

SERMON TITLE: “And a Voice Came From Heaven”

TEXT: Mark 1:4-11

PREACHED AT: Neighbourhood Church

DATE: January 11, 2009/First Sunday of Epiphany

Epiphany: A Story

As a new pastor, I’ve experienced a lot of “firsts” over the past half-year. There are a lot of totally new experiences to walk through and process, and often these experiences are sources of new perspectives and opportunities to learn and grow. Last November provided one of these experiences. In the morning I was down in Victoria preaching and leading a discipleship class at a church down there. It was a very structured and liturgical service, and the people there were mainly upper middle-class well-educated white-collar types.

The passage I preached on was Galatians 3:26-29. The basic idea of the sermon was that the kind of community we are called to as Christians is one where all are welcome, regardless of race, gender, socioeconomic status, age, etc. The message seemed to be fairly well received and I had several stimulating, enjoyable conversations after the service.

Later in the day I was off to the Nanaimo Correctional Centre for a couple of worship services with the inmates there. I talked a bit about my experiences at the jail a few weeks ago, but you could obviously hardly imagine a more different “worship experience” from the one I had been a part of earlier in the day. The inmates trickled and took their seats in the sparsely decorated chapel. A few songs were sung, mostly off key and with varying degrees of enthusiasm. Two of the prisoners stumbled through the Scripture readings, the chaplain delivered an informal homily, there was a prayer time, followed by a few more songs and a benediction. At the end, there was a bit of time for cookies and coffee to be hurriedly stuffed back over conversation before the guard arrived to lead the inmates back to their cells.

In Galatians 3:28, one of the verses I preached on earlier in the day, Paul writes these words:

You are all one in Christ Jesus.

Those words rang a bit hollow as my head hit the pillow that night. On one level, I thought, we most definitely are not one. It was hard for me to imagine a world where the prisoners I worshiped with that night would feel comfortable with the highly-educated professionals I worshiped with that morning. The Galatians passage spoke of how the lines we use to divide ourselves have been abolished in Christ but they still felt pretty real that Sunday. We still have very clear categories, even in the church. Educated/uneducated, white-collar/blue-collar, formal/informal, volunteer/convict, inside/outside. Whatever unity Christ has made possible among human beings seemed more of a future hope than a present reality to me on that Sunday.

But there are moments where we get a glimpse of this future hope breaking into the present. As a part of his homily, the chaplain had read the inmates a story from CNN about a little girl in Afghanistan who spent six hours a day begging for bread because her dad was strung out on drugs and couldn't/wouldn't provide for his wife and daughters. It was a heartbreaking story, but it didn't seem to make much impact at the time of its reading.

Or so I thought. After the sermon, there is usually an open prayer time where the inmates are invited to pray about anything on their minds. During this prayer time one large, red-faced young man boomed out this prayer:

Hi God. It's Tyler again. I'm getting out on Tuesday and I need you to help me make it this time. I need you to fill me up and show me the way that I need to go, to protect me and those I love. Please watch over me God.

And God, please give this girl in Afghanistan some bread. I work in the kitchen, and I know that we throw a lot of bread in the garbage every day. It's terrible and we shouldn't do it. The amount of bread we throw out each day could probably feed a whole village. I don't know God, she needs some of our bread. Just please, give this little girl some bread.

I sat there, amazed. It was one of those precious holy moments where the truth and the power of the kingdom came shining through, where our common humanity seemed much stronger and more enduring than the walls and divisions we put in place to keep us apart. I preached about oneness in Christ in the morning but the real sermon came later in the day when I witnessed one simple, practical expression of how the love of Christ can unite us, despite our many differences.

You are all one. This was the truth that was communicated so powerfully by Tyler's prayer.

That moment when the Tyler opened his mouth to pray was a moment of clarity, inspiration, and grace. It was something like an **epiphany**.

Epiphany: What is It?

As I've mentioned several times over the last little while, I've been trying to think about time according to the Christian calendar as opposed to the Gregorian calendars that we mostly organize our lives around. This means learning how, where, and when to use all kinds of interesting words like "Christmastide," "Holy Week," "Lent," "Advent," "Pentecost..." **And Epiphany.**

This past Tuesday we entered the season of "Epiphany" which is the season in which the church has historically remembered and celebrated Jesus' revelation to the Magi—to the Gentiles. It is a season for reflecting on all that Jesus reveals to us about who God is. The season of Epiphany goes from January 6 until February 24, and today is the first Sunday of Epiphany.

