

Epiphany 1 – Baptism of Jesus

Genesis 1:1-5 Acts 19:1-7 Mark 1:4-11

May the words of my mouth and the mediations of our hearts be right and acceptable to you, O Lord, our Rock and Redeemer.

In 1961 when I was 10, my parents came up with a Easter Break road trip for my parents, two younger sisters, and me that involved driving from our home in New Jersey down to Washington DC.

I loved history and had devoured dozens of American Heritage and Landmark History books, and thus I recall how awestruck I was when we toured the Capitol, peeked into the Senate Chamber, and looked straight up in the center of the rotunda to see what looked like the Sistine Chapel—it was a celebration (The Apotheosis?) painting of General George Washington on the ceiling far, far above—almost in the heavens I thought.

We children were silent and even reverent in the rotunda looking up as if we were in church. Here in this very hall strode Abraham Lincoln, Teddy Roosevelt, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Dwight D. Eisenhower. To me the capitol was THE religious, historical, political center of the universe—and we walked its hallways silent, and in awe.

I was so taken by that experience, and our tours of the Supreme Court, the Smithsonian, etc. that when it came time to choose a college, I hoped against hope that Georgetown University in Washington DC would accept me for admission. It did.

Thus it was from out of this perspective, I share with all of you what we saw of the Capitol on TV or the internet last Wednesday—people violently busting-out window panels to gain entry, ripping out wood paneling to steal as trophies, belaying off a balcony of the Senate Chamber, stealing the podium of the House, smashing into the Speaker’s Office, and a Q-Anon shaman high after smoking marijuana in a broken-in Representative’s office, walking with a buffalo helmet bare-chested through the halls.

This was not vandalism, this was not 1st Amendment free speech, this was the desecration by dark forces of a civic shrine hallowed by the lives of many, many previous generations.

It was not gentle—there was smashing, rendering, and tearing asunder full of anger, mob insanity, and hate. And there were deaths and injuries requiring hospitalization—deaths from gunshot, trampling, stroke, heart attack, and injuries requiring hospitalization.

All true, but what does that have to do with the Scripture readings on this day.

Well the phrase that most catches my ear in the context of the *capitol desecration* is

“And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens trn apart”

*Torn apart...the Greek word *Schizo* also could be translated as to cleave asunder as by a cleaver knife or axe, or to rend, to tear aside.*

So Jesus is looking up after coming from under the waters of the River Jordan and seeing the heavens above him undergoing something like what happened in the smashing, and rendering, and tearing asunder in the Capitol. Why would that be?

Well, the way people at the time of Jesus imagined the world and its place in the cosmos is quite different from ours; they imagined the way humans could hear and know things from God quite differently from us.

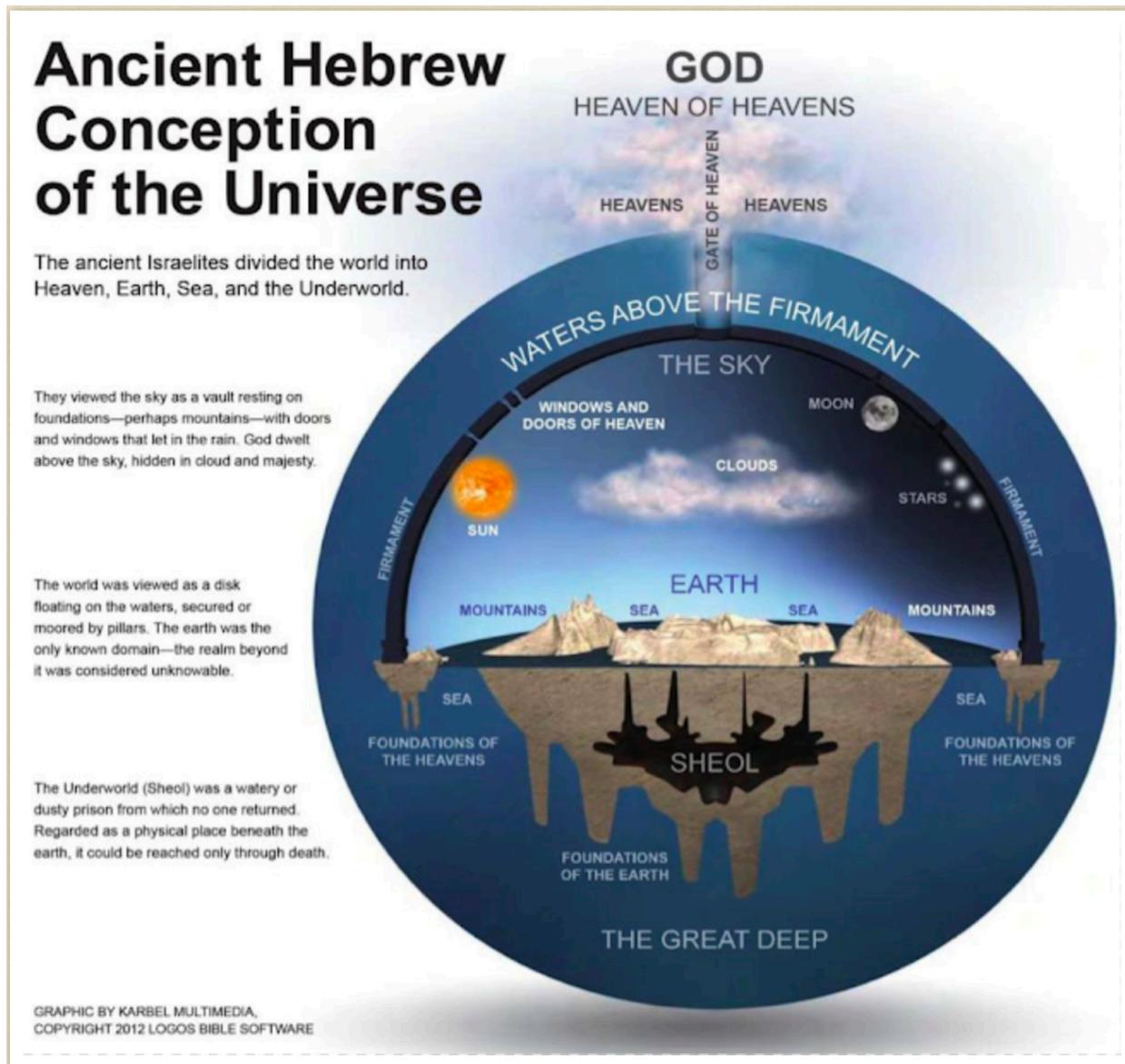
Some of this can be understood if you look at the map below of their imagined cosmos.

