

Opening the Heavens  
Sunday, January 13, 2008  
The Rev. Barbara E. Davis  
Psalm 29  
Matthew 3:13-17

One of my favorite ways to relax around the New Year is reading through the endless “best of” lists about the previous year. I love to see what people think the best movies were, the best books, the best places to eat; but by far, I appreciate most Time Magazine’s annual “Pictures of the Year.” From the orange glow behind a kneeling firefighter battling the California wildfires; to a barely visible Barak Obama speaking to voters in Iowa – the camera angle from the outside looking into to high-ceiling warehouse, light obstructed by the walls of the building, making the perspective that of an outsider looking in; to a young widow with her face in her hands sitting in grief across the room from her husband’s flag draped casket; to a candlelight vigil at Virginia Tech after a student killed thirty-two persons; to the Rutgers Women’s basketball team huddled together during the final of the NCAA Women’s Championship Game, unaware of the words that would engulf them just days later demanding that they speak about their race and their gender in a broadly public forum; to a young lawyer in his black suit, dress shoes gripping the pavement, tie flying toward his chin as he leans forward and lobs something toward police in protests in Pakistan, his gloved hands the only unusual piece of his business attire; the best photos of 2007 do more than create a timeline, they each tell their own story about a moment in history.<sup>i</sup>

These images capture just a few of this past year’s major events and do not begin to express the emotional ups and downs we have felt along the way. Whether we are thinking about the state of the world or about our personal lives, this past year was full of change, worries, routine, comfort, strength, and perseverance.

If we were given editorial license and the charge to look at Matthew’s gospel and pick passages that expressed the “Pictures of the Gospel,” we would have to include this morning’s passage that Jon read for us about Jesus being baptized. We would include it not for the conversation between Jesus and John about what is proper for that time, but we would include it for that moment it describes “just as Jesus came up from the water.” The immediacy of the heavens opening and the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on Jesus is too powerful a moment to ignore; we must stop and look and listen.

How brief that moment is. What a lasting impression that moment has. For it is like each of those “Pictures of the Year” in trying to seize and remember an essence, an image, a feeling. It is in our mind’s eye a beginning; a beginning of a ministry, a beginning of an identity.

The gospels pictures of this scene are remarkably similar, but yet have a few variations. The Gospel of Mark, likely first of the gospel accounts chronologically, reports no conversation between John and Jesus. Mark moves Jesus quickly from Galilee to the Jordon River and puts Jesus in the role of eyewitness. The Gospel of Mark reports it this way: *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 1:9-11 NRSV)

The Gospel of Luke has different timing than both the gospels of Matthew and Mark. Luke’s Gospel places the heavens opening just after Jesus’ baptism while he is praying, and in

doing so loses something of spectacle of the moment, but infuses the scene with a more contemplative atmosphere. *Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'* (Luke 3:21-22, NRSV) Even with the shift in timing, the Gospel of Luke retains the strong emphasis on God claiming Jesus as “son” and “beloved”.

Matthew’s Gospel is most closely related to Mark’s Gospel, and in this passage we see a clear example of the benefit of reading the gospels side by side. In theological circles, you will hear Matthew, Mark and Luke referred to as “Synoptic Gospels,” this Greek word “synoptic” really means reading alongside one another. Many scholars have spent a great deal of time deciphering the agreements and disagreements among the synoptic gospels, pointing ultimately to the explanation that these three gospels might have shared common sources. The story of Jesus’ baptism is one place where we can clearly see the agreements and disagreements among the texts.

Matthew expands Mark’s account by addressing the issue of relationship between Jesus and John the Baptist. While in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus comes from Galilee and is immediately baptized, in Matthew, we are privy to a sidebar before the baptism between Jesus and John; it is question that John instigates, asking Jesus if it wouldn’t make more sense for Jesus to baptize him than for him to baptize Jesus. John’s humility in asking this question and Jesus’ response of the need to do what is “proper” at that time emphasizes one of the Gospel of Matthew’s most important themes – righteousness. This ordering of events sets in motion an identification of Jesus’ authority in multiple layers. John recognizes Jesus as the Son of God even before he is baptized; and then in his baptism Jesus is clearly identified as God’s Son, the Beloved, with whom God is well pleased.

Listen again to how the Gospel of Matthew shares this snapshot: *Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so for now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he consented. And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he was came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”* (Matthew 3:13-17 NRSV) No matter which gospel we read the extraordinary happening of Jesus baptism and God claiming him as the Beloved happens in an instant with the opening of the heavens.

It is intriguing that this pivotal event in the ministry of Jesus is described in just a few verses in each gospel. As one commentator aptly notes, there is no analysis by the any of the gospel writers about Jesus’ psychological state of mind around this event; the gospel views are interested in the claiming of Jesus as God’s son, as the beloved.<sup>ii</sup> It is decisive moment in identifying the relationship between Jesus and God; it is a moment of authenticating the work that Jesus is about to do. All of the gospels situate this narrative between explanations of John’s ministry of baptism as a preparation for Jesus’ ministry -- *“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight”* (Matt. 3:3) – and Jesus being led by the Spirit into the wilderness.

