

Splitting Apart the Heavens
A Sermon on Mark 1:4-11
Baptism of the Lord
January 7, 2018

Introduction

We heard a lot about John the Baptist during Advent. Mary preached about *Holy Infrastructure*—John was a voice in the wilderness, calling on the people to prepare the way of the Lord by repenting of their sins. I preached on John as a witness—his role in the Gospel of John is to testify to the light that is coming into the world.

The wait is over. John meets Jesus in today's text. Jesus surprises us. He has a new way of understanding God and self. Jesus' radical new vision is misunderstood by the disciples throughout the Gospel of Mark. We still misunderstand it today.

I would like to talk about what this text says about Jesus' consciousness and how it compares to the consciousness of John the Baptist. What does the symbol of the heavens being split apart tell us about Jesus' consciousness?

First Move: An Old School Prophet

John is old school. He wears a garment made of camel hair and a leather belt around his waist. Mary and I wore sackcloth in Los Alamos when we were with John Dear to protest the 70th anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima. Sackcloth is like wearing a burlap sack. It is rough and scratchy. Mark is describing John as an ascetic who wears uncomfortable clothing as a sign of penitence.

Mark also is comparing John to the prophet Elijah. 2 Kings 1:8 describes Elijah as a hairy man with a leather belt around his waist. The last book in the Old Testament is Malachi. It describes Elijah as the eschatological prophet. "I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me." The messenger prepares the way for the great and glorious day of the Lord.

John eats locusts and wild honey. That is part of the diet of people who live in the desert wilderness.

John is a prophet like the prophets of old. People in Israel believed that God had stopped speaking through prophets. There are only three canonical prophets, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi, who appeared after the return from the exile in Babylon in the fifth century B.C.E., but after them, nothing. It has been 400 years

since a prophet had arisen in Israel. All of Judea, including all of Jerusalem, flocked to see John in the wilderness. The people of Israel were hungry for a prophet.

John proclaims a baptism of repentance for release of sins. John proclaims *baptism*—he doesn't proclaim *repentance*. Baptism comes first. John baptized people by immersing them in water as a way of purifying them. The prophet Elisha tells Naaman the leper to wash himself in the river Jordan to heal his leprosy.

Baptism has lost much of its symbolic significance. It has become a synonym for initiation. The Greek verb, *βαπτίζω*, meant to dip or plunge something into water, such as dipping a cup in a wine bowl, sinking a ship, or plunging a sword into someone's body. Our communion by intinction is based on the Latin word for baptism. It means to dip the bread into the cup. Baptism scared people. Not many people knew how to swim until the modern era. To be plunged into water carried the risk of drowning. Baptism symbolizing dying. We've lost something of that symbolism today. Most denominations sprinkle a few drops of water on babies to baptize them. It symbolizes God's grace, but it doesn't suggest dying.

Baptism in the river Jordan also is a dramatic way of reenacting the Exodus. Baptism represents new life. Israel passed through the river Jordan and became a new people.

When we are baptized, God heals us and gives us new life. The proper response is repentance. Repentance means turning our minds around. In the Bible it means turning our minds toward God. Focusing on God instead of the false gods that have distanced us from God. Repentance also means being sorry for our sins.

Sin in the Bible is a breach of the covenant. Sin has both a personal and a social dimension. The primal sin in the Old Testament is the golden calf. Israel turns away from God and worships false gods. This is a social sin that all the people were guilty of. Personal sin means breaking one of the commandments set out in the Jewish law, which is called the Torah. When we are baptized, God forgives our social sins and our personal sins.

In the Gospel of Mark, John has no words of judgment for the people of Israel. In Q [Matthew and Luke], John says, "You brood of vipers! Who told you to flee from the wrath to come."

The role of John the Baptist in the Gospel of Mark is to be a herald of the coming of a stronger one. John is thinking of a Messiah. He is exhorting the people of Israel to prepare the way of the Lord. John does not yet know that Jesus is the Messiah. In Q [Matthew 11:2 and Luke 7:18], John in prison sends his disciples to ask Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

John says, “I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the holy spirit.” The spirit in the Old Testament represents the awesome creative power of God and the power that God gives to judges, kings and prophets. The spirit of the Lord rests upon the Messiah, the shoot of Jesse, in Isaiah 11:2. God puts his spirit upon his servant in Isaiah 42:1 to bring judgment to the nations.

John was anticipating that God would send a Messiah to liberate Israel and rule over it in wisdom and in power.

Second Move: A Mystical Vision

Jesus is introduced with little background. This is all that Mark tells us: “And it happened in those days [that] Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee.” In Mark’s gospel, we don’t have the genealogies and the birth stories that we have in Matthew and Luke. We don’t have Jesus described as the pre-existing Word of God who was present at the side of God at the creation of the world. Jesus is almost nondescript. He is from Nazareth, a town of about 500 people. Nazareth is not mentioned in the Old Testament. God is doing something new and unexpected by bringing a Messiah from Nazareth.

Jesus apparently was a disciple of John the Baptist. Jesus responded to John’s message of baptism. All four gospels describe Jesus as being baptized by John.

Mark describes the baptism in just a few words. “He [Jesus] was baptized in the Jordan by John.”

Mark’s focus is on what happens after the baptism. As Jesus is coming up out of the water, he has a vision. He at once sees the heavens being torn apart and the spirit descending like a dove into him. The tearing apart of the heavens is an irrevocable act. Matthew and Luke soften it. They say that the heavens were opened, but Mark says they were torn apart. He uses the Greek verb, σχίζω. It is where our word schism comes from, which is a religious split, like the irrevocable split between Roman Catholics and Protestants.

