

Mark 1:4-11

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the River Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, 'The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.'

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

The World Shattered - January 10, 2021

Mark 1:4-11

I like big words. They have a power to describe situations in a way that a whole string of short words can't. One word that comes to mind as we reflect on the events of the past week is the word cataclysm. What happened in Washington last Wednesday can only be described as cataclysmic. Yes, the insurrectionists were eventually driven off and yes, Joe Biden was officially confirmed to be the 46th President, and yes, some of those elected officials so eager to perpetuate mistrust in our democracy have backed down for a bit— don't worry, they'll be back.

But we all know that the underlying causes of the riots have not gone away. In fact, there are many who will regard the storming of our nation's capitol building as a moment of extraordinary triumph and those who came to Washington at the current president's bidding are being hailed as heroes. Make no mistake, tens of millions of our fellow citizens believe that Joe Biden won the election by fraud and will never be persuaded otherwise. Make no mistake, tens of millions of our fellow citizens very much approve of what happened on Wednesday and will forever claim that those who committed these crimes are indeed "special people," and should be called "patriots."

In one fell swoop, our nation suffered a severe loss of credibility in the world. China was quick to point out that their military actions toward the Tiananmen Square protestors were no different from the actions law enforcement officials took Wednesday toward the insurrectionists. At the same time many African-American leaders in our country claimed correctly that had the rioters been black, the response from law-enforcement would have been far more violent and deadly. The sad truth is the Proud Boys and other mobsters who have contempt for anyone who is different from them went out and grabbed beers at local bars that night celebrating their utterly contemptible actions.

Does anyone doubt that regardless of a new administration taking power in a few days, the damage of this incident will take years to digest and recover from, if at all? We, friends, have just lived through a cataclysmic event.

And cataclysm is indeed the right word to describe it. The word cataclysm comes from two Greek words. Kata, meaning "down or against" and klyzo meaning "to wash over." It was originally used to describe what happens in a flood but its use quickly expanded to include any social upheaval or change. What happened Wednesday washed away many assumptions about whether most Americans truly believe in our democracy, especially when the president himself incited the rioters and one out of four of our elected representatives participated in the charade that the election was stolen. Interestingly, none who claimed the presidential election was stolen did not claim that their own personal elections were stolen.

But what do any of the events of the past week have to do with the church. Why should I be dragging political events into church yet again?

Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” He told Pontius Pilate, “I have come to testify to the truth.” In short, Christians value truth as being absolutely integral to life. Without truth, life is impossible and the world descends into chaos — just as it might have done on Wednesday. The church is founded on the truth of Jesus Christ. It must therefore insist on truth in all aspects of life. And by insisting on truth, we embrace that fact there are both actual truths and actual falsehoods in life. We do not exist in a fog of relativity where there are always “good people on both sides.”

No, there are things that are absolutely, unequivocally right and other things that are absolutely, unequivocally wrong. The church, because we claim to function outside of society, is uniquely qualified to demand truthful words and truthful behavior from human beings and human institutions alike. Much of the strife, not just the past four years, but the suffering and conflict that has been integral to the history of our nation, has been rooted in all kinds of lies — terrible lies. At the same time, throughout our history, it has often been dedicated Christians who insisted on testifying to the truth. It is they who have been the agents of genuine change in our land. Christians who testified to truth and, like Jesus, suffered and died for the truth.

Our nation, indeed, our world, is mired in a swamp of lies: lies about race, lies about poverty, lies about nationality, lies about the environment, and worst of all, lies about God favoring the wealthy, the powerful, and white people above all other human beings.

If we as a church do not stand for extolling the truth and condemning lies then why do we exist? Why should we exist? Why would we deserve to exist? Demanding truthful words and behaviors from all people, including our elected officials, must be a core mission of the church. To ignore the truth and drift through our weekly worship pretending that everything is OK is to betray and reject every word of scripture.

Truthfully, our nation suffered a cataclysmic event on Wednesday. Its impact will have repercussions for decades. But also truthfully, the world experienced a far more cataclysmic event over two thousand years ago and that event we celebrate today: the Baptism of Jesus.

Recall again the definition of cataclysmic: the Greek word for down and the Greek word for wash over. Aren't those two words a perfect description of what happens in Baptism? Down and wash over.

Baptism. What is baptism? Nowadays, I fear it has for many devolved into a quaint little ritual where family members, especially grandma, are gathered together and watch the newest member of the family “get done”. Yes, “get done.” Throughout my ministry, I have been approached several times a year by people who want to know if we can “do” their child. After all, they say, “it'd be real nice if you

can help us make grandma happy. She's getting up there, you know, and who knows when we'll have another chance."

Do these couples know me? No. Do they know our congregation? No. Do they know anything about Jesus Christ? No idea. Do they care at all about the vows we ask them to take? What do you think?