If the gospels lack attention to Jesus’ psychological state of mind in this event, they lack even more any examination of the people’s response to this event. It is almost eerie how the people fade away in the transition from John preaching by the waters of the Jordan to Jesus journeying alone into the wilderness. All who were in the scene listening to John preach are now

silent, and seemingly oblivious witnesses to the heavens opening, the Spirit of God in the form of dove, and the voice of God echoing across the waters.

The careful reader is left with the feeling of being a lone witness to a very private event; the gospel of Matthew describes the heavens opening *to him*. Further evidence of the privacy of the moment is that all the gospels lack any instruction to the crowds about what to do with this information, a rarity, as we will hear throughout the gospels a variety of instructions about how to respond to different aspects of Jesus ministry - who to tell about a healing, who not to tell about a miracle, when to have more faith, when to shake the dust off one's sandals, and so forth. The silence of this moment allows us to see the heaven's opening, to feel the wind of the spirit move by us, and to hear the voice from heaven declare: *This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.*

The silence of this moment allows it a sharpness it would not have otherwise. The distance created by the gospel writers by isolating Jesus in this scene is like one of those pictures of the year, for if we are in the photograph we know more about what was really happening, the absence of any crowds brings the mystery front and center with boldness. The mystery described is just one sliver of a revelation that we seek. It is the mystery of the relationship between heaven and earth; the immediacy of the action, the privacy of the event set the context, but it is the gospel of Mark who captures the power of this mystery best when it says "*the heavens were torn apart...*" It is a dynamic image, NOT meant to invoke fear, but to invoke awe and wonder. The opening of the heavens is a moment of creation; it is filled with the tension of something about to begin. It is a revelation of a mystery as old as creation when God's voice brought the heavens and the earth into being.

While it is a private moment for Jesus and John, from our vantage point it reminds us that the incarnation of Jesus coming into the world forever changes the way humans understand the separation between heaven and earth. Something which seemed impenetrable suddenly became porous. As the gospel stories unfold, the opening in the heavens grows wider and wider, it begins with Jesus' birth, then his baptism, and continues with his ministry, culminating in his death and resurrection. We can imagine it like pushing a drape apart with both hands, the heavens no longer need our hands to hold the curtain in place.

But we are reluctant to believe in this change. We pray as if God is far away; we imagine with our wildest imaginations how we can find that one place where the heavens are opened. We go to the Jordan River, we try to go back in time, we travel to outer space, we look earnestly for the heavens to open, but the best opening we find is the drenching rain on Atlantic Avenue when we once again have left our apartment without an umbrella.

This quest for the place where the heavens are opened reminds me of an experience that the writer Annie Dillard included in one of her book For the Time Being. She begins the book discussing a rare form of dwarfism known as Seckel Syndrome, or as it is often referred to "bird-headed dwarfism." She begins the book this way in order to consider some of the difficult questions of human life, the theological questions, the "why" questions.

Forgive me if I have shared part of this story with you before, but it bears repeating. Her words:

"One morning I walked from a kibbutz to the edge of the Sea of Galilee. On the shore beyond me I saw a man splitting wood. He was a distant figure in silhouette across the water. I heard a wrong ring. He raised his maul and it clanged at the top of its rise. He drove it down. I could see the wood divide and drop in silence. The figure bent, straightened, raised the maul with both arms, and again I heard it ring just as its head knocked the sky. Metal banged metal as a

clapper bangs its bell. Then the figure brought down the maul in silence. Absorbed on the ground, skilled and sure, the stick figure was clobbering the heavens.

I saw a beached red dory. I could take the red dory, row out to the guy and say: Sir. You have found a place where the sky dips close. May I borrow your maul? Your maul and your wedge? Because, I thought, I too could hammer the sky – crack it at one blow, split it at the next – and inquire, hollering at God the compassionate, the all-merciful, WHAT’S with the bird-headed dwarfs?”<sup>iii</sup>

Each one of us could fill in our questions at the end of this story. How many of us would love to take a swing of that maul for a chance to open the heavens and ask God the compassionate, the all-merciful, WHY....

What we forget is that we no longer need a maul and wedge. The heavens do not separate us from God, in fact, God is as close we need her to be. The opening of the heavens does not mean that life is without mystery, and not all of those mysteries have easy answers that are simply hiding behind the robes of the divine. The opening of the heavens means that we are intimately accompanied in the mysteries and questions of life. The opening of the heavens means that that we row out the red dory to the figure with the maul and have a conversation. In that space where the sky dips close, we do not need to borrow the maul, we just need to sit together and ask whatever is on our minds, for in this moment, the heavens are open wide.

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<sup>i</sup> “Pictures of the Year,” *Time Magazine*, December 31, 2007/January 7, 2008.

<sup>ii</sup> Boring, M. Eugene. “The Gospel of Matthew” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible* vol. VIII. (Abingdon Press, Nashville, TN: 1995), p. 160.

<sup>iii</sup> Dillard, Annie. *For the Time Being*. (Vintage Books/Random House, New York, NY: 1999), p. 53.