

“The Day the Heavens Were Torn Open”

Mark 1:9-11 (NRSV)

By John Gill

How many of you are Star Trek fans? If you were here in Sebastian during the Summer after I arrived to be your pastor, you may recall from one of the early sermons I preached that I am a Trek fan. I don't mean, a fan of those TV spin-offs (“The Next Gen.”, “Voyager” or “Deep Space Nine”), or any of those full-length movie sequels that have played in the theaters over the recent decades (they're OK, I guess – but I don't really follow them).

No, I am a purist! – a fan of the original 1960's TV series, starring William Shafner as Captain Kirk, and Leonard Nimoy as Spock, and the crew of the Starship Enterprise, as they explored deep-space, going “where no man has gone before.”

Growing up, I never missed an episode! I loved that show, and thought it was the most creative and sophisticated show ever – even though now, looking back, I have to confess that it was pretty hokey by today's standards... I mean, would actual female astronauts dress in 1960s “go-go” mini skirts? (On second thought, as a 10 year old boy, maybe that's the real reason I loved the show!) As hokey as the show may have been, it always had an intriguing angle on the story, some new insight or way of looking at the universe that I had never thought about. Of course, many of the plots were pure science fiction – but it also would sometimes present episodes that dealt with real scientific theory. Anyway, the show always made me think.

One of my favorite episodes was called “Mirror, Mirror.” Captain Kirk and his landing party beamed down to explore a new planet, only to discover that they had stumbled into a parallel universe. In this alternative reality there was a duplicate Captain Kirk, and Mr. Spock, and all the rest... This mirror universe was exactly the same as the one they had left – except that the parallel universe was evil. I can't recall how the episode resolved, but that episode caused the viewer to ponder whether such parallel realities were even possible. Sounds more than a little far-fetched, don't you think?

Well, as it turns out, this notion of parallel universes may not be as implausible as it may sound. In 1954, an American physicist name Hugh Everett, studied quantum physics, and hypothesized that these parallel universes may, in fact, exist. I don't understand the theory, but it seems to suggest that there are multiple realms of reality that exist simultaneously. As you can imagine, lots of people thought Everett was off his rocker, but physicists today continue to explore whether or not there are alternative realms we cannot see. But since, unlike the crew of the Enterprise, we probably will never actually stumble upon our mirror universe, we'll never really know, I suppose.

Most people in our world probably would be skeptical that there is an alternative reality they cannot see. They will believe in only what they can see – what can be proven. They would say that any suggestion that there is some other parallel realm besides our own is just hogwash!

But we, who are people of faith, aren't surprised to hear that more than one dimension exists. In fact, our whole belief system as Christians is predicated on the conviction that there is an alternative reality to this fallen world in which we live. Obviously, there is this world, this reality as we know it. But by

faith we perceive the existence of an alternative reality, a parallel dimension – We call it “heaven” or “the kingdom of God.”

You see, contrary to popular belief, this heavenly kingdom where God reigns supreme is not someplace far removed from where we live – somewhere “way up there,” nor is it something to dream of in the far distant future. This kingdom of Heaven exists side by side the earthly realm in which we live. And we can access the divine reality at any time.

In “The Clarified King James Bible” website, this is how the commentator described the closeness of the heavenly realm: “How can the Kingdom be within and around a man? It is a parallel dimension occupying the same physical space. The Apostle Paul helps us understand the Kingdom of God within and around us, writing in the Bible’s book of Acts: ‘God .. is not far from each one of us, for in him we live and move and have our being,’ (Acts 17:27-28) — but we are not aware of this because we are in a lower physical dimension. The physical dimension shares the same space as the higher spiritual dimensions. To enter the Kingdom of God within and around us, is to be dramatically translated to the spiritual dimension of consciousness and sight, in union with Christ and God, but walking on earth by the light of God. The world passes away from our sight when the Kingdom is entered.”¹

You see, we may not see this Kingdom of God, nor can we prove it. We just know in our bones that there is more to reality than what we can perceive with our eyes. In fact, this alternative reality where God reigns supreme, is the very hope that we as Christians cling to, and the ultimate destination of our souls. You could even define faith as “living in this earthly realm with the perspective of the heavenly realm,” or as the author I just quoted put it, “to be in union with Christ and God, but walking on earth by the light of God.” Yes, for Christians, we know there is an alternative reality – a divine reality.