Fortunately for me, in all the congregations I have served, from Zambia to Pittsburgh, Sessions have been unanimous in one thing: they would never authorize the baptism of children whose families had not demonstrated a real commitment to joining the congregation and becoming part of our worship and mission — not just until we "did" the child, but forever afterwards. Funny, when I tell these couples that if they want us to "do" their child, they'll have to attend worship regularly for several months, attend new members classes and even attend baptism classes. Funny, they just seem to fade away.

And I'm glad! Baptism is a cataclysmic event and can never be taken casually. Baptism is not an excuse for a family party. Baptism is not a cute photo opportunity created to make Grandma happy. No, Baptism it is cataclysmic for us now and it was cataclysmic for Jesus on that day 2000 years ago when he knelt before his cousin John and was immersed in the waters of the Jordan River.

Some people rightly ask why Jesus had to be baptized. If baptism represents a spiritual rebirth, Jesus himself hardly had to be spiritually reborn. Paul describes baptism as a singular event in which the water washes away our old lives and links us permanently with a new life rooted in Jesus Christ. We baptize infants in our tradition because we believe human beings, when given the choice, will always reject God and God's love. The whole of the Bible, the whole of human history shows that time and again people will do what they perceive to be in their own short-run self-interest and ignore the needs of society. Sin is simply worshipping ourselves instead of the God who created us. Therefore baptizing infants represents in a simple yet powerful way that we don't and can't choose God. Instead, God welcomes us first.

But that is not what Jesus' baptism was about. It wasn't about washing away his personal sin. It was in part about embracing his shared humanity by participating in the same act all his followers do. But Jesus' baptism is truly cataclysmic because when he came up out of the waters, what came down and washed over him was nothing less than the spirit of God.

Recall Mark's account: he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. The heavens were torn apart. Not merely opened, but torn apart. What is the significance of these two words?

What happens when something is torn apart? Well, when our dog tears apart her squeaky toys — something that occurs fairly regularly — the seams are split, the fabric is ripped, the stuffing lies in

clumps all over the place. It might be possible to repair the toy. However, even if everything is re-stuffed and sewn up, the toy will not be as strong as it was. It is best to simply throw it away.

When Jesus was baptized, the heavens were torn apart. That is to say the heavens, where God was understood to be living, was no longer separated from the earth, where human beings live. In Jesus, the barrier between heaven and earth is no more. It has been shredded. It has been destroyed. It is forever torn about. In Jesus Christ, heaven and earth, God and humanity are united in one individual.

If this is not a cataclysmic event, I don't know what is. The baptism of Jesus inaugurates an entirely new relationship between God our creator and we whom God created. Many Christians and non-Christians alike who have any kind of faith at all insist on believing there exists a huge gap between God and Humans. God is "up there" we are "down here." The gap is so wide that God and Humans have as little as possible to do with each other.

The coming of Jesus changes all that. Jesus is the focal point of the universe because in him, the spiritual and the physical are inextricably bound together. The Heavens are torn apart so we no longer need to view God as some distant, inaccessible entity we can't possibly relate to. Instead this rip in the heavens permanently unites us with our creator and forever changes how we understand our relationship with God.

Baptism binds us to Jesus because he is human like we are human. Baptism binds us to God because Jesus is also one with God. Therefore the God who dwells in Jesus also lives in us so we, like Jesus, are also bound to God. The cataclysm of Jesus' baptism is that when we are baptized, everything changes about how we relate to each other. Because the God who is in Jesus Christ is in us, all of us, we humans are now united in God. That is why Paul can say there is no Greek or Jew, there is no male or female, there is not slave or free, for all are one in Christ.

In Christ, therefore, all the lies we have been told about the way the world works, lies that have been dividing and destroying us since time began, all the lies are proven to be false. We are one: one humanity, united by one Christ, created by one God and because we all are one, how then can we possibly want or try to hurt each other or destroy what God has created for our personal benefit?

I hope you had the opportunity to prepare a small bowl of water and have it nearby. In years past, we would often form a line and go to the baptismal font in front of the pulpit. We would find the font was filled with water and stones. We would be invited to take a stone from the water and carry it around as a reminder of our baptism — a reminder that we belong to God.

This year, of course, we cannot visit the font in our sanctuary. But we still can share the experience of touching and feeling the water.

This year, I invite you to simply take your hand and place your fingers in your bowl of water and just leave them there. Let's do that and pause.

While your fingers are touching the water just reflect on how your faith in Jesus comes down and washes away your past — how your faith binds you to all humans who have been touched by the water throughout history — how your faith binds you to Jesus who himself touched the water just as you are doing now.

What a cataclysmic event! The Spirit has descended on us. The Water has washed over us. We are made one with Christ. Our lives are changed forever.

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.