

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt  
Fourth Presbyterian Church  
Baptism of the Lord  
January 7, 2018

## Heavens Torn Apart

Psalm 29; Mark 1:4-11

No one was quite sure when or how the bird got into the sanctuary  
of the First Presbyterian Church, in Staunton, Virginia.

but by the time the guest preacher began his sermon,  
the whole congregation was well aware of its presence.

It was during the Christmas season because the Advent Wreath was up.

I remember this because it was one of those artificial wreaths  
and the poor bird couldn't quite understand why those holly branches  
refused to give up their berries.

It wasn't a large bird. Something like a house finch, I think.

But you might be surprised at the commotion and distraction a little house finch can cause  
in a Presbyterian service of worship on a Sunday in December.

If the bird had stayed on the Christmas greenery, all might have been well.

But, of course, birds are not inclined to stay still, or in one place,  
especially not indoors,  
especially not when it becomes dissatisfied with plastic berries,  
and especially not if it can sense a nervous energy in the air.

So the little fellow took flight up into the choir loft, which was behind the pulpit,  
flying back and forth from one set of organ pipes to the other.

You can imagine that choir was nervous for a number of reasons.

There were several potential outcomes of this scenario,  
and the choir members were imagining them all.

You would have thought at one point,  
as the bird flew from left to right, and right to left,  
that the choir was swaying to the music of a spiritual,  
as they leaned to keep their eye on this intruder  
and stay out of the way of his swooping.

The preacher at this point made a poor decision.

He tried to pretend as if nothing unusual were happening.

He continued right on with his sermon,  
though clearly not a single word was being heard  
by a single member of the congregation,  
and certainly not by the choir.

Things got even more entertaining when the bird grew tired of the choir loft,  
and set its sights on the balcony in the back.

It's flight pattern — across the heads of the congregation —  
involved a swooping, dipping motion  
that sent a wave of adrenaline from the front to the back of the sanctuary.

Presbyterians pew-sitters, it turns out, even octogenarian ones,  
can move pretty darn quickly on a Sunday morning,  
to duck out of the way of a dive-bombing house finch.  
The sudden sound of creaking pews alone, from front to back,  
should have put an end to the sermon right then and there.

But I kid you not, the whole time,  
not once did the guest preacher pause to acknowledge  
the total disruption of the service under his administration.  
He actually tried to pretend nothing unusual was happening.  
He tried to ignore the havoc that this little bird was wreaking  
among the people of God.  
Stolid Presbyterian that he was, he didn't miss a beat.  
Nor did we.  
We all proceeded right through the rest of that service,  
and concluded with the benediction at 12 on the dot.

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I am reminded of this story because it has been suggested  
that when the Spirit descended on Jesus in his baptism *like a dove*,  
the bird should not be pictured as coming down  
in some delicate, helical motion,  
but rather with the startling suddenness  
of a **dive-bombing pigeon**.

For the Gospel of Mark,  
the baptism of Jesus is not meant to be a particularly peaceful occasion,  
but the first of many dramatic moments in Mark's gospel  
which could be described as **God's invasion of creation**.

All four gospels have their own version of Jesus' baptism by John,  
but in Mark's, the earliest of the four traditions,  
one of the more noticeable differences  
is the description of what Jesus saw as he was coming up out of the water:  
*...he saw the heavens torn apart  
and the Spirit descending like a dove on him.*

The Spirit descending like a dove is attested in all four gospels,  
and three of the four tell of the voice from heaven saying,  
*"You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."*

But only Mark has the **heavens torn apart**  
In Mark, Jesus' baptism  
is the **opening scene of the drama  
of God's invasion into creation**.

The movement of the Holy Spirit through Mark's gospel  
is less like a gentle breeze,  
and more like the disruptive power of, say,  
a Bomb Cyclone.

When Jesus sees *the heaven torn apart*  
the Greek verb is *skidzo* — “to tear, to rend, to cleave, to divide asunder” —  
and it is the same Greek word used in the 15th chapter of Mark,  
when Jesus is crucified:  
He *gave a loud cry and breathed his last.*  
*And the curtain of the temple was skidzo (torn in two, torn apart),  
from top to bottom.*

These **two dramatic moments** bookend Mark's gospel.  
In in his **baptism** and **crucifixion**, and the life between them,  
**the veil between heaven and earth is forever rent.**

In this moment of baptism, God endorses Jesus — claims him —  
and says to us,  
this is the One in whom I will make myself known to the world,  
the One through whom I will enter creation in a new way.

