

January 11, 2009

The First Sunday after the Epiphany: The Baptism of Our Lord, Year B

Mark 1:4-11

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Ga.

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THE HEAVENS TORN APART

There are two places where Mark uses the word for tearing. Today we hear about Jesus seeing *the heavens torn apart*. After the crucifixion we will learn that *the curtain in the Temple was torn in two* (16:38). When we tear something, we might be able to patch it, but it is very hard to fix a tear as our treasurer will testify during his long, long process of healing from a torn Achilles tendon. Mark doesn't have clouds 'moving apart' or 'separating' or 'opening'. He uses a strong word -- one that implies finality. And he uses it first when Jesus appears on the scene and again when he leaves it. He uses it first to tell us something about Jesus person, his *identity*, and later to signal his saving work or his *purpose*.

Jesus baptism and crucifixion are a kind of reversal of the fall, which had its own kind of finality. When Adam and Eve ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they became aware of the difference between right and wrong and a host of other things besides. And so began the human story of managing anxiety and dis-ease in ways that lead quickly to violence. They are cast out of Eden, and Cain's murder of Abel soon follows. In Jesus, we are shown another way to live -- a way other than violence and separation, a way different than grasping for power one over another, a way other than following our tendency to assign blame whenever we can for when life doesn't go right, a way that is different from hanging on to our status as victims so that we don't have to learn and don't have to change and can try and get others to accommodate themselves to us.

In Jesus, the way of life is once again opened to us with a kind of finality implied by the tearing of the heavens and the unveiling of the truth about who we are and who we can become. Jesus is today revealed as God's beloved in whom God takes pleasure. He lived the way of absolute integrity, and he was put to death as a consequence of the sin of the world -- our sin -- the ways in which we live every day. What is revealed by the rending of the curtain in the Temple is the truly innocent victim, the last victim if you like, the final revelation that our systems of sacrificing one thing for another, of getting ahead only by others being left behind, of making sure that we are governors of our own lives by being governors over as many other people and spheres as possible -- all of these mechanisms are shown to be unnecessary from now on, and the use of them is culpable.

Of all the ways we try to manage ourselves and get others to take care of us, --of all the ways we try to justify our actions-- perhaps the most subtle and insidious is that of claiming and clinging to the status of victim. If you have ever been or felt yourself to have been a victim of prejudice or abuse or discrimination, then you will know the temptation to live as a victim. If you have ever felt aggrieved or treated unjustly by someone else, then you know this temptation. If you have ever had the feeling that life somehow owes you a living and has not come through on the deal, then you too know the temptation of clinging to the status of victim.

We have all been reminded of the most severe example of this temptation at work in the bloodshed, killing and mayhem taking place in the Gaza strip in recent days. In one way of looking at the conflicts of that part of the world we can see everyone claiming international sympathy because they are the victims, the minority, and the vulnerable ones in the situation. Israel with a long history of anti-Semitism behind it and the Nazi genocide in its recent memory sees itself as needing to be strong and clear when surrounded by hostile nations without and hostile residents within. The Palestinians are aggrieved and claim our sympathy because they have been subject to brutal and oppressive policies at the hands of the Jewish majority in what was, after all, their historic homeland as well, and so they look for international support among Arab friends. I heard it suggested by one commentator this week that *Hamas* had to fire missiles in order to provoke attack in order to continue to draw attention and presumably sympathy to their cause. How perverse is that?

We see something similar in our inter-Nicene battles in the Anglican world with everyone feeling that they have been offended and showing that it was 'the others' --whoever they may be--who started it all with their... and then we fill in the blanks with the offense you take at the other side whichever side we are on.

The temptation to live as a victim will become more severe for many of us during this recession as more of us are laid off -- victims of the economic realities of our times. We are taking that on here by doing everything we can here to avoid laying off staff, looking instead for reductions through attrition over the next couple of years. We are also cooperating with some other local churches to provide programmatic teaching about searching for employment and other issues, but most important is that we are gathering a group of people looking for work to be a spiritual community for one another in a terribly difficult time. We may even want to offer something similar for their spouses and partners along the way. They will help each other remember that they are beloved children of God and that every one of us has been given work to do in loving and serving others. What they will need is remunerative work, but in the meantime they can hold each other accountable and offer support and encouragement from others who really understand the challenge of involuntary unemployment. Maybe they are particular victims of our times, but they need not stay there and be defined by that reality. They, and we with them, can remember that the heavens have been

torn apart so that we need never again find our status in anything other than our being beloved of God. Then gathering with the whole community of faith, week by week, around the Lord's Table, we remember that we are baptized, forgiven, valued, judged, challenged and beloved People of God. Around this table we are confronted by the real victim in whom all our illusions, all our pretensions, all our mechanisms for managing in ways that hurt others, all our sins are revealed. We are reminded that God really does sustain us, granting us everything we really need for what is important in life, including forgiveness and love and freedom -- all things which over time help us to be less fearful and less anxious even in the most trying of circumstances.

The heavens have been torn open and so has the curtain in the Temple. We have been shown Jesus as God's beloved and we have been shown him in his saving work of dying that we might know ourselves judged for all the ways in which we victimize others and then disallowing us the status of victim any longer because we are forgiven and loved and freed for new life.