

**The Baptism of Our Lord**  
**January 10-11, 2009**  
**Mark 1:4-11**

*“Torn Apart”*

About six weeks, at the end of November, we entered into the season of Advent. On the First Sunday in Advent, we heard these words from the prophet Isaiah: **“O that you would rend the heavens and come down”** (Isaiah 64:1). It is a prayer of Isaiah asking that God would tear open the heavens, draw back the veil that separates earth from heaven, and make himself known in powerful and awe-inspiring ways. In today’s Gospel lesson, the account of Jesus’ baptism by John in the River Jordan, Isaiah’s prayer has been answered. Here we read: **“And just as he [Jesus] 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’”** (Mark 1:10-11). Mark’s word choice is very interesting here. Matthew and Luke, who also record Jesus’ baptism, use a much tamer word to describe what’s going on. The word they use is simply “open” – the heavens were “opened.” Mark’s version is different – more descriptive, more of a word picture. Mark goes back to Isaiah’s prayer from hundreds of years before and writes: “the heavens [were] torn apart.” Like a piece of cloth that is torn in two, we can almost hear that ripping sound as the heavens were split apart and the Holy Spirit comes down upon Jesus the Messiah. That word for “torn apart” in the original language here is *schizo*, where we get our words “schism,” “schizoid,” and “schizophrenic,” all meaning a splitting, a tearing apart of a group or even an individual’s personality. It is a powerful word. As we consider the Word of the Lord today, may that Word split us open, tear us apart, that the Holy Spirit may come down upon us so that we may be renewed in our calling as the baptized people of God. As we celebrate the Baptism of Our Lord this day, the message is entitled “Torn Apart.” May the Lord’s rich blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word, for Jesus’ sake.

Let’s face it: when a piece of cloth has a tear in it – a shirt, a pair of pants, a pocket – we can try to fix it, but that piece of cloth just isn’t the same. It will be more prone to tear again. As a young boy growing up, I used to watch my mother darn socks for the family. I used to hate wearing socks that had been darned because they felt so weird. And does anybody even do this anymore – darning socks? Maybe with the economy being the way it is, darning socks will make a comeback, like the lay-away plan has. Something that has been torn apart usually is seen as damaged goods, broken, and maybe not worth fixing, especially in the throw-away society that we live in. But in truth, aren’t we all torn apart? Aren’t each and every one of us gathered here, as well as everyone in the world, damaged goods and broken? We don’t have to look very far in our lives or in our world to see just how damaged and broken we are. For some, the scars go very deep, and the pain that goes with it. Sometimes we may think that we’re not worth fixing; we are just too broken and damaged beyond repair. This is why Jesus came to the waters of the Jordan River to be baptized by John. He came to bring healing and hope. He came to bind up what is broken and torn apart by sin. He came to restore us to God’s original design and purpose for his creation.

Jesus was not baptized, like we are, for the forgiveness of sin. As the sinless Son of God, he had no need for this. But in stepping down into that water, Jesus’ baptism marked him as God’s chosen Servant to do for us what we could never do for ourselves: to live that righteous life we cannot because of our sin, and to pay the penalty which we owe because of our sin. This is what is called Jesus’ active and passive obedience: he lived the godly life we cannot, and he died the death we deserve. Jesus’ baptism was the public beginning of all of this, placing him on the

road of servanthood which would lead him to his coronation on the throne of the cross wearing the crown of thorns. My friends, all that Jesus has done is given to us in the cleansing waters of holy Baptism. His active and passive obedience, his fulfillment of all God's righteousness, his atoning death upon the cross, his forgiveness, mercy, and grace – all this is given to us when that water is poured over us and those words are spoken: "I baptize you in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." And just as Jesus' baptism led to humble and loving service, so it is with us. Our Baptism marks us as servants of Christ and of one another. As Dr. Harry Wendt of Crossways! puts it: "Free grace must lead to costly discipleship." As we begin this new year, I want to hold that up to us all: our Baptism into Christ's death and resurrection takes us on the path of humble and loving service to others in Christ's name.

That tearing open of the heavens at Jesus' baptism would lead to another tearing on the day of his death. When all the work of salvation was complete, Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "**Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!**" (Luke 23:46), and "**the curtain of the temple was torn in two**" (Luke 23:45). The separation between God and man because of sin was now removed. Through Christ's sacrifice upon the cross we have graciously been given direct access to the Father, now and forever. The terrible tearing apart of our lives and of our world which seemed beyond repair, has been transformed into something beyond all that we can ask or imagine. The words of the angel Gabriel to the Virgin Mary are fulfilled: "**For with God nothing will be impossible**" (Luke 1:37). Amen.