My dictionary defines "epiphany" as:

- A manifestation of a divine or supernatural being.
- A moment of sudden revelation or insight.

We use the word "epiphany" somewhat casually (if we use it at all) to refer to moments where a great idea (or what we *think* is a great idea) comes to us in a flash, where we instantly know the solution to a particular problem, or when something that's been puzzling us for a long time suddenly becomes crystal clear, or when something that's normally hidden or not obvious becomes visible in a new way (as in my experience in the jail). Epiphanies are usually very good things—most of us probably wish they would come more frequently!

This morning's text also describes an epiphany, but on a much larger scale! In Mark 1:10 the heavens themselves are torn open and God himself speaks! Talk about an epiphany!

Pulling Back the Curtain

What does it mean to say that the “heavens were torn open?” We don’t tend to have positive associations with the word “tearing”—it seems to connote destruction—but in the biblical tradition this phrase would have evoked a powerful moment of divine revelation, of God coming to right wrongs and show himself to be in charge. Isaiah 64:1 is an example of this:

Oh, that you would tear open the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before you!

Isaiah is pleading with God to come and establish his sovereignty for all to see. The first hearers of Mark’s words in today’s text would have had this idea in their heads as they heard and thought about the events at Jesus’ baptism. This was God coming to act, to rescue his people, to establish his kingdom of justice and peace.

So the opening of the heavens does not refer to a giant doorway in the sky being ajar, but, as N.T. Wright has put it, allowing us to see “God’s dimension behind ordinary reality.” According to Wright,

[I]t’s more as though an invisible curtain, right in front of us, was suddenly pulled back, so that instead of the trees and flowers and buildings, or in Jesus’ case the river, the sandy desert and the crowds, we are standing in the presence of a different reality altogether.

Wright’s image of pulling back the curtain is a good one. Over these last month or so when we had that surprising blast of winter, every morning I would stumble into the living room in the morning and cautiously, with much fear and trepidation, pull back the curtains to see if it was *still* snowing, how *much* snow had accumulated over the night, what the status of my driveway was, if we were stuck for the day, etc. I pulled back the curtain to get a sense of the reality that I knew existed on the other side of my insulated walls and windows—the reality with which I knew I would have to deal.

In the same way, in Mark’s description of the heavens opening at Jesus’ baptism we see the curtain being pulled back and the revelation of a reality that was previously hidden to us. We are given a God’s-eye view of Jesus’ baptism: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.” Mark wants us to see that God is pleased with Jesus; God is validating him as his chosen one, the light to the Gentiles, and the hope of Israel.

The Servant King

But God is doing more than just expressing affirmation for Jesus. He is saying something about the very nature of Jesus’ identity as well. This short phrase, “You are my Son whom I love; with you I am well pleased,” contains two references to

important traditions and hopes within the Old Testament (Israel's Scriptures). The first part, "You are my Son," is almost universally agreed by scholars to be a quote from Psalm 2:7:

*I will proclaim the LORD's decree:
He said to me, "You are my son;
today I have become your father.*

Here the language is found within what is known as a royal. "Royal Psalms" were likely used during the coronation ceremony for the Israelite king. These Psalms were used to draw a link between God and Israel's king, with the human king reflecting the glory of the divine king. The point of quoting Psalm 2 at Jesus' baptism was to locate Jesus as within the royal line of David, as the fulfillment of God's promise, through the prophet Nathan, to David in 2 Sam 7:16-17:

And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever.

The second part of God's speech at Jesus' baptism says "with you I am well pleased." This is widely thought to refer to Isaiah 42:1:

"Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will bring justice to the nations."

It's not a direct quote, but an allusion that scholars are fairly confident about. Isaiah 42 is commonly known as a "servant song" which describes the suffering servant who will bring forth justice to the nations, the one who will be "bruised" for us, to bring the prisoners out of darkness into the light.

In linking the divine speech at Jesus' baptism with this "servant song," Mark shows that it will be through Jesus that God's justice will be brought forth to the nations. Thus in the second portion of the divine coronation speech from heaven, we have a depiction of Jesus as the Servant of Yahweh; not only is Jesus the king, from the royal line of David, but he is the obedient suffering servant of the Lord through whom God's redemptive plan will be accomplished.