- As you can see in the center was the Earth, below was Sheol where all the souls of the dead went. Above the earth within **the first sphere** where the sun, moon, stars, and clouds that orbited the earth stationed unmoving in the center.
- The **next sphere up and down** was “the waters above the firmament” and the waters below Sheol in The Great Deep. There were little windows above The Sky in the roof of the first sphere, which allowed waters to come down from “the waters above the firmament” to the clouds and give rain. The waters of the Great Deep created the seas beyond the dry land.
- And only in the **Third Sphere** above the “the waters above the firmament” and above the Earth and Sky was the Heaven of Heavens and this is where God resided.

So you could see that it was quite a distance and quite difficult to hear God on Earth from at least two spheres above with waters and stars and the sun in between.

However, God voice was able to rend and burst through these spheres and barriers, through the Gate of Heaven as we hear in the first reading:

the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God hovered over the face of the waters.



Given this map, we can see the earth in the center all dark and formless with the waters of the Great Deep below and the Waters Above the Firmament—but God’s Holy Spirit, God’s *Ruah* is able to burst down from the Gate of Heaven.

And we hear of this bursting in the Psalm given us today:

*3 The voice of the Lord is upon the waters;
the God of glory thunders; *
the Lord is upon the mighty waters.*

*4 The voice of the Lord is a powerful voice; *
the voice of the Lord is a voice of splendor.*

*5 The voice of the Lord breaks the cedar trees; *
the Lord breaks the cedars of Lebanon;*

7 *The voice of the Lord splits the flames of fire;
the voice of the Lord shakes the wilderness; *
the Lord shakes the wilderness of Kadesh.*

8 *The voice of the Lord makes the oak trees writhe *
and strips the forests bare.*

Holy Cow, if such a wind came through our town, our electricity would be out for weeks with trees laid flat along power lines. We would be powerless, cold, and flat...

And yet God's wind moves in the Genesis story with *rachaph*—a high degree of care, even concern in its action as it *hovers* over the face of the waters, withholding landing over the waters and the Earth?—out of deference, gentleness, humility, waiting to be invited?

So it takes energetic action for God to come from many spheres above the Earth to come to earth, and yet after all the energy and power to come to our Earth, God's power waits, gently, compassionately, to descend acceptably.

The combination of sheer power and compassionate, even gentle understanding in the terms of change?

What a contrast to what went on in the power of breaking into the Capitol this week. Was there any evidence of compassion? of deference, gentleness, humility, waiting to be invited, understanding?

This breaking through barriers and spheres was an assault out of anger and frustration—and an attempt to injure, intimidate, humiliate, and hurt.

Now the problem in Mark's Gospel at this point was that this Wind, this *ruah*, this Spirit of God was gone.

In the past with the prophets Moses, Elijah, Ezeiel, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, the Holy Spirit rested upon them, and the conversations between them and God were personal and intimate—the barriers between the spheres were permeable and the Gate of Heaven allowed God to be heard clearly by human prophets.

BUT after the death of Malachi, the spirit of prophecy, the *ruah* ceased in Israel. The Jewish people believed the Gate of Heaven was closed, blocked, so that the only voice of God that could be heard through the spheres surrounding the earth was an echo of an echo of an echo—it was as if God's messages were photocopies of photocopies of photocopies.

So when we hear today in the Gospel that

“And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens
torn apart”

Schizo in the original Greek *for torn apart*, was not meant as a figure of speech, but rather that Jesus, for the first time since the last of the prophets, was seeing the Gate of Heaven smashed open by the power of God coming down and re-entering the human world through the spheres separating the Heaven of Heavens to the earth. The Spirit, in the original Greek, was violently smashing through.