We know it is real, because for fleeting moments throughout our lives, we have gotten a glimpse of the divine dimension. By the way, there is a name for these “close encounters” with the divine. In Celtic Christian spirituality, those moments where we are most aware of the heavenly realm are called “Thin Places.”

On a website called “Patheos,” Dr. Mark Roberts describes a “thin place” as being “a place where the boundary between heaven and earth is especially thin. It’s a place where we can sense the divine more readily.”² Or as the Apostle Paul described this experience in First Corinthians: “now we can only see through a glass dimly, but then then face to face.” Thin places are where the membrane that separates heaven and earth becomes so translucent that God’s glory shines on us.

In fact, the Bible is filled with stories of Thin Places – or “God encounters” where heaven and earth touch.

You no doubt have experienced these windows into the heavenly realm in your own life – but probably didn’t know quite what to call the experience. We’ve all stood at the grave of a loved one to say our final goodbyes, and sensed the closeness of the divine in that holy moment. Or, you were privileged to hold your wife’s hand as she gave birth to your child, and you could feel the very presence of God in the room. Or, you were in a secluded place in nature all alone – and were overcome by the beauty and

grandeur of God's creation, and you felt the intimate closeness of God deep down in your bones. Or, maybe you were at the altar rail of a church with tears of joy rolling down your cheeks, as you felt the warmth of the Holy Spirit wash over you, and you knew you were in the presence of God. When have you experienced this "thin place?"

Or, it is possible that you have never experienced a thin place. It could be that you have lived your entire life oblivious to the divine realm. Sadly, lots of people today go through their entire life without perceiving any other dimension to reality than this finite world they can see.

Or, maybe years ago, you did encounter a "thin place," but the memory of that sacred moment – that holy ground – is so faint that you now wonder if it ever really happened. Perhaps, you even have come to the conclusion that the belief in a heavenly kingdom running parallel to our reality is nonsense.

Or, it could even be that, while you may say you believe that this heavenly realm exists, your experience is that heaven is out of reach for you – that God is absent from your life – or even hostile to you. You feel cut-off from this divine alternative realm.

We can begin to feel so far removed from the heavenly realm that we can identify with the rich man in Jesus' parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus. You remember that, in the story Jesus told, a rich man died and was sitting in the fires of Hades because of his stinginess during his lifetime, and he calls out to Father Abraham in heaven for a drink of cool water. But Abraham replies, "between you and us a great chasm has been fixed." Does that describe how you feel about heaven? Perhaps you know that heaven is real, but because of the way you have lived your life, instead of experiencing the glory of God's grace through a "thin place," you feel separated from the divine by "a great chasm" – a chasm so deep and wide that you have despaired that you will ever be able to cross over into the presence of God.

If that describes you, I don't want you to lose heart this morning. There is Good News for us in our scripture today – in our story of the Baptism of Jesus.

The Baptism of Jesus? That's an odd text to inspire a sermon focusing on heaven! What could Mark's telling of this event at the very beginning of Jesus' ministry reveal to us about the intersection of heaven and earth? More than you might think. Let me explain:

Several years ago, I was privileged to go to Emory University in Atlanta to participate in the Marcy Preaching Fellowship. During those days, we focused on the stories found in the first Chapter of the Gospel of Mark, and were challenged to develop a sermon based on one of the texts. In many ways, Mark's telling of the ministry of Jesus is very similar to Matthew and Luke's narrative, but in other striking ways, Mark is quite unique. One pretty obvious way Mark's gospel is unique is that there are no Christmas stories – Mark begins his gospel with the preaching of John the Baptist, and the baptism of Jesus. So since this is how Mark chooses to introduce his readers to Jesus, it is clear that, for Mark, something earth-shattering must have happened when Jesus was baptized.

What makes the Baptism so significant? Well, when you compare the way the various gospel writers report this story of the Baptism, there are some interesting differences in Mark.

One difference we may not catch in our English translations of the original Greek: It has to do with the word Mark uses to describe the cosmic event that takes place during the baptism. The other Gospel writers simply describe the heavens as “opening” with the voice of God speaking and the Holy Spirit like a dove descending. Mark, choose a completely different word – the heavens don’t simply open – Mark uses a much more violent word – the word is “schizo” - the heavens were “rent, split, torn apart, ripped open.” At the Baptism of Jesus, Mark is saying that God doesn’t just crack open the window of heaven and peek out – he smashes the window!

