

Looking Up

Mark 1:4-11

Whitefish UMC

Baptism of the Lord, January 11, 2009

- † A mother was at home with her two young daughters one lazy afternoon. Everything seemed to be just fine until the mother realized something strange. The house was quiet. And as every parent knows, a quiet house in the daytime can only mean one thing: the kids are up to no good.
- † Quietly walking into each of the girls' rooms and not finding them there, she began to worry. Then she heard it: the sound of whispering followed by the flushing of a toilet.
- † Following the sound to the bathroom, she heard whispers, then a flush; whispers, then a flush. Poking her head into the bathroom, she was able to see both of her daughters standing over the commode. Whispers, then another flush.
- † One of the little girls was holding a dripping Barbie doll by the ankles and the other had her finger on the flusher handle. Whispers, then a flush. Wanting to hear what her daughter was saying, she slipped quietly into the room.
- † Whispers, then a flush. And this is what she heard: "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and in the hole you go!"
Flush.
- † Yes, this is a true story, a cute story. Kids say the darndest things. But wait a minute, because this is your story, my story, our story, too.

- We know it's true because we know what it feels like to have life grab us by the ankles and dangle us over the waters of chaos.
- † We know this happens despite our faith in God, and sometimes even because of it. Children must have a good intuition about this fact—at least some of them do. A few years ago, Tom was teaching “godly play” over at Holy Nativity Episcopal church.
 - † Asked to paint scenes from the life of Jesus onto a large piece of long brown paper, one child painted a picture of Jesus being baptized in the Jordan River, dunked in head first and held by the ankles by his cousin John.
 - † Whether Jesus was dunked head first, dove under himself, or whether he even needed to be baptized at all are fun things to think about, but really aren't the main point after all.
 - † However it happened, all the Gospels agree that it DID happen, that for some reason Jesus felt called to the banks of the Jordan River that day. And when he arrived, he brushed aside his Cousin John's objections and immersed himself into the waters of his baptism.
 - † An interesting question: Did Jesus look up at the sky before he went under water? Barbara Lundblad suggests we ask it. The narrator doesn't say whether he does, but when Jesus came up, dripping wet from the Jordan, he did look up.
 - † And Jesus saw the heavens torn apart, not opened as in Matthew or Luke, but torn apart. The Greek word that Mark uses is *schitzo* as in schism or schizophrenia. It's not the same word as “open.” As Lundblad says, “I open the door. I close the door. The door looks the same, but something torn apart is not easily closed again.

- † The ragged edges never go back together as they were. Mark wasn't careless in using that word: *schitzo*. He remembered Isaiah's plea centuries before when the prophet cried out to God, 'Oh that you would tear the heavens open and come down to make your name known to your enemies and make the nations tremble at your presence.'"
- † We don't know if anyone else saw or heard "the heavens torn apart" or saw the dove or heard the voice as Jesus came up from the waters of the Jordan. But even if no one else noticed, it doesn't mean that nothing had changed. For sometimes God's message comes as a breath, a still small voice, a flutter of the heart.
- † "At the Jordan the voice that came from heaven spoke to Jesus alone. It was intimate, direct. 'You are my Son, the Beloved. With you I am well pleased. In you my Spirit will be present on the earth in a new way.' The heavens were torn apart, and they would never close again." (Lundblad)
- † So what did that mean for Jesus? It didn't mean that the Father would keep him out of trouble. He found that out right away. It didn't mean that things would work out as Jesus had planned. But it did mean that when he found himself in trouble, when he wasn't sure if he could face the temptations of life, the matters of life and death that he would face, he would still have God's blessing and the Spirit's urging.
- † "And isn't that what Jesus' baptism means to us, too? Unlike John's baptism, Jesus' baptism means that we are not alone in the wilderness. It means that God's love doesn't depend on us. It means that God's grace doesn't wash off.

