

The Second Baptist Pulpit

“The Torn Place”

Mark 1:4-11

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One of the places my family has really enjoyed discovering since we moved to Memphis is the Smoky Mountains in East Tennessee. Twice now we have gone to the town of Townsend, which is a small town just at the edge of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

I like Townsend. There's really not much to the town. It's away from Gatlinburg and Pigeon Forge. I know, for some of you, Gatlinburg and Pigeon Forge is wonderful, but to me, with all the shopping and the shows and

the wax museums and the traffic, it just sounds like something I would want to stay away from.

So we like going to Townsend, which is known as “The Peaceful Side of the Smokies.” What we like to do is stay there in a cabin up in the hills and everyday drive into the park and do one of the day hikes—maybe around a five mile hike through the mountains. We love it.

We went there in October, and one day while we were hiking, we started talking about which

one of us has ever had a broken bone. Neither of our kids has broken a bone (yet). Neither has Heidi.

Sam and Ivy were fascinated by the fact that I broke my leg when I was four months old. My dad was holding me out by the metal playground set in our backyard, and my older brother was climbing on the bars and started to fall. When my dad reached out to catch my brother, he accidentally dropped me.

I like to tell my dad that I've been in therapy ever since over that. At four months old, I was too young for a cast, so the doctors rigged up something like a baby carrier where they put my leg in traction. And I stayed like that for four or six weeks.

So I was telling Sam and Ivy about that and that I had never broken another bone since then. Thinking about how I broke a bone so young and then never broke another one, I remembered that line from Ernest Hemingway in *Farewell to Arms*: *The world breaks everyone, and, afterwards, many are strong at the broken places.*

The world breaks everyone. Everyone is hit with failure, despair and a sense of powerlessness at one time or another. But the hope is, the part that some

tragically never come to see is, that many are strong at the broken places.

A preacher friend of mine, Glen Schmucker, has gone through some tough times as a pastor recently. He ended up resigning as pastor of his church last spring, a challenging place that he had served well for over ten years.

In his last sermon as pastor of the church he said this (and it's so good, I wish I had said it):

I came here believing, and I leave here believing, that God is more able to show himself to this world through our broken places, through our cracks and our defects in our character, than he is through those places where we are already strong, or we are trying to fool people into thinking we are. Go walking down any sidewalk this afternoon and see if it is not true that it is where the concrete is cracked, and the light has gotten through, that a flower is coming up to new life.

Jesus' own life and ministry, is a testimony to the fact that light shines through the broken places. And the beginning of Jesus' ministry was his baptism.

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."

When Jesus came up out of the water, wet from the Jordan, he looked up, and he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending on him like a dove.

He saw the heavens torn apart. Three years ago when I was studying this passage, I learned something from a commentary by Barbara Lundblad that so got to me, that I don't know if I can preach on this without talking about it.

The heavens were torn apart, not opened as in Matthew or Luke. They use the milder word "opened." But Mark says the heavens were torn apart. The Greek word there is a form of the verb schizo as in schism or schizophrenia.

It is not the same word as open. I open the door. I close the door. The door looks the same. I open a book. I close a book. The book looks the same.

But something torn apart is not easily closed again. The ragged edges never go back together as

they were. When something is torn apart you can't just close it again like nothing ever happened. The tear is still there like a gaping wound.

[thanks to Barbara Lundblad, Professor of Preaching at Union Theological Seminary in New York, for pointing out the significance of the word "schizo" in her sermon "Torn Apart Forever," 2003, www.day1.net/]

What does Jesus' baptism say about who he is? I think what it says is found there in that line about the heavens being torn apart. Like the cracks in the sidewalk where a flower grows, the torn place is where God comes through, the place that never can be closed again.

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

Jesus' baptism here is almost another way of telling the Christmas story. Last week I pointed out that the Christmas story is only found in two of the Gospels—Matthew and Luke. I said last week that John approaches Jesus' birth from a philosophical angle, talking about the Word becoming flesh.

Now in Mark, again there is no Mary and Joseph or manger or shepherds. Maybe this here today is Mark's way of

saying the Word became flesh. The heavens were torn apart because God has torn through what separates God from us. And that torn place can never be closed again.

Jesus was baptized by John so that in his baptism he could be identified more closely with us, so that he could become one of us. He became one of us.

And that torn place in the heavens can never be closed again. It's a new day, a rebirth, a clean slate.

So Mark uses this powerful word: *schizo*. Torn apart.

And as I looked at that word *schizo* and thought about that word, I began to wonder if there might be another place where Mark uses that same word, and maybe there might be some significance to that.

