Torn Apart

A sermon preached on the Sunday after Epiphany for St Brendan's Episcopal Church, Deer Isle, By the Rev. Dr. Jenny Reece

"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"

Please pray with me: God of Light, God of Love, we give you thanks that you have brought us to this season of Epiphany when we can see your power made manifest in Jesus Christ your beloved, born of Mary, baptized by John, at one with the Spirit. Send that same spirit on us now, we pray, that we may feel and know, and hear and say, what it is to be baptized into his death and be raised with him to new life. May all your people know we too are your Beloved ones and be healed, until we live together in peace, justice, and wholeness forever, and all this for your glory, one God, Holy and Everlasting, Amen.

Heaven torn apart

Texts: Genesis 1:1-5; Ps 29; Acts 19:1-7; Mark 4:1-11

In Mark's Gospel, there are two places where the heavens are spoken of as being Torn Apart. The first is here at the Baptism of Jesus, when the heavens split and the Spirit comes down on Jesus like a dove. The word for this opening of heaven in Greek by the way is "Schizo" which we encounter in English "Schizophrenia", the psychological breakage between outer reality and inner experience that tears apart individuals, families and communities. It's a violent word. Mathew and Luke use milder ones. But Mark is always so dramatic, so pointed. He doesn't mess about. The one other place he uses "Schizo" is at the crucifixion, when, at the moment Jesus dies, Mark describes the veil of the temple being "torn apart". This was the veil or curtain that separated the holy of holies, where God self was supposed to live, from the rest of the temple courts, and from the world of human devotees in their various ranks. It is not by accident that Mark uses this word at the beginning and the end of his gospel drama. In Jesus, he is saying, the distinction between heaven and earth is once and for all destroyed. Heaven itself has split apart to bring to birth a new reality on the earth, the love that is stronger than death. The Beloved is with us now and forever.

Let's look at the gospel passage a little more. In the weeks of Advent, waiting to celebrate again the birth of the Saviour, we met and thought about as we always do, the man with the big finger: John the Baptist. I call him the man with the big finger because if you look at the centuries of Christian art in paintings and stained-glass windows and icons, you so often see John the Baptist portrayed as having a very large index finger. He is eternally pointing, pointing to Jesus. So in Advent we thought about the prophet himself, John, and the fact that in the

wilderness of our lives we too may hear a voice and see someone who points, like John, to where a new life, a new hope waits for us to find it. It could be an individual, or a movement. A John Lewis, or a Black Lives Matter, a worldwide ecology movement to save our planet, or a Greta Thunberg. Look there, they say, follow the way of right action. Follow the road of love.

The baptism John offered in the wilderness was the baptism of repentance. Turn around, says John, from your assumptions of how you should live, assumptions formed under a cruel empire of oppressive injustice and poverty for the many, but wealth, privilege and power for the few. Turn around from the kingdom of this world, built on inequality and violence, and "seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness", as we just sang. Our righteousness, our self-righteousness, consists in actions and behaviors that seek power, self-aggrandizement or self-interest, but God's righteousness seeks nothing but self-giving love. "Turn around!" cries the Baptist to us today, from all that is not love, and also from the formality and hierarchy that has crept into your religion-- so that each of us may rediscover the power of the Holy Spirit that is ours who are baptized in the name of Jesus.

We do well to pay attention to the prophets. But today our attention is not so much to the pointer, the big fingered John, but to what he points to: to Jesus. It is the Baptism of Jesus we celebrate today, not the Baptist.

In the birth of Christ, we see at last that it is possible for human beings despite all our fallenness to live in the fullness of self-giving love. Jesus was born in love, for love, so that we can all love. But it's all very well to keep repeating that word "love" to feel warm and fuzzy about it. What does it really mean to be God's Beloved, going down with Jesus into the cold water of the Jordan, into the waters of death, and rising back up through them with him into a new life.

It means being split open. Love is painful. Birth is painful. That wrenching open of the heavens, that slicing and tearing of the veil meant grief and confusion for many. The people had relied on the temple and on the distinction between heaven and earth. A place for everything, everything in its place. Heaven not getting involved with the things of the earth. Earth going its own way. But Jesus comes to destroy all that coziness, all that false comfort of the status quo, of things as they are, of "that's the way we've always done it". Heaven on earth is what we pray for every time we pray the Lord's Prayer. But it means we , like heaven itself, must endure the same sense of being split and torn apart. Our hearts must break like Mary's.

Our hearts may be broken as we see the Capitol of the United States invaded by people proudly carrying the flags of insurrection and of hate. Our hearts may be broken when we have put all our trust in one human leader only to find out he cares not at all for us but for his own ego. Our hearts are broken surely as day by day we see the number of deaths from the Covid19 pandemic reach new and terrible heights.

One thing we know about love: when we love we are liable to get a broken heart.

But a broken heart is not the end of love, despite the despair that we may feel or that is expressed in popular songs. What is split open reveals a new life. A heart split open and vulnerable is able to have a deeper experience of love, to experience the love of God. Indeed "A broken and a contrite heart" is the only sacrifice God wants (see Psalm 51:17-20).

In our time of brokenness here and now, Jesus the Beloved is with us. In this crisis he is here among us to bind up our wounds, and to set us on a new path. And Mary the broken hearted mother is here also, leading us in the worship of the God who has torn God's very self open to be at one with humanity, who has come to take on our suffering and transform it into his kingdom of peace, and justice, and wholeness.

So take heart, dear friends. Jesus shares everything with us, even the name God gives him: the Beloved. So now go find someone, look them in their eyes, and say, You are the Beloved Child of God. And if there's nobody around, or even if there is, Go find a mirror and say it to yourself: You are the Beloved child of God. Nothing can stop you after that. "Ask and it shall be given unto you, seek and you shall find, knock and it shall be opened unto you, Allelu alleluia. " Amen.