Do you see why this is good news for us? Throughout our lives we may get little hints of glory – we may experience God’s presence in fleeting moments – we may even seek out those “thin places” so we can cozy up to the veil that separates earth and heaven and try to peer “through the glass dimly” at heaven. But, from our earthy side of the divide, we are only tantalized – we can never quite reach out and touch the divine. We can never know the full glory of God. Heaven always is just beyond our reach.

But at the Baptism of Jesus, all that changed. God has ripped open heaven and invaded our world. The barrier between the two parallel realities is shattered, and heaven has taken up residence on the earth – in the divine Son of God. By using this Greek word “schizo” Mark is saying that God is finally coming to the rescue! Heaven has come down to earth, in the person of Jesus! And that, friends, is very good news!

But, you know - there is still a problem, according to the way Mark tells his story. The pathway between heaven and earth may now be open – but at this point, it is only “one way.” God had taken the initiative to come to us, but we were still blocked from returning to him. Something more must take place to make it possible to cross over and experience the glory of the God. And that something – is faith.

Mark tells us this, in the way he chooses to tell the story: the way Mark describes the Baptism, no one except Jesus and the reader, is aware of this amazing cosmic event! The other gospel writers say that, at the baptism when God speaks, his words are addressed all those present, announcing to all the identity of Jesus: “This is my beloved Son.” Everyone standing around heard God speak. Not so in Mark. In Mark’s version, the voice is spoken only to Jesus: “You are my beloved Son” - and nobody else present at the baptism has a clue what is really happening.

The most important moment in Salvation history up to that point has just occurred, a transformational event that completely alters the relationship between heaven and earth – and no one knows about it – it is secret. Why?

According the Mark – God doesn’t let them in on the secret, because God wants people to figure out who Jesus really is on their own. It seems that it is our faith in Jesus as God’s Son that is the key that unlocks heaven for us. Throughout Mark’s gospel, people experience “thin places” as they encounter Jesus’s teachings and miracles – and ought to have been able to figure out that Jesus is the Son of God, the Savior of the World. As Mark tells his story, some people who encounter Jesus begin to figure it out, but in the end, they miss it.

Peter comes the closest – at one point when Jesus asks “Who do you say that I am,” Peter says the right words, “You are the Christ...” But later on in the Gospel, Peter proves by his denial of Jesus that he doesn’t really believe the words he said.

However, there is one human being who finally figures it out, and declares that Jesus is the Son of God – according to Mark, the only person to truly get it – is not a Jew at all. In the 15th Chapter we read the account of Jesus’s final moments on the cross. At the moment of Jesus’s death, this is what Mark reports: “Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. And the curtain of the temple was “schizo” torn in two, from top to bottom. Now when the centurion who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, “Truly this man was God’s Son.”

Do you see what Mark is trying to tell us? At the beginning of Jesus’s ministry, the heavens were ripped open and God invaded our world in Jesus Christ. At the Baptism, the highway between heaven and earth was only “one way.” The work of tearing down the wall that divides heaven and earth had only just begun. What was still missing, according to the way Mark tells his story, was a demonstration of faith in Jesus as the Son of God. But at the cross, the saving work of God in Christ is complete, and heaven is ripped open once again so that we finally have access to the God’s Heavenly Kingdom!

You see what Mark is saying by the way he tells his gospel story: It is only by faith in Jesus as God’s Son that the highway to heaven becomes two-way. It is only when you and I recognize and confess Jesus as the Son of God, that we can cross over heaven’s threshold and know the full presence of God.

Friends, that is why this scripture – the story of the Baptism of our Lord - is one of the texts we consider during the season of Epiphany! Epiphany means “to make manifest” or “to reveal” – those shimmering “thin places” where the boundary between heaven and earth is so translucent that we can behold the Glory of God. At the baptism of Jesus, God revealed Jesus to be his Son. And on the cross Jesus opened for us, and for all, the doorway to heaven.

So, this morning, as we focus on our own baptisms and rejoice in witnessing the baptism of two of our sisters in the faith, we are standing on holy ground. We find ourselves approaching one of those shimmering “thin places,” where heaven and earth intersect, and the doorway to heaven is ripped open so we can get a glimpse of the Glory of God.

By faith, may each of us reclaim the vows of our own baptisms and once again put our trust in Jesus, God’s only Son, that one day, we may be able cross that eternal threshold, and behold God face to face.

John 3:16

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

John 17:3

And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.

¹ <http://www.hallworthington.com/getverses.php?search=luke17:20-21;&version=160;>

² <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/markdroberts/series/thin-places/#ixzz3HZ3tBlb3>