And I looked and I realized that there is, in fact, one other place and only one other place where Mark uses that word. The other place that Mark uses the word *schizo* is at 15:38: *And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom.*

The Holy of Holies was a small room, thirty feet square, within the larger Temple. Here the Ark of the Covenant containing the Ten Commandments was

placed. Here the High Priest would come one day a year, on the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), to offer sacrifice for the sins of the people. In the Jewish mind, the Shekinah glory and presence of Jehovah God dwelt here as in no other room on earth.

And this Holy of Holies was separated from the rest of the Temple, and the rest of humanity, by an incredible curtain. Sixty feet high, thirty feet wide, as thick as a man's hand, the curtain was so heavy the Jewish Talmud says 300 men were required to move it.

Only one man, the High Priest, was able to enter into this holy place on the other side of the curtain to be in the presence of God and offer sacrifices for the sins of the people.

And on the Day of Atonement, when the High Priest would come into the Holy of Holies itself, he would tie a rope around his foot, trailing outside the curtain, so that if he died in the awesome presence of God and the bells on the hem of his robe stopped ringing, the priests outside could drag his dead body out. He came before God in reverence and humility. Here he knew he entered the presence of Jehovah, the God of the universe.

And when Jesus took his last breath on the cross at 3:00 in the afternoon on that day, as the priests were gathering in the Temple for their customary evening sacrifices, the gospel of Mark tells us that that heavy, immovable curtain that walled off the Holy of Holies from the rest of humanity was torn apart from top to bottom. Schizo is the word. The curtain that separates God from the rest of humanity was torn apart. And that curtain can never be repaired.

The word became flesh and dwelled among us.

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."

We are all battered, bruised, and broken. Even in the hopefulness of a new year, the fact remains that we all have torn places in our lives.

In the Broadway play "Rent" the characters set the stage with a song that has a play on the word "rent." They sing about how to pay the "rent" on their living

quarters: *How we gonna pay last year's rent?... How do you leave the past behind when it keeps finding ways to get to your heart? It reaches way down deep and tears you inside out till you're torn apart. Rent!* And then, with that double meaning, they conclude that *Everything is rent!*

[Rev. Allen V. Harris, "Torn Heavens, Broken Glass, and Cracked Pots," January 8, 2006, Franklin Circle Christian Church, Cleveland, Ohio]

Yes, everything is not our own, borrowed from our Creator. Rent. And yes, everything is rent, torn apart, broken, shattered.

But Jesus reminds us that out of broken things, from the torn places in our lives, that's often where God can be found. I'm starting to even wonder if what I'm reading in the Bible and what I'm learning in my own experience is that it is *only* through the torn places that God can truly enter the world.

God doesn't take away all our troubles and brokenness. They are there and can't be denied. Think about your own hurts and losses. Things that are torn, ripped apart can't ever be just the same as before. The jagged edges never go back together exactly the way it was before.

Here's what we know, though—this is the essence of our faith: the torn place is still there, but God is in it.

Paul's words ring in our ears, *But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies.*

(2 Cor. 4: 7-11)

There is an old Indian legend of a water bearer in India who had two cisterns—two large pots—, each hung on each end of a pole, which he carried across his neck. One of the pots had a crack in it, and while the other pot was perfect and always delivered a full portion of water at the end of a long walk from the stream to the master's house, the cracked pot arrived only half full.

For two years this went on daily, with the bearer delivering only one and a half pots of water to his master's house. After two years of what it perceived to be bitter failure, the cracked pot spoke to the water bearer

one day by the stream. *I am ashamed of myself and I want to apologize to you.*

Why, asked the bearer. What are you ashamed of?

I have only been able, for these past two years, to deliver half my load because this crack in my side causes water to leak out all the way back to your master's house. Because of my flaws, you have to do all of this work, and you don't get full value for your efforts.

The water bearer felt sorry for the old cracked pot, and in his compassion, he said, *As we return to the master's house, I want you to notice the beautiful flowers along the path.*

Indeed, as they went up the hill, the old cracked pot took notice of the sun warming the beautiful wild flowers on the side of the path, and this cheered it some. But at the end of the trail, it still felt bad because it had leaked out half its load, and so again it apologized to the bearer for its failure.

The bearer said to the pot, *Did you not notice that there were flowers only on your side of the path but not on the other side? That's because every day while we walk back from the stream, you have watered them. And for*

two years I have picked these beautiful flowers to decorate my master's table.

I told you what my friend Glen Schmucker said, *God is more able to show himself to this world through our broken places, through our cracks and our defects in our character, than he is through those places where we are already strong, or we are trying to fool people into thinking we are. Go walking down any sidewalk this afternoon and see if it is not true that it is where the concrete is cracked, and the light has gotten through, that a flower is coming up to new life.*

Maybe it is always through the torn places that God comes into the world. And those ragged edges that don't go away, I think they just might be called holy.

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