

The Man for Whom the Heavens Opened

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Isaiah 42:1-9; Matt 3:13-17
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As Jesus came up from the water,
The heavens opened to him
And he saw the Spirit of God
Descending like a dove, alighting on him,
And a voice from heaven said,
“This is my beloved Son...”

The heavens opened to Jesus. Wow! that’s really something. Not quite like what happens at our baptism. I struggle to envision it: those opening heavens, God’s Spirit descending, alighting on Jesus, and then the voice, the transcendent voice: “This is my beloved Son.” That voice; I can hear it, clear as a bell, and I can almost sense what it feels like to have God’s Spirit alighting upon us, God’s presence in our midst. But what perhaps matters, even more than the envisioning of this story, is its meaning, for we are encountering here the beginning of Jesus’ mission, what gets Jesus going, Jesus’ call: for that mission, that call, gives us the content of our faith. Without Jesus hearing the call, responding to it, opening himself to God’s Spirit, where would we be today. That’s such an unanswerable question. We can only be grateful that it happened, for what happened is truly good news, gospel. So let’s spend our sermon time this morning unraveling, as much as we can, the meaning of this story, this happening.

And this happening is such a splendid beginning, full of glory, full of wonder, it feels so good, the heavens opening, like a great awakening, Jesus hearing his identity, “you are my beloved son,” God’s Spirit lighting upon him, Jesus taking it that Spirit in, finding himself, finding his life’s work ahead of him: a life of compassion for others, of mercy, of forgiveness, particularly for the downtrodden, the deprived; a life of healing the wounded, of calling others to goodness. Later, of course — we all know this, even as we bask in the splendor of the beginning, the wondrousness of his life— later, of course, comes the sadness, the tragic note: the betrayal, the arrest, the crucifixion, the abandonment, the cry of forsakenness — can we also say, the disillusionment, even the shame? We don’t quite know that, do we? But that’s certainly what the disciples felt three days later as they huddled together, their dreams dashed, their hopes gone, frightened, downcast, disappointed, secluded in an upper room, doors locked out of fear that the authorities would be coming for them, too. Of course, as we know, it was not the authorities that came to them in that upper room, through those locked doors. Here’s a funny story. My grand-daughter, Hannah, the child of Elizabeth and Earl, who’d been taken to church worship services from infancy on, remarked, when she was five or six years old, maybe younger, I forget exactly, (Hannah remarked), in a slightly shocked tone, that Jesus had a very short life: born on Christmas day in December, she said, and dead in April, just a few months later, on Good Friday. Well, funny or not, she had a point, not so much that Jesus had a shockingly short life but that there is a shock in his life; and that shock carries over into our faith, a shock that tends to lie buried in our consciousness because we rush so quickly to the resurrection appearances. Here’s what is shocking: first, the shock to Jesus, for at his baptism, as we all heard, a promise was given to him, that he was God’s Son, that God was well pleased with him ... and yet, despite that promise, that assurance, he finds

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himself, perhaps not more than a year later, coming to a terribly disastrous end: rejected by his own people, condemned by Jewish and Roman authorities, mocked by common soldiers, bearing the cross through Jerusalem streets, nailed to it, hoisted up, left there hanging, no angels descending to liberate him ... forsaken by God. "Why," Jesus cries, "Why." Jesus' cry is to God, so there is faith in that cry, but it is faith at the end of its tether, faith at its uttermost edge; it is faith in shock. And then there is the shock, everlastingly, in our faith: that it is through betrayal, denial, rejection, crucifixion, forsakenness, through all that pain, what we call Jesus' passion, through all that darkness, that we come to be loyal to God, to trust in God, to have faith that God is with us, for us. How is that possible? We say, of course, as we assume the disciples said, we come to faith through Christ's appearance to us, through the testimony to Christ's appearance, and we stay in faith through the memory of it. But perhaps there's another way of seeing this. Perhaps it's the other way around: not so much the appearances triggering our faith, but the intensity of our faith maintaining itself, the miracle of our faith continuing to trust and live loyal to God through the darkness, despite the darkness, even overcoming the darkness ... that miracle of faith, despite all, that is the experience of the resurrection; our faith that Jesus Christ is God's beloved, and continues to be God's beloved, world without end, that gives us the presence of, the experience of, Christ in our midst: Jesus Christ risen, our Lord, present even now, two thousand years after his death, .

I know I am not saying this as well as I should, not saying it clearly enough. Forgive me. I know we cannot penetrate far into the miracle of the resurrection, into the miracle of our faith. But we can be thankful for our faith, grateful to God for it — and we can say why we are grateful to have a life with faith in our heart.

Here is what I am thinking. No matter that there are many good things in our lives, we never escape from living in the midst of injustices, suffering, evils: everything today from the lies of political leaders, to the murder of four college students, to the horrible destruction and killing in the land of Ukraine. Just the other night I was reading in the latest issue of *The New Yorker* an article on the 1947 partition of India, and the resulting murderous turning of Hindus and Muslims upon each other, bringing about the death of a million people, and the abduction and rape of tens of thousands of girls and women. How are we to understand any of this? How are we to live in it? Well, if we have a religious bent, we might think of God as a supernatural reality, subject to anger at us, a God of wrath, hunting out every fault in us, punishing us for our infringements. Such a God needs to be appeased: with rituals of praise, with sacrifices. Or, here's a currently popular option, we might simply deny the existence of any reality transcendent to the universe, deny any ultimate purpose or meaning to existence, asserting that if there's to be meaning, we have to create it ourselves, for nothing has to be, and as we came from nothing, so we return to nothing. Tragedy, darkness, is the last word to us. Or, in faith, we can accept Christ's word, live Christ's word, that God is the mystery from which we all come, and to which we all go, that God is love, that God is faithful to us, loyal to us, that God is merciful, forgiving, calling us to goodness, that tragedy is not the last word to us no more than it was to Jesus; that light, not darkness is our end, Sisters and brothers in Christ, this is our great faith, to live in it, is to live in the miracle and goodness of God's grace, for which we can only give God our great thanks. So ... thanks be to God. Thanks be to Christ. Amen.