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EPISCOPAL DIOCESE OF LONG ISLAND



Sermon on the First Sunday after the Epiphany: The Baptism of our Lord

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Torn Apart in 2021, *Mark 1:4-11*

The Very Rev. Dr. Michael Sniffen, Dean of the Cathedral

If you've ever been caught in a storm – you know the experience of things being as they were one moment and then the heavens opening up the next! Everything changes like that (snap). The winds pick up. There may be thunder and lightning, Visibility changes and then...you are soaking wet.

Depending upon your circumstances, being caught in a storm can range from an inconvenience to life threatening.

I am sure you have also had the experience of that moment when a storm suddenly resolves and everything is clearer, brighter, calmer, at peace. Looking up at the sky it would be almost impossible to tell that anything happened at all.

What happens in a storm is similar to what happens in baptism. There is a gathering of energy, we get all wet, and we are changed. When we look around after baptism, it may seem that everything has gone back to normal. But if we look again – we see that things are not as they were. We inhabit a changed atmosphere.

The visible heavens play a role in each of the synoptic accounts of Jesus baptism. In Matthew and Luke the heavens are opened. But not in Mark. In Mark, the heavens are torn apart – as God's voice is heard saying, "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased."

In older translations of Mark the heavens were *rent asunder*!

This tearing, this rending of the heavens as the Holy Spirit descends and the voice of the Lord announces Jesus as the Messiah – says a lot.

There is an urgency to God's appearance and a consequential force behind it. God doesn't just open the heavens - God tears them apart to make this most important announcement to the human family: I am with you!

This is quite different from opening the heavens. Think of the difference between opening a door or tearing it off its hinges.

Things that are opened can be closed. Things that are torn apart will never be the same. The heavens were torn apart at the baptism of Jesus. God broke into our experience in a manner that changes things, changes us, irrevocably. It cannot be undone. The clouds don't just close again like a curtain.

We know this tearing experience in our bodies. In our lives and relationships. When something is torn – it is never the same again. It may be healed, restored, mended – but there will always be evidence of the tear. Whether it's your ACL or a cherished relationship. A tear leaves evidence forever.

Scar tissue remains. And if the tear has been significant - the scar may be bigger, thicker, more irregular. Leaving lasting pain.

This distinctive feature of the Baptism of Jesus in Mark - the rending of the heavens – is as encouraging as it is unsettling. God tears into our awareness with urgency and hope, leaving evidence. Not slipping in and slipping out undetected. But rather, showing up in such a way that even in when God seems absent, God's presence may be felt.

Here's something I have learned in my own journey with the God who tears things open: Once God has torn into our lives – the best way to find peace is to commit again and again to a life of mending. A love of restoring, healing, knitting together that which has

become frayed. Sharing in what the church calls the ministry of reconciliation – the heart of Christ’s mission given in baptism.

In the baptism by fire we have been living through this year and this week, more is being torn apart than the heavens. The fabric of our civic life is being rent asunder. Our sense of peace and security as a people is unraveling. Our civility is fraying. Our institutions and our health are at risk in urgent ways.

When confronted at once by disease, desecration, violence and unrest, what are the baptized to do?

First – to acknowledge that we too have been torn apart. We are not on the outside looking in –aloof from circumstances. We are in this storm ourselves, feeling caught unprepared and with no obvious place to run. The anger, pain, fear and powerlessness felt by so many is felt right here.

Second – Recognize that our faith was made for the circumstances in which we find ourselves right now. The teachings of Jesus show us how to be a beloved community in the face of powers and principalities which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God.

Here is the Good News: This present moment of international and national crisis will end. How do I know this? Because everything but faith, hope and love comes to an end. But what the world looks like following this storm is largely up to us. The world will never be as it was. That is always true. There is no going back. Only God was, is and will be. Everything else is in flux.

God has called us into the work of mending what has been torn apart. These fabrics, these relationships, these institutions which exist for the welfare of all...what they will be depends upon how we mend them with God’s help.

Generations after us will still be able to see the scars of these days. To touch them. To remember us who lived with the open wounds of public despair. Think of the scars from before we were born which have shaped our lives, which we can still touch.

The work of reconciliation demands our faithfulness in order that those who come after us will be able to say that we were restorers of the breach. That we were healers able to stitch together once more the garments of peace.

We may not feel able. We may not feel equipped. We may not know what to do.

If **you** feel that way – then you are a human being and there is Good News for you indeed...

This very moment, God is at work repairing the torn parts of our lives. This very moment, God is at work mending our broken hearts, announcing the beloved-ness not only of God's Son but of every member of this human family.

This very moment, God is stitching us together for a purpose; That we might share God's mission of repairing the world. Tikkun Olam.

The call today is the same that it was at our baptism:

Will you continue in prayer?

Will you persevere in resisting evil?

Will you proclaim the Good News?

Will you seek and serve Christ?

Will you strive for Justice and Peace?

By God's grace, we will. And in so doing, we will be the restorers of streets to live in.

The life of this country is torn, not broken. It cannot be fixed, but it may be mended. And that work will take all of us, especially people of faith who know that the whole sacred story of our salvation is one of reconciliation.

You know, a few verses further on in Mark's Gospel, after the heavens are torn apart at Jesus baptism, He finds Himself in the storm of temptation in the wilderness. Satan is right there. And when Jesus emerges from that storm, right away he begins to call disciples into his ministry of reconciliation. First He calls Simon and Andrew. Then He

finds James and John in their boat. And do you remember what they were doing?  
Mending the nets.  
AMEN.

