

Sermon Jan 7th Rev Jo Smith

A few weeks ago as we entered the season of Advent, the very first week of Advent we had a reading from Isaiah with what I think is one of the most relatable verses in all of Scripture, Isaiah 64:1^(L), where the prophet cries out to God, “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down.”

We spoke then about the season of Advent being about waiting, and how hard waiting is, and how tired we get as we wait, and how it feels like we’re in this in-between time, doing so much waiting, “waiting on the world to change” as John Mayer puts it.

And oh how desperately we long for it to change

I’m still stuck on that Isaiah verse from the end of November. O that you would tear open the heavens and come down.” Break into this broken, fragile world, O God, and come do something.

Today’s gospel reading is the beginning of Mark’s story of, as he puts it, “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” Part of what’s interesting about Mark is that he skips entirely over Christmas. As we enter Mark’s Gospel—and we’ll be reading a lot from Mark this year—you can set aside just about everything you know about the Christmas story. I don’t know if Mark has ever heard about the shepherds and the wise men and the manger story, but if he has, he doesn’t care. It’s not important to the story he’s telling.

Instead, he starts his telling of the Jesus-story with a character named John, who appears in the wilderness, on the outskirts, in the wild-places. He's a wild sort of man, wearing rough clothes made of camel's hair, eating strange food of locusts and wild honey, (makes my diet seem pretty normal doesn't it) sort of an all-natural diet, and the people from the city and the countryside are coming to him to be repent, to confess their sins, and to be washed by him in the water of the river Jordan.

And in those days, says Mark as he introduces his main character, Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And—listen to this part. This is God's answer, the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophetic cry—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.

At Jesus' baptism, God tears open the heavens and comes down. It's the same promise the other Gospel writers tell in their Christmas accounts. God has come to us. Matthew and Luke focus on the promises the angel reveals to Mary and Joseph, and the prophets Anna and Simeon recognizing Jesus' identity in the temple. John talks about the Word becoming flesh and living with us, the Light entering the Darkness.

For Mark, God's plan to redeem the world begins at Jesus' baptism, with the heavens torn open, and the Spirit descending like a dove. By the way, I usually picture that moment as a soft white dove slowly and gracefully fluttering down towards Jesus, but I saw someone point out this week that birds don't only descend slowly and gracefully—sometimes they dive straight down. I think this week I like that image better, the Holy Spirit diving into the world.

In case we miss the point, Mark will come back to this imagery of the heavens being torn open twice more in his Gospel. In a few weeks, we'll hear the story of Jesus' transfiguration on the mountain top, when a voice from heaven again declares Jesus' true identity. Then on Good Friday, as Jesus breathes his last on the cross, Mark describes the veil in the temple being torn in two, the boundary that sets apart God's dwelling place being ripped open.

So the promise I want to share with you today is simply that God has heard our prayers and entered our world, in the person of Jesus Christ. God is not afraid of the disruption and chaos in our world, the uncertainty we're facing as a nation and as individuals.

In the first reading, in the very opening pages of the Bible, we hear that in the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Maybe you've heard me talk about this before, but in the ancient near-Eastern understanding of the world, the waters represent chaos. God comes into the watery nothingness, the formless void, the uncertain darkness, and God gets to work, creating, speaking the world into being.

God is not hindered by fear and chaos. Instead, that is where God begins to work.

Genesis 1:2 reads that the primordial soup of pre-creation was *tohu wa-bohu*. That was fun to say out loud as a student — it rhymed, it was phonetically simple, and it was one of the few things that I could pronounce without mangling the language. It also made you feel like you enjoyed some mystical knowledge about creation.

Tohu wa-bohu. The stuff of creation was a formless or unformed waste. A shapeless, futile and empty void. Darkness and desolation covered the watery deep. Things were chaotic.

But then there was a "great wind" ("ruach elohim") that blew over the waters. The simplest way to read this is a "strong and stormy wind," but interpreters have never been able to resist the translation that the *ruach elohim* is the very wind, breath, or Spirit of the living God.

Like a tender mother, God's Spirit hovers, broods, or flutters over the watery chaos. The word *rachaph* is used only two other times in the Hebrew Old Testament. In Deuteronomy 32:11, God says that when he found his people in a "howling wasteland," he shielded or guarded them — "like an eagle that stirs up its nest and hovers over its young."

The gospel and the epistle for this week remind us that the Spirit of God broods and blows over our own little lives just like he does over all creation and history. As with the original creation of the whole cosmos, so now with the recreation of my own life.

At the baptism of Jesus, Mark writes that "the Spirit descended on him like a dove."

And when Paul baptized twelve clueless people in Ephesus, Luke writes that "the Holy Spirit came on them."

The Spirit of God forms the formless. He breathes spirit into matter. He creates purpose, order and meaning out of the chaos. He fills the empty void with beauty and goodness. He turns darkness into light, night into day, the evening into a new morning. God calls those things that don't exist into existence.

That's what the Spirit did in creation, and that's what he does in our redemption.

As evidence of God's work, consider your own baptism. Not only has God broken into the world, God has torn apart the barrier of sin separating you from your Creator. By the work of the Holy Spirit, that same Spirit that descended to Jesus at his baptism, you have been washed clean and given new life. You have been named beloved by God, claimed as God's children, gathered into the Body of Christ.

Beloved of God, remember your baptism. Remember that God has torn open the heavens and come down into this world. May you see and share God's presence this week