Jesus is anointed as Messiah by the spirit’s descending into him. The spirit is the divine power in the Gospel of Mark that allows Jesus and his followers to do battle with demons and evil spirits.

The dove can have several meanings. It could refer to Genesis 1:2, in which the spirit of God hovers like a bird over the waters of chaos. Birds also were seen as linking the heavens and the earth—they flew into the sky and landed on the ground. The dove also is a symbol of peace; Mark contrasts the peacefulness of the dove with the power of the Spirit. God’s power is non-violent. That is a contraction in terms, non-violent power, but Jesus will demonstrate that power throughout his ministry.

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus alone is able to see the heavens being split apart and the dove descending. It is a mystical vision. Mystics have intense spirituality; they are able to see the sacred all around them. Mark's first description of Jesus in action is as a mystic.

Jesus' vision includes a voice out of the heavens that is heard only by him: "You are my beloved son; in you I have taken delight." This is not a voice of judgment; it is a voice of love. It reminds us of Psalm 2, where a new king of Israel is anointed. God tells the king, "You are my son; today I have begotten you." The king is the representative for all the people. The whole people of Israel is God's son.

God calls Jesus, "my beloved." The Greek word is ἀγαπητός. It is the noun form of ἀγάπη. Ἀγάπη is a powerful word in the New Testament. It is the highest form of love—divine love. The same word refers elsewhere in the Bible to the love that has parent has for an only child, someone who is unique, just as Israel is God's chosen people.

Mark doesn't tell us what Jesus did to earn God's love. He doesn't tell us why God chose Jesus to be the beloved Son. Mark simply reveals how God sees Jesus.

If we had been standing on the riverbank, we wouldn't have seen the heavens being torn apart and the dove descending. Only Jesus saw it. John the Baptist and the people on the riverbank wouldn't have noticed anything unusual about the baptism of Jesus. They certainly wouldn't have known that Jesus had just been anointed as the Messiah. For Mark's readers, there is no doubt. Mark has shared Jesus' vision with us.

Third Move: A New Identity

John the Baptist and Jesus have different understandings of the tearing apart of the heavens. It reflects their differences in consciousness.

John sees the tearing apart of the heavens as an apocalyptic act. Isaiah 64:1 says, "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence, . . ., to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence." The Song of Deborah in Judges 5 is one of the oldest texts in the Old Testament. It speaks of the mountains quaking and the earth trembling and the heavens dripping. This ancient song glorifies God as the Divine Warrior who led Israel into Canaan and conquered the native peoples.

Like Isaiah, John the Baptist longs for God to come down from heaven and deliver Israel from its captivity. He expects God to send a Messiah who will be filled with the power of the spirit. John reminds me of political partisans today. They are looking for a savior to lead them to political victory.

Jesus has a different understanding of power. The power of the spirit takes the form of a dove descending into him. The Greek preposition εἰς is usually translated as *into* rather than *in*. The spirit descends into him.

Perhaps Jesus understands the heavens as being torn apart within him. Jesus has a different understanding of God. God is no longer a distant monarch who rules from the highest circles in heaven, issuing laws and punishing people for their sins. God has forever broken open the heavens so that Jesus can feel the presence of God, the love of God and the power of God within him.

Can we live as if heaven has been split open? As if heaven is something we can experience right now?

Maybe heaven is not someplace you go after you die. Maybe heaven is more like a sacred dimension to life that we only get glimpses of. The Apostle Paul says, “Now we see in a mirror dimly, but I long to see you face to face.” Jesus can help us see the sacred face to face.

Jesus had a vision of the kingdom of God. He could see what a better world would look like if people cooperated with each other instead of competing against each other. A world where five loaves and two fishes can feed five thousand people. That vision sustained him throughout his life. He worked toward it every day by resisting conventional wisdom and by sharing that vision with the people that he met.

The kingdom is not just about politics and ethics; it is also about a relationship with the sacred. Christianity is out of balance when it focuses only on politics and ethics. The life of faith also has a spiritual component

Jesus had a unique relationship with the sacred. It filled his life. He was a mystic in the best sense of the word.

Marcus Borg defines a mystic as someone who is intoxicated with God or the sacred. He had frequent and intense experiences of the sacred all around him. The theologian Matthew Fox says, “Everyone is born a mystic and a lover who experiences the unity of all things, and all are called to keep alive this mystic or lover of life.”

Mystics see the connections between things. They have a unitive consciousness. They don’t divide the world into good and evil, heaven and hell, red state and blue state. They see a little bit of heaven in everyone and everything. They see power as something that is shared, persuasive not coercive.

Mystics stand in awe of the mystery of life and celebrate the miracle of life. That is what brings them to worship on Sunday morning. They want to share their joy with fellow travelers on the journey. They want to give thanks for the original blessing that surrounds them.

You are a beloved child of God, just as Jesus was. Jesus helps us see that the barriers that separate us from God have been broken down. Jesus helps us unite our humanity with our spirituality.

Conclusion

Jesus says in Q [Matthew 11:11 and Luke 7:28] that, “There has not arisen among those born of women one greater than John the Baptist, but the least in the kingdom is greater than he.”

John the Baptist should be celebrated for leading people to repentance, but his understanding of God and power is holding him back. He would not have seen the kingdom of God as within you. He would not have seen the kingdom of God as spread out over the earth but people do not see it.

The man born of water makes way for the man born of spirit.

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