

Curtain up!

Feast of the Baptism of Our Lord Jesus Christ

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Preaching in the wilderness, John proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 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. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." - Mark 1:7-11

Many of us know that little thrill when the curtain rises at the opera or theater. We've taken our seats. The house lights dim. The hubbub quiets. And then: *Curtain up!* We take in the set and may tingle if it is gorgeous or provocative or sets a critical mood. We wonder how certain features onstage will figure into the story that's about to unfold.

Today's gospel passage about the baptism of Jesus could be heard and seen as the '*curtain up*' moment in the Gospel of Mark. The designation would appeal to some scholars who believe that the Gospel of Mark was uniquely written in the form of a Greek tragedy. *Curtain up!*

In any case, we may be surprised to note that the Gospel of Mark begins here, or nearly so. In Mark's telling, there is no pre-existing Word or light shining in the darkness, as in John. There is no Annunciation to Mary or bedazzled shepherds or prophesying temple elders, as in Luke. There is no genealogy traced to Abraham or visiting magi bearing gifts or flight into Egypt, as in Matthew.

When my wife Brooke and I compared notes about this yesterday, she said, "*I know what this means: Clearly, this author had no children of his own! He couldn't relate to those parts of the story; he didn't think they were important.*" It's an interesting conjecture, but one that can't be fact checked. What we can plainly see is that the Gospel of Mark begins with an eight-verse prelude devoted to John the Baptist. And then the heart of the story begins. An initially unremarkable adult character named Jesus walks on stage, having come, we are told, from Galilee.

In this, our first view of him, Jesus is being baptized by John, as so many others had recently been. Then, immediately, comes the '*curtain up*' moment: "... *just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart ...*" Suddenly, and already, this is not just another guy in line. A veil or a curtain rose as "*a voice came from heaven ...*" The voice is directed at Jesus: "*You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.*" All that follows in this story will confirm and expand on this divine introduction.

What makes this a '*curtain up*' moment is also suggested by Mark's unique choice of words. As the same story is told in Matthew and Luke, the heavens merely open. Here in Mark, Jesus sees "*the heavens torn apart.*" The Greek here is *schizomenous*. You can no doubt hear the poignancy. This word has the same root from which we get *schizophrenia*.

Interestingly, the author uses the same Greek word, or a variation of it, one other time in this gospel. Near the end, immediately after Jesus seems to have succumbed to the weight of the world by way of his Passion, *the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.*

But *why* this particular language? Why *schizomenous* at the baptism of Jesus? Why ‘torn apart’? Perhaps we readers are being prepared, or asked by extension, to tear ourselves away from all that has been familiar ~ business and religion as usual ~ in order to make way for all that is to come as we follow this one whom God calls *my Son, the Beloved*.

The scene and its particular language may also be addressing the troubling duality of our primal human condition. In our deeply flawed mortality, we are stuck and blind. At the same time, a part of each of us yearns for the heavens to be torn open, to hear a reliable divine voice.

William Blake once wrote, “*In the Universe, there are things that are known, and things that are unknown, and in between are the doors.*” The author of the gospel of Mark was arguably thinking of those doors – or curtains if you will – when he wrote of the tearing apart of the heavens in this opening gospel scene and the tearing of the temple curtain at the end.

Whether of a metaphysical or a more mundane nature, you or I may respond by wondering about what curtain has been raised, or what curtain we might hope to have raised, or what’s been torn apart, or what we may hope to see torn apart, in our own lives.

Many of us felt a shattering *schizomenous* inside of ourselves as we witnessed what we believed to be a corresponding tragic *schizomenous* in the fabric of our nation as chaos erupted in Washington this past Wednesday at this instigation of our own president.

Closer to home, some of us may continue to feel a tearing apart of normalcy, traditions or security as a consequence of the pandemic, or the tearing apart of our hearts due to loss, from whatever cause.

If we look closely in faith, we may also see that whatever has been torn apart has also revealed something consequential. Whether or not the tearing was noticeable to anyone else, whether or not accompanied by an audible voice from heaven, things now look different. A door has opened or a curtain lifted. It may be hard to go back. We can only go forward.

With this in mind, let’s also briefly look at what happens after the baptism of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark. The author only fleetingly tells of Jesus’ temptations in the wilderness. Only three verses after the heavens are torn apart and only two verses after he hears the divine voice from heaven, we learn that “... *Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God ...*” In other words, he responds by taking action. He begins his public mission and ministry. The dramatic or metaphysical aspects of his baptism may only be of value insofar as he responds.

The same may also be true of us. And therefore we may ask ourselves what action or new direction is to be taken in response to our own baptisms, or whatever curtain has risen, or whatever’s been torn apart, or the divine voice we believe we have heard.

Notice, finally, how, even with the dramatic features in the story, the author expertly keeps our attention riveted on Jesus. It’s an implicit invitation, as you and I navigate the curtains and tears in our own lives, come what may, to also keep our own hearts, words and actions continuously intent on Christ. *Amen*.