

Ripping the Heavens Open

The baptism of Jesus could raise many questions which seem contradictory to our understanding of Jesus and God. It almost seems like it is a case of the 'unstoppable force meeting the immovable object' where there can be no easy answers. The questions which can be raised about whether or not Jesus needed to be baptized via a baptism of forgiveness are somewhat crucial to our understanding of God and humanity, but are way beyond the scope of what this sermon could cover. Let's just say that some of these questions may require a total rethinking of how we think about God and developing an entirely different theological system.

As you know, words are important - which words are used; the meanings, both actual and implied meanings of those words and even which words are not used and they determine how we understand what the author is wishing to convey to the reader. This can be further complicated when writings get translated into other languages. Some words can be translated in many different ways and it is up to the translator to decide which word to use. These decisions are not usually done arbitrarily but in research other documents from that time period and how the original word is used, the concept which the author is trying to put across and consistency within the same document. The translator's beliefs may also influence which word to use. Usually, there is a group of several people who will review the translation or may even collaboratively work on the translation. This is all to say that a translation may not always be a straight-up word for word translation. The translator may try to convey the same meaning but uses contemporary language structures to reach a particular audience.

That said, the choice of one word over another may give a different understanding to a particular passage. For example, in today's Gospel text of Mark's telling of Jesus' baptism, the NRSV says "the Spirit descending like a dove on him." There are several other English translations that use the same concept that the Spirit descended like a dove upon Jesus. This gives the impression that the Spirit just kind of hovered over Jesus. However, by selecting another word instead of 'upon' changes the meaning of this verse. An acceptable alternate translation would be to say that the Spirit descended **into** Jesus. I can see why translators would choose 'upon' in this case since a dove cannot go into a person. If we use the word 'into' we get the sense that the Spirit is in Jesus, that the Spirit is inhabiting or possessing Jesus. Later in chapter 3 of Mark's Gospel account, Jesus is accused by the Scribes that He is possessed by a demon. This is the passage where Jesus says that anyone who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit commits the unforgiveable sin. Since by this exchange we get the sense that Jesus is disputing what is possessing Him, we can see where using the word 'into' at Jesus' baptism would be appropriate. Also, at His death, Jesus breathed out His Spirit, indicating that understanding that the Spirit descended into Jesus is more appropriate than descending upon Jesus.

By having the Spirit descend into Jesus would be more reassuring to Jesus (especially the human side of Jesus) that God is with Him in the journey Jesus is about to undertake. By hearing the words, "You are my son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased" are also words of assurance that God loves Jesus for who Jesus is, not for anything that Jesus has done thus far. These words can also be reassuring to us as we recall our baptisms into Jesus where God forged a unique relationship with us through Jesus. God is proud of us for being whose we are

and this assurance gives us the power to take a chance and do things for others. Knowing the full story of Jesus that God 'took care' of Jesus despite (or because) of Jesus' trials and death by resurrecting Jesus from the grave, we have the assurance that God will 'take care' of us when we dare to live the way Jesus did - for others.

Another important thing to notice in Mark's telling of Jesus' baptism is that the heavens were 'torn open.' This is not a neat slicing of the firmament between heaven and earth, exposing the heavens through Jesus; this is a ripping apart beyond any hope of repairing the tear or the possibility of this opening then closing up. This should give us pause, because this firmament which separated heaven from earth no longer keeps God up in heaven. Through Jesus, there is nothing to keep God from invading the earth. It's not that there was anything to stop God from doing that before, but in this tearing open, we can see it as God once again laying claim to God's sovereignty over all of creation and this claim is through Jesus. This could be a scary as well as a reassuring concept - that God is loose in the world. Scary in the sense that humanity no longer is in control of the earth and humanity's charge as stewards of creation is no longer valid since the 'owner' has now returned. If we hear Jesus' parables of judgement correctly, then the stewards will need to answer for their stewardship of the owner's possessions. Having God loose in the world can be reassuring for those who are abused and taken advantage of by those who are supposed to be leaders of God's people. They have the assurance, that like a Good Shepherd, those shepherds who led others astray in any way will be dealt with and these 'lost sheep' will be brought home by the Good Shepherd to the green pastures and quiet, still waters.

In all the readings today, in *Genesis 1*, *Psalm 29* and *Acts 19*, as well as the Gospel reading, we get that sense of creating by God. *Genesis 1* tells us about the first day where God spoke and the process of shaping the universe began, that the Spirit of God was present helping in that ordering and that God saw that it was good. The Psalm talks about what God can do, simply with the voice of God, things that may seem to be both destructive and creating. The reading from *Acts* tells of the creating of new abilities of people given to them by the Holy Spirit when they were baptized in name of Jesus. The Gospel reading tells of the new creation that is beginning when Jesus came up out of the water and the Spirit descended into Jesus. This new creation continued as the Temple curtain was ripped from the top to the bottom at the time of Jesus' death and still continues as we strive to live out our baptisms, following God's will and daring to live like Jesus.

May the Holy Spirit continue to guide, strengthen and assure us that through our belief in Jesus; through our belief in Immanuel, in 'God is with us,' God's will is going to prevail and take us to that place of true peace and everlasting life.

YouTube Links:

Gospel and Sermon: https://youtu.be/TXk43bT_KR0

Sermon: <https://youtu.be/bOEUpuboQg0>