to the Jordan River and were being baptized by John as they confessed their sins. **6** John wore clothes made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist. He ate locusts and wild honey. **7** He announced, “One stronger than I am is coming after me. I’m not even worthy to bend over and loosen the strap of his sandals. **8** I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

**9** About that time, Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee, and John baptized him in the Jordan River. **10** While he was coming up out of the water, Jesus saw heaven splitting open and the Spirit, like a dove, coming down on him. **11** And there was a voice from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I dearly love; in you I find happiness.”

The Word of the LORD. **Thanks be to God!**

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

And Jesus saw heaven splitting open. Have you noticed that before? Matthew and Luke say that the heavens opened up. John only says that the Dove descended and rested on Jesus.

Heaven split open versus Heaven opening. It's subtle, but the ramifications for the rest of the Gospel of Mark can't be overstated. It's as if Mark portrays God as one who can't be restrained. It's as if Mark portrays God as one who takes interest in the world. It's startling! And you know what else? No one sees heaven splitting open, only Jesus and the readers.

Eugene Boring talks about this disorienting moment as apocalyptic<sup>1</sup>. This is a moment where we get a glimpse as how the divine and humanity meet. This is also a terrifying moment and,

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<sup>1</sup> Eugen M. Boring. *Mark: A Commentary*. Louisville: WJK Press, 2006. p.45

frankly, violent. Yet, in the other Gospels, this moment has been toned down. Could humanity be threatened at this time in Mark? Could God be a threat? Perhaps God is up to something? Could God be, as Brian Blount says, “on the loose” in our world?<sup>2</sup>

God is on the loose. It’s another reason I love Mark’s Gospel so much. God can’t be contained in one place. God is not stuck in the Temple for our 1st century audience. God is not merely taking residence in heaven. God is not some distant being who couldn’t care less about what goes on. NO! God splits open the heavens and gets all up in our business. God does that through the ministry of God’s Son, Jesus Christ. God does that through the Holy Spirit who grabs us and forces us out in our own wildernesses, towns, and crowds to minister to the world.

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<sup>2</sup> Brian Blount

God splits open the heavens and gets busy in our world!

God gets in the thick of things and Mark's Gospel portrays that so beautifully! Since there's no time to waste as people listening to this Gospel for the first time two-thousand years ago were harassed simply because of their faith, Mark has to get this story moving. And heaven splitting apart would certainly get people's attention.

As we celebrate the Baptism of our LORD, the ordination and installation of our new Ruling Elders, and Communion, we see God on the loose in our world. After today's passage, Jesus was driven by the Spirit into the wilderness where he had to deal with wild animals and was tempted by Satan. Our new Ruling Elders are

transitioning onto the Session during a great crisis, yet we affirm God's work in their lives. As we will celebrate the Sacrament of the LORD's Supper, we affirm that through his death, Christ destroyed our death. We affirm that through his rising, Christ restored our lives. And we affirm that while he died and *IS* risen, Christ *WILL* come again.

God is on the loose in our world! And about a year into this pandemic, believing and knowing that God is on the loose and God is not finished with us is powerful! God is up to something and God has bigger and better plans than anyone thought possible. And if you aren't sure, just keep reading Mark's Gospel. It ends with an empty tomb even though people thought they killed Jesus.

As we begin 2021, let us commit to prayer for each other. Let us pray for the Session. Let us pray for the Presbytery of Coastal Carolina. Let us pray for the PCUSA. Let us pray for Pollocksville and Jones County. Let us pray for our area. Let us pray for our state, our nation, and our world. Let us pray for God to split open the thin veil that separates the here and now from the invisible. Let us pray for God to split apart the barriers that we have built to keep “us” from “them”. Let us pray for God to open our hearts to discern the movement of God’s wild Spirit who can’t be contained.

Beloved, believe this Good News!

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.