

“BAPTISM BY DELUGE”

Mark 1:4-11

Sermon by Mack Dennis, Pastor

Jesus rises from the waters of the Jordan, the water courses across his uplifting face, he opens his eyes to see the answer to the prophet Isaiah’s plea: “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!” (Is. 64:1). He sees the heavens “being rent apart” (*trans.* D. B. Hart), and the Spirit descending upon him like a dove, which is to say, with breakneck speed. For doves are known for their power and speed, and even for the whirling sounds their wings make. They can reach speeds of 55 miles per hour, while retaining their precise flight patterns. What Jesus experiences as he rises from the water is on a scale of biblical proportions: the sky above him being ripped in two, the Spirit of God rushing down upon him like a jet with a Blue Angel pilot at the throttle. It is sudden, overwhelming, and cosmic. And—though the text doesn’t say—what happened to Jesus might cause the rest of us mere mortals to duck underneath the water for protection.

Biblical scholar Joel Marcus has a beautiful and unmatched description of this tearing open of the heavens. He calls it “a gracious gash in the universe,” an irreparable tear through which God, once and for all, has flooded the earth with the Holy Spirit. He notes how some Old Testament prophets—Isaiah, Ezekiel, Joel—describe the Holy Spirit coming “upon them,” like a gift. This is a gift that is given. It is, as such, a gift that can also be withheld, depending on the circumstances. But now, at Jesus’ baptism, it is as if the water has not only poured over the dam, but has broken through it, and the seemingly impenetrable wall that formerly held back this reservoir of Spirit has come to rest on the bedrock—not one stone remaining atop the other. At Jesus’ baptism, he sees the beginning of the end times. This is truly the beginning of the Last Days. The new creation has begun.

It helps to understand the significance of what has happened by going back to the beginning. The very beginning. *In the beginning*, when God created the heavens and the earth. *In the beginning*, God said, “Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.” Though to our modern ears it sounds rather unscientific—it was never intended to be scientific but theological—this is actually a description of the creation of the sky. In this beautiful, imaginative telling, God creates the sky by making a dome in the midst of the topsy-turvy waters of the universe. God uses this dome to separate waters from waters, and to make a safe space for dry land to exist. Why is the sky blue? Because it is a dome holding back a cosmic reservoir of water.

We might compare this to touring through a tunnel underneath an immense but structurally sound aquarium. There are several around the country, so you might have been to one of these before. But imagine walking through, when, all of a sudden, just above you, the dome of the tunnel begins to crack, and before you can escape, the full force of the water comes down upon you. To say nothing of your chances of survival, it would be an effective mode of baptism.

So, to capture the sheer magnitude of this event, when Jesus comes up out of the water, what he sees is the dome God established to separate waters from waters ripped open. What the dome held back is no longer contained. At his baptism, Jesus has witnessed a breathtaking alteration in God's created order. Truly Jesus' baptism is the beginning of the new creation—a new flood—only this time, we are consumed by the Holy Spirit.

But here is a detail we should not miss, and one that opens up the text even further. What is the very first thing Jesus does as he comes up out of the water? He sees. *He sees*. And this particular word for “see” privileges the sight of the mind—perception, discernment, experience. At his baptism, Jesus sees that the consequence of his baptism is a gift for the whole creation. It is not that Jesus sees a truth that is only for him. He sees what God does in baptism. Baptism changes the way we see the world and everything in it.

Let's say, for example, that you really are walking through a tunnel surrounded on all sides by water. And that tunnel does crack and finally give way. And you are consumed, but still mysteriously able to exist in this new underwater world. You have some ability to imagine this if you've ever played with your friends underwater in a clear pool. You all decide to go underwater at the same time with your eyes open. When you're underneath, you can still see each of your friends for who they are. But being underwater alters their appearance. Not only because their cheeks are blown out from holding their breath. But also because their hair is floating around their faces and heads, their skin looks pristine through the water's filtering effect, and the stirring surface of the water above refracts the light upon their facial features in a delightful and enchanting way. Opening your eyes under the water has a way of giving an otherworldly, almost angelic visual effect on the faces of people close to us.

This is at the heart of what it means to say we are “Becoming a Parable Church.” A parable church is one in which things look strangely different. When you cross the threshold of a parable church, you walk into a strange new world where the least of these are given seats at the head of the table; where the language of kindness and gentleness displaces the language of violence and division from the airwaves; where imperceptibly small, mustard-seed size gestures of beauty take root and grow until the whole place is overgrown with splendor; where the hungry are filled with good things; where sinners and scoundrels can come and be transformed by the renewing of their minds; where enemies become friends again.

I believe architect Douglas Ellington had this in mind when he not only constructed this sanctuary as a dome, but had the ceiling painted blue. What I don't know is whether he intended the color blue to signify the sky or the waters. But like any wonderful artist, perhaps he intended both. For this is a place where the very substance of the heavens mixes and fuses with the substance of the earth and everything and everyone upon it.

Listen, I will tell you a mystery. This past summer, I drove to Warren Wilson College to visit our FirstShine camp. And after driving around the campus lost for half an hour, I finally stumbled upon a parable. Walking up the path, and into a secluded clearing, I came upon our members and children from throughout our community with special needs. Youth and adults of every age were setting up lunch, while others were just coming back, looking as though they'd just been baptized by deluge. Just having come from some kind of epic water balloon fight,

soaked from top to bottom. There, under the tent, as we broke peanut butter and jelly sandwiches together, I had a very detailed conversation with one of the campers, who had an encyclopedic knowledge of future modes of transportation—battery powered cars, high speed trains. As I took it all in, it became so much clearer—this is just exactly the beautiful, outrageous, impossible, otherworldly, beloved community *baptism* makes possible.

Nicholas [newly baptized], beloved child of God, in whom God takes great delight, you have been baptized in a deluge, submerged into a world of parables and mysteries, signs and wonders. And the good news is that God gives you the eyes to see such abundance every day. Now go and live into this good news with your eyes open, so that you may take it all in and be made into a living parable yourself—a strange, startling, subversive disciple with visions of a new world breaking in upon us from above.

Brothers and sisters, hear the good news: the barrier between heaven and earth has been forever breached. The dome has not only cracked but been graciously gashed. Now the hills and the valleys have been inundated by a deluge of God's Holy Spirit. Come! Take a deep breath! Step across the threshold! And see...