If we find this to be a peaceful, comforting scene  
we may not truly be seeing it, or perhaps not believing what we see.

Professor Brent Driggers, our Pellett-Wearn lecturer a few years back,  
has written of this scene that it is a remembrance of the prophet Isaiah  
who prays,  
*O that you would **tear open the heavens and come down,**  
so that the mountains would quake at your presence.*

“If one follows this interpretive trajectory,  
the tearing of the heavens in Mark  
signals a divine initiative of rather unsettling proportions.  
The audience no longer hears a comforting invitation to enter confidently into God's presence  
but rather a potentially frightening announcement about  
'the removal of protection'  
that once shielded them from that presence.”<sup>1</sup>  
The voice from heaven that speaks, claiming Jesus as “my Beloved Son,”  
may not have sounded all that tender and comforting  
to those who heard it.

Was it the voice that speaks in **Psalm 29**?

*The voice of the LORD is over the waters;  
the God of glory thunders, the LORD, over mighty waters...  
The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars;  
the voice of the LORD flashes forth flames of fire.  
The voice of the LORD shakes the wilderness;*

*the voice of the LORD causes the oaks to whirl, and strips the forest bare;  
and in his temple all say, "Glory!"  
The LORD sits enthroned over the flood;  
the LORD sits enthroned as king forever.*

One does not simply...

...watch the heavens torn apart and remain in the same.  
...or hear the voice of God thunder and remain unmoved.  
Jesus, for his part, is immediately cast out into the wilderness  
for 40 days and nights,  
where he faces a life challenge of monumental proportions.

The gospel writer would likely agree with **Annie Dillard**,  
a Presbyterian author of a generation ago,  
in her famous rant about the docility of Christian worship:

“Why do people in church seem like cheerful, brainless tourists  
on a packaged tour of the Absolute?  
Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we blithely invoke?  
Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it?”

The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets,  
mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning.  
It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church;  
**we should all be wearing crash helmets.**  
Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares;  
they should lash us to our pews.  
For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense,  
or the waking god may draw us to where we can never return.”<sup>2</sup>

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For Mark's original hearers, for his little Jewish Christian community,  
the world was already in upheaval:  
the Temple in Jerusalem had been burned by the Romans,  
and Jews were fleeing far and wide to start their lives over.  
The world they had known was falling apart.  
God rending the heavens and coming down to earth  
was a welcome occasion.

For you and me — here at the beginning of 2018 in Greenville, South Carolina —  
I wonder what this story does for us and to us?  
Can we hear this story and remain untouched and unmoved?

The **good and comforting news** is this:

Whatever in this world or in your life may be separating you from God,  
it is no match for the God who has torn the heaven apart  
to be with you.

Nothing will prevent God from claiming you as God's child,  
and saying to you,

*You are my child, my beloved,  
with you I am well pleased.*

And the **challenging news** is this:

In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus,  
God has torn open the heavens and come down  
in a way that changes the relationship between God and creation.

Like a dove dive-bombing sleepy Presbyterians  
the Spirit will not let us merely sit and warm the pews,  
or sit around the house in our jammies on Sunday morning,  
or close our eyes to the suffering of others,  
or pretend that our material comfort is all we need to be concerned about,  
or imagine that our actions here on earth have nothing to do with what God wills  
in heaven.

Will we drone on in our theological platitudes  
and pretend that nothing unusual is going on in our world,  
or will we let our vision be changed,  
and let our priorities be changed,  
and let our habits be changed,  
and let our checkbooks be changed,  
and let our family life be changed,  
and let our friendships be changed,  
and let our present reality and future possibility be changed...

...changed by the Spirit who comes...  
...to comfort the afflicted  
...and afflict the comfortable.

God has torn open the heavens...  
...and the Spirit has come down.

...Can you believe it?

<sup>1</sup> Ira Brent Driggers, *Following God Through Mark: Theological Tension in the Second Gospel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007) 15.

<sup>2</sup> Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982) 40-41.