

Baptism of our Lord

January 8, 2012

Mark 1:4-11

Fracture!

### **Tearing Things Apart**

Before the story begins there is silence. The earth lies formless, void and covered in darkness. The Spirit, the breath, the wind from God sweeps over the waters. Suddenly, an explosion of creativity, God speaks. Light appears. And God by Word and Wind begins to separate things, names things and gives the chaotic order. First God separates light from dark. Later, God separates land and sea and sky, giving each its boundary, each its place. And it is good.

These opening words from scripture reveal a creative, energetic, living God who speaks things into existence and places these creatures into ever-changing, interwoven and interdependent, always dynamic systems of God's own making. And God delights and finds pleasure in each new creative addition and development, exclaiming that all this is good, good, very good.

But scary and dangerous too.

Ponder the fiery, creative process by which this thin crust of earth we live on is renewed and sustained, and remember the planet's growing pains we experience as earthquakes and volcanoes. It's good, beautiful and awesome – and terrifying. These and other forces of wind, water and fire threaten us to such a degree that we often find ourselves fighting against these powerful forces trying to manage, regulate and control them, unable to see their goodness. We struggle to find God or speak of God in the wild, untamed and intractable creation, and we shudder to think what it might mean for us if God were here – creating, energizing, living, breathing and speaking still.

We live and move in a mostly artificial and fabricated world, much like this warm and cozy building we're sitting in now. We make sure to manage, regulate and control things so we're mostly comfortable, but every so often the boundaries between us and the natural world tear, crack or fracture: the heating system breaks, the air conditioning goes out, a window's left open. We're left exposed ... left to feel how warm or cold, wet or dry, the world really is at this point in time. When that happens, we often complain to someone, demanding they return the environment to its previous, comfortable state.

## **Manage, Regulate and Control**

It's easy to dismiss complaining about heat and air conditioning as trivial concerns for church and church leadership, but maybe our grumblings about the environmental control systems in our building reveal something much deeper about our desire for church and religion to manage, regulate and control the terms of our encounter with God. In one way, that is what we do here; we attempt to manage, regulate and control where, when and how we meet God.

We schedule our worship to regulate the divine-human relationship as we move through time. We create boundaries, sanctuaries and holy spaces to control our experience of God in space. We label and separate things and people for special service, special functions and load up with meaning all sorts of ritual actions and objects.

And it's all good. It really is good to worship, together, at a regular time, according a regular order and plan in a heated building. But we can also use these boundaries to keep God at arm's length, to make God less awesome, beautiful and terrifying, to keep God tame and well-behaved.

But every so often, the boundaries are stressed and fracture; the creative, living, and dynamic God breaks in, breaks through or breaks out of our managed and controlled environment. It's scary when that happens. We want so badly for someone, anyone to hold things together, put things back the way they were. In those times, the call to keep things together, to repair the walls, to restore the boundary, though isn't the good or faithful response it seems, but a struggle against God, God's Spirit, God's Word as God's prepares to do something new.

## **Let God Be God**

In the story we heard from Mark's Gospel, this morning, John the Baptist appears – not at the center of the people's religious life, not at the heart of the symbolic place of God's presence, but outside of its walls, along the very border that separated people of God from the nations of the world. John appears – wild and intractable – shouting for the people to turn around and start again. It's the first sign of tear in the fabric of their well-managed, well-controlled, well-regulated relationship with God.

When Jesus comes to that borderline river to be baptized, when he goes down into that water and comes back out again – he sees the heavens torn apart. That basic division – the barrier that separates heaven and earth – is torn apart. The Spirit alights on Jesus and the voice of God confesses him as God's own Son, and it happened out on the edge, in the middle of the river. Like earthquake or volcano, the powerful force of God's Word and God's Spirit are unleashed to renew the earth, to re-create the creation.

It's a scary vision – the heavens ripped open. It's scary to see that God's grace comes with a force and power that breaks down the barriers constructed to contain God; that tears apart the curtains that sequester the holy in sacred space. The religious elites can sense that what's happening out by the river is the fracturing of whole systems of religion, politics and economics. They want it fixed, put back in order. But the Holy Spirit has already poured through the breach like lava, making everything new.

As the old passes away, though, it's hard to imagine that this is God in God's love for us that rips apart the boundaries separate us, distance us or keep us from God. With a burning creative delight, God comes close – real and alive, breathing and speaking – to us. And it's scary. But don't be afraid, God comes to us as Jesus. Jesus show us that this wild, intractable God loves us and all of creation – loves and only loves.

At Christmas, we celebrated and praised God for entering into our lives – God's Word takes flesh and allows us to see and follow God in a new, tangible way. Now, at Jesus' baptism, we start to glimpse some of the implications of this new, explosive and creative work.

Something new has happened to the world in Jesus. The holy comes to us and, instead of becoming common or polluted by contact with us, Jesus sanctifies, Jesus makes holy the people and things he touches. Through Jesus, God's creative, life-giving power flows to make us children of God, a holy people, set apart now for God's purposes. But we are not like the holy dishes – cleaned to be locked away. We, each and every one of us, from this watery and fiery sanctification of baptism become the bearers of Christ's body and blood into the common and ordinary world. The holy vessels God places into common circumstances for the healing, reconciliation and salvation of the world.

### **Thanksgiving for Baptism**

It begins here. It's renewed here. But God's presence and work in the world is not limited to this time or space; to our schedules or our programs. God's Word and Spirit tears through the old and creates the new ways, at surprising time, in wild and uncontrolled places. Word and Spirit expose us, open us, make us holy and set us free and send us out. And while our first inclination may be to construct ways control, regulate and manage God's creative and life-giving love and grace, God invites us into a much more dynamic and dangerous type of relationship -- a relationship where God is God and we are God's new creation in Jesus' death and resurrection.

So this morning, we invite you to remember your baptism, to give thanks for it -- not as a fixed point in the past, locked in time and space -- but give thanks to crucified and risen Lord Jesus who daily makes this place a fault-line between heaven and earth, a place where old boundaries are fractured and God's love flows to renew and restore us.

By water and word and Spirit we are being born again as God's beloved children, sanctified and sent out for God's purposes ... God's new creation in Jesus name. Amen.