There's a lot going on in one little sentence, isn't there? When the curtain is pulled back, there's a lot to see!

Taken together, these two references constitute an epiphany—a revelation or insight into who God is and what he is doing in the life of Jesus of Nazareth. He is a king, but a king unlike any other. He is a Servant King, and a Suffering King.

In linking Jesus to these prophecies of Israel, Mark makes it clear that the curtain which ordinarily blocks our access to what's going on behind the events of our every day lives, the events of history, is being pulled back.

And when it is pulled back we see how God's plan is being worked out, how his promises to Israel are being fulfilled, how all the people of the world will be blessed through the seed of Abraham. When God allows us to look through the window, we are given a glimpse of the underlying reality that sustains, guides, and provides hope for the everyday, observable part of reality with which we are more familiar.

Two Realities

In my jail story, the reality I was familiar with was obvious enough. It was a reality where people do rotten things to each other and have to spend time behind bars; a reality where “church people” are expected to do good things like visit prisoners and share the gospel with them; a reality where prisoners probably come to services partly out of boredom, partly out of curiosity, partly out of a desire for cookies; a reality where volunteers sometimes have little enthusiasm for another jail service and go mainly out of obligation; a reality where we're not always sure how much good is accomplished as a result of our limited efforts in doing what we think Jesus wants us to do.

But during that prayer time, I think the curtain was pulled back just a little and there was a brief window of insight where another reality could be seen. In this reality, the power and presence of God transcended our own feeble efforts and mixed motives, and showed us all, through the heartfelt prayer of a marginalized member of society, something of the unifying power of the gospel.

In this reality, our connectedness and obligation to one another as human beings is understood. In this reality, the kingdom of God really is advancing through love, compassion, and grace. In this reality, there really is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female—neither poor nor rich, Western nor Eastern, modern nor primitive, Enlightened nor unenlightened.

In this reality, we really *are* all one in Christ Jesus.

Am I making too much of a simple little prayer? Perhaps. I don't doubt that many who were present that day were not affected by Tyler's prayer in the same way that I was. I don't know if anyone else would have considered it an "epiphany." But epiphanies come in unlikely places and they don't come to everyone at the same time in the same way.

As followers of Christ, we all have to live within what appear to be two realities. On the one hand, we live according to the reality that is most familiar to us, the one that occupies most of our waking hours; the one in which we have jobs and kids and demands and vacations and meetings and joys and triumphs and heartaches and frustrations and... fill in the blank.

But there is another reality as well. This is the reality that lies behind the curtain, the reality that we may see only glimpses of in rare moments of epiphany. This is the reality of God reconciling all things to himself in Christ Jesus, the reality in which we are gradually becoming more like Jesus; this is the reality in which our little acts of kindness and service to others really do advance God's kingdom.

The key is to see that these are not separate realities, but two dimensions of the same one. And that if we keep our eyes and ears and hearts and minds open and attentive, we will be ready for the moments when the curtain is pulled back.

Epiphany is a season where we celebrate a God who speaks. God spoke at Jesus' baptism, and allowed those present to catch a glimpse of who this Messiah was and who he would become.

And God still speaks. It may not come through an audible voice from heaven, but moments of epiphany still do come.

Perhaps now, at the dawn of a new year, and on this first Sunday of Epiphany, we too need to be reminded that there are still times when the curtain is pulled back and we get a glimpse, if we have eyes to see, of the unseen reality that is guiding everything from the big story of cosmic history to our own individual stories.

Perhaps we need to be reminded that God is at work even when it doesn't seem obvious to us. Israel had been waiting in darkness and uncertainty for a long time before its "epiphany" came. Perhaps in these uncertain times you, too, find yourself waiting. Perhaps you, too, have found it difficult to see what God is doing in the events and circumstances of your life.

What today's text tells us is that no matter how things look on the surface, when the curtain is pulled back, God is there, God is working, God has a plan, and God is good.

May God help us to be a people whose eyes, ears, hearts, and minds are open to God's voice, to little epiphanies where we see behind the curtain, and catch a glimpse of the scope of God's one reality, a reality of hope, blessing, grace, and promise.

Thanks be to God.