- † The baptism of Jesus means that whenever we find ourselves in a hole, we can be sure that in the hole he goes”—just like the little girl said. (Boggess)
- † Hasn't it felt as if the last year has been full of torn heavens and deep holes? Beginning in December, our church family began losing beloved members unexpectedly and tragically. Today we remember David Gogolak's life and acknowledge again the grief we have felt over his death—none of us more than Nicole's chasm of loss.
- † Shortly after David died, we all signed up to jump in Whitefish Lake, in memory of Charlie Reeder and David, to raise money for Special Olympics. Record numbers from this church took the Penguin Plunge. Last year it had new meaning.
- † I don't know about others of you who jumped, but for me it did feel as if it were a renewal of my baptism—a leap of faith into murky freezing deep water—for an important purpose. Not just to bring good out of loss, but to fly for a moment in the face of death and grief before hitting the water. To come up from the waters dripping with hope and looking up instead of down.
- † Reflecting back on the photos of that day, I see defiance, determination, and excitement on the faces of our jumpers. I see Logan jumping with his friends, even though his life, too, would be lost in the year. I see friends from church lending support and holding towels and dry clothes. It's almost that time of year again.
- † Nicole sent me a wonderful story that has important visual imagery for today's scripture and for the anniversary of her husband death. She has been exploring a book called Animal Speak by Ted Stevens.

† The book looks at different animals and their significance for us as well as their roots in Native American spirituality. Nicole says that from the time he was a boy, David was known as “Moose.” Hear this description of the moose’s special ability:

“They have a unique ability to plunge to the bottom of lakes, and can remain there feeding for up to a full minute before surfacing in a burst with fresh greens dangling from their mouths. For those who want to work with the full mystery of the power of the moose, this should be carefully studied and meditated upon. It reflects the ability of the individual to learn to go back into the depths and draw new life and nourishment from it.

The moose can teach the ability to move from the outer world to the inner. It can teach how to cross from life to death and back to stronger life. It teaches how to use the thin thread that separates life and death to one’s advantage.”

† Isn’t that a great image—the moose coming up dripping from the bottom of the waters with fresh greens dangling from their mouth? If you have trouble picturing Jesus coming up out of the waters, then just think of that moose.

† I don’t mean to trivialize Jesus by comparing him to a moose, and that’s not my point. You know that. But I think we can take a lesson from both. For many of us, our worlds are not the same after this year. The heavens have been, metaphorically at least, torn apart.

† And it’s impossible to put the pieces back together as they used to be. But as Mark’s gospel says, the torn place is where God comes through. God breaks in to the place that never again closes as neatly as before.

- † And from the day he saw the heavens torn apart, Jesus began tearing apart the pictures of who the Messiah was supposed to be. He tore apart the social fabric that separated rich from poor. He broke through hardness of heart to bring forth compassion. He broke through rituals that had become oppressive or meaningless. He tore apart the chains that held some imprisoned by rules of separation.
- † Finally, he tore apart the notion of what it meant to be God’s beloved child. And nothing would ever be the same—the heavens would never again close so tightly. And at the end of his life, as Jesus hung on a cross between heaven and earth, and when he breathed his last, the curtain of the temple was torn apart, just as the heavens had been at his baptism.
- † Nothing, even then, could separate the people from God’s presence. And in the silence of his death, a voice from a Roman centurion standing by echoed the words of Jesus’ baptism.
- † “Truly this man was God’s son,” the centurion said. And he was. And he is. And he will be.
- † For each of us, in this year past, there’s been a torn place or a deep hole. And yet, even though it may not have felt like it, God’s blessing has been there, too. The voice of God has whispered to us, “You are my beloved child.” Oh that we could hear it better. Oh that we could really live because it is true.
- † That’s why we conclude this service every year with a remembrance of our baptism. To remind us that we are God’s beloved children and that our baptism does make a difference..... Amen.
- † *Note: the congregation heard Luke Walrath sing “You Raise Me Up” and then participated in the ritual remembering of their baptisms.*

Sources:

Dr. Barbara Lundblad, “Torn Apart Forever,” www.day1.net

Rev. Tim Boggess, “In Hole He Goes,” www.day1.net

Ted Andrews, Animal Speak. (Excerpt sent by facsimile)