

The Baptism of the Lord, rcl yr a, 2021
St. John's in the COVID diaspora
GENESIS 1:1-5; PSALM 29; ACTS 19:1-7; MARK 1:4-11

he saw the heavens torn apart

I'm really glad to be back in the church building for worship. I do wish you could be here with me—that would make things that much better. (Though I'm afraid there will still be a few weeks yet of Sunday worship with a few of us here, and most of you there.)

Part of what I love about being the Rector of St. John's, Kitchener, is not just the time I get to spend with you, the community of faith that gathers from all around the region—but because we are St. John's, *Kitchener*. After ZOOM coffee hour today I'm going to fill a few prescriptions at Shoppers, maybe call ahead to Lookin' for Heroes and have them bring the comics in my bin out to the sidewalk—and then, as I've been doing the past few weeks, make my way back up to my car from King Street.

And I especially look forward to that little jaunt up College, because just off King Street there will be a van, with volunteers serving hot food, and others nearby giving fresh food away. It's kind of hidden, on the other side of that ever-present construction barrier, nestled in and hidden between our church building and City Hall.

Now I can always hope that the heavens will have be torn apart this morning, right here in the church building as you watch, and that you will all have a beatific vision of the Holy Spirit descending in the form of a dove. This is a place of holiness, after all. And the gospel always *disrupts*. And maybe we should expect that a voice will come from heaven over at City Hall—the place of power that it is—and that God will say something about his beloved Son taking up residence in the council chambers.

But if we were to pay close attention to the gospel, we wouldn't really expect things to begin there, or even here for that matter. If the heavens were to be torn apart, and Jesus's ministry were to begin here in Kitchener, it is most likely that it would happen not at the focal-point of power, nor at the centre of importance, but on the edge somewhere, almost out of sight—perhaps on a street dead-ended by construction, where a van will open its doors, set up a shaky table, and give away hot food to hungry people. That would be where *the heavens are torn apart*.

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Mark's Gospel begins with an announcement: "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." It could almost be about Caesar—Caesar, the Emperor, the divine man, and the "glad tidings" of his bloody rise to power in Rome, the ancient centre of worldly authority. There's good reason to think that Mark was intentionally gesturing to just that kind of language—but only to subvert it. Because his Gospel will most certainly *not* be a story of bloody exploitation and earthly power. This is "the beginning" of a very different kind of glad tidings: it is "the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."

For Mark, "the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" begins just about as far away as you can get from the power of the imperial capital. For Mark, "the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" doesn't even begin in the minor capital of a minor province. For Mark, "the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" begins on the outskirts of the outskirts. "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" begins in the wilderness. *That is where the heavens are torn apart.*

And when the heavens are torn apart, and the Spirit descends like a dove, and a voice comes from heaven, saying, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased," upon whom does the dove descend? Who is this beloved Son, in whom God is well pleased?

No man with royal retinue, nor a man with a Secret Service or aides to tell him what to say, neither is he a man with acolytes bearing him up on a litter. It's a guy in the crowd, stepping forward and telling his cousin "it's time *you* baptised *me*." This is no Caesar from Rome, neither is he a priest nor a son of a priest. This is a dude from Nazareth, a guy from a backwater town, a nobody from Nowheresville, a hoser from Prince George. This is Daryl from Letterkenney.

And it is upon this person, "of these doubtful social origins, in this remote location, that the divine favor falls." It is over this one, that *the heavens are torn apart.*

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The good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, will find its way into the throne-rooms of the world. As conflicted as some of us might feel about it, and as conflicted as some of them appear to have been about it—Emperors of Rome, even, will have their conversions to the Gospel of Jesus. And this will begin the long and highly conflicted union between the supposed “good tidings” of imperial rule and the truly good news of Jesus Christ the Son of God. The church, too, will its newly found privilege a hard habit to kick.

But the gospel will be proclaimed and heard in the churches; and perhaps, here too, the heavens will be torn apart. (One can hope and pray.) And the gospel will find a place for itself among the well-fed, it will find itself a comfortable place by the fire in the homes of the well-to-do. If not, many of us would be in a bit of trouble, would we not? So do read the gospel at home; read it to one another, read it to your children; and pray in thanksgiving for all we have.

And do look here—to this ambo, to this pulpit, and to this altar. You will hear the gospel; you will see the gospel; and you will grow in discipleship, if you are to join in and put your shoulder to the plough. And do look next door at City Hall—while it is far from perfect, God's will is done there too.

But if the Gospel of Mark would teach us to set our eyes anywhere, if it were to have us set our eyes on the places where “the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” is to be found—we would look to the *wild places in between* Rome and Jerusalem. We would look to the wilderness of a street turned into a dead-end by a construction barrier, where a van full of volunteers parks, and where a wobbly table is set with hot food, a place where hungry people gather—because this is the sort of place where *the heavens are torn apart*—where the Holy Spirit descends like a dove, and where the Beloved would be found.

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