Then if we skip two verses we find that the Holy Spirit causes things to happen violently for Mark writes that the Spirit immediately *drove him* [Jesus] *out* into the wilderness—the Greek here for *drove out* was is *Ekballo*— *to command or cause one to depart in haste; to draw out with force, tear out.*

So it almost sounds like the Holy Spirit is acting in this passage like the tearing, rending, smashing mob in the capitol through, of course, from two very different sources: the former from love and caring for humans and especially this Beloved; and the latter from anger, hatred, and fear.

The Spirit from God had appeared to humans in the past as fire, earthquakes, and huge powerful winds as in the case of Moses when the Gates of Heaven were open on mount Sinai. If one were to think of a bird descending to represent this kind of appearance of God surely it would be an eagle, a hawk, or a falcon—fast, powerful, large, and with talons.

But not this time, this time the Spirit descends like a dove. The Spirit is likened to a dove, for its simplicity, sincerity, plainness, and openness. To which may be added, Noah's dove bringing the olive leaf in its mouth, as a sign, of peace and reconciliation. This fits the Holy Spirit for one of whose fruits is peace.

Thus Jesus is witnessing a powerful rending of the spheres of heaven and will experience a violent, powerful push of power out to the wilderness.

But at the moment, this powerful Holy Spirit comes to Jesus as he is arising from his baptismal immersion under the water in the Jordan River: the Spirit doesn't knock him down, push him aside, but comes near to him transformed like a dove—almost as if the sudden transformation from power to gentleness was an action voicing the first words of the angel to Mary and the Shepherds: “Be not afraid.”

And then a voice comes—issuing from this powerful spirit that I would expect to be like

I am O, z the great and terrible—

The Wizard of Oz in his fire and clouds of smoke talks only of himself in such a way as to intimidate Dorothy and her friends.

However in our Gospel today, the voice that comes out of this powerful Holy Spirit and focuses on Jesus not Himself: “You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.”

Like the dove’s descent on Jesus, the voice’s message is simple, plain, peaceful, graceful, and, I would add, full of love and affection.

So at the end of this event-filled week we are presented with two very powerful forces—both rend, tear, and break asunder.

God’s Holy Spirit is no woosy; it’s very powerful; it changes things and people—it’s going to command Jesus to leave, pushed out to the wilderness, but God’s Holy Spirit operates out of love, care, even affection in its encounters with humans—“Be not afraid” is said and enacted time after time in the Gospels.

On the other hand, the mob violence we saw at the Capitol also rent, tore, and broke aside—but it operated out of anger and hate clearly symbolized by its actions communicating the desire to hurt, humiliate, and intimidate—

- **Be Afraid** when an enemy army of slavery Confederate Battle Flag is carried through the Capitol.
- **Be Intimidated** when a gallows and noose is positioned on the West side of the US Capitol, and when a guy busting through the Capitol wears a “Camp Auschwitz” sweatshirt.
- **Be Humiliated** when sacred civic space is demolished and discarded as piles of junk at the ends of corridors.

And we today?

We stand in a world around us **and inside each one** with the awesome powers of God’s Holy Spirit to enact God, to powerfully break down barriers that imprison and enslave our fellow human beings—to Dare to Be the Face of God to all those we meet.

And we also stand in a world around us **and inside each one** with the awesome powers of dark wickedness with its hues of hate, intimidation, fear, and blind destruction.

God's Church has seen and encountered this terrible perplexity of good and evil in humans, and has been ordered by God to attack this perplexity **by Baptizing all nations**.

In the sacrament of Baptism we are clear told that there are *spiritual forces of wickedness*, that there are *evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God* and each one of us here were asked to renounce them—and we were given the most powerful way to work against these forces and powers, *God's help*.

Here are the questions and responses in Baptism, the foundation sacrament of our Christian faith. Listen to them this day, and say the responses today that your parents and godparents answered for you so many years ago—

Question Do you renounce Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God?

Answer I renounce them.

Question Do you renounce the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God?

Answer I renounce them.

Question Do you renounce all sinful desires that draw you from the love of God?

Answer I renounce them.

Question Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?

Response I will, with God's help.

Question Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?

Response I will, with God's help.

Question Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?

Response I will, with God's help.

Spiritual forces of wickedness, and evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God may have seen such quaint, ancient, archaic words and phrases in our world that we think we fashion and control and balance

by vaccines, internet packets of information, atomic energy power stations, and ships that fly to the moon and back.

Surely we have left behind those forces and powers back in the defeat of the Third Reich, back in the KKK nightriders of the 19th century, back in the mass hysteria about witches on the North Shore of our state.

But Wednesday horrifyingly showed us that such forces and powers are very present and very, very powerful.

And thus, return and consider our, your, my foundation as a Christian:

That with God's help **and only with God's help** we will:

- persevere in resisting evil
- serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself, and
- strive for justice and peace among all people, and respecting the dignity of every human being

Amen