



Sermon at the Cathedral Eucharist

First Sunday of Lent

readings: [Genesis 9.8-17](#), [1 Peter 3.18-22](#), [Mark 1.9-15](#)

18 February 2024

When you think of heaven, what do you imagine it to be for? A place of complete unity with God? Where you will be able to look at God's glory and bask in it for all eternity? A cozy, comfortable place, perhaps? Well, that is not how the ancient Hebrews, for whom Mark was writing, saw it.

In *Preaching Mark in Two Voices*, co-written by Gary Charles and Brian Blount, Blount describes their belief like this:

"The ancient Hebrews believed that no human could look upon God and live. God was too holy, too bright, too powerful. Thank heavens, then, for the heavens. It was the heavens that kept us separate from God, kept us from seeing God face to face."

How often have you thought of heaven as a buffer zone? The heavens providing a way for us to be in contact with God but not fear God's power. Like a wall that "one great power uses to separate itself from another great power."

Is that a comforting thought or not? Isn't it tempting sometimes to just want the safety that that would bring? It may be a cold safety, but it is predictable and less likely to interfere with (or even change) your life – or worse still, expect you to get involved with the lives of others! Risking being closer, having a level of intimacy with the Almighty... well, that can be... uncomfortable.

A distant heaven can be comforting, but that is not the kind of God we serve, worship and adore!

Have you ever thought of Jesus' baptism in Mark, as the moment when "a wild, untamed God" is set loose in the world, like a tiger released from the zoo, violently ripping his way to us?

2. The baptism as God violently ripping his way to us.

This amazing cosmic moment happens in Mark 1:10. Mark uses the Greek word *schizo* (meaning "tear" "rip" or "rend") to describe how the heavens are torn apart as Jesus rises from the water of his baptism. Matthew and Luke choose a milder Greek verb for "to open." Not Mark.

In Mark the description is of a dramatic apocalyptic scene of:

Clouds tearing. Heavens ripping. Divine voice booming. Spirit descending. This is terrible, untamed tiger talk. Blount says it is the language of slashing and slicing, shredding and clawing until something once locked up, on that safe and seldom seen heavenly side over there, knives its way free to this historical, human side we're standing on over here.

Jesus' baptism in Mark is being portrayed as an act of apocalyptic cosmic disruption. And we're just getting started!

Jesus' baptism marks the beginning of his boundary-breaking ministry. He gets started immediately as the Spirit drives him into the wilderness.

3. The wilderness

Actually, Mark doesn't say "drive" he puts it in a much wilder way: the Spirit "casts out" Jesus into the wilderness (if you really want to know, this exorcistic-sounding word is *ekballei* in Greek).

In Mark we don't get all the detail of the temptation we get in Matthew and Luke, no interesting theological banter between Jesus and Satan. Because in Mark, Jesus' temptation is not about a theological conversation with the devil. Instead, it is a forty-day, life-or-death, Spirit-authorized struggle in a place of vulnerability. Wild animals show up. Angels wait upon him. The temptation in Mark is not words, but an apocalyptic struggle that Jesus survives.

4. The ministry

The apocalyptic battle with Satan has begun. Jesus returns from the wilderness to break down the barriers between Jew and Gentile, clean and unclean, man and woman, rich and poor. Jesus announces the coming of the Kingdom. Let the healings, the liberations from bondage to evil, the announcements of forgiveness, and the calls to transformation begin. It is on people!

He comes with the gospel of God, points away from himself, trusting that God breaking through the heavens means both change for us and change with us.

5. Conclusion: so what?

Change with us. Jesus broke down barriers. We wish to follow and yet we spend so much energy building barriers. Psychological, emotional, corporate and even physical. I wonder what energy you are using up in keeping your own walls up? What are you walling in or walling out?

Trust me, it is not me asking, it is Jesus. What or who are you keeping out? Jesus' boundary-breaking example asks this question of us all. Isn't that something worth working on over this Lent? Or are you hoping that your defense barriers are high enough to keep God out?

Friends, you know (really, deep down you know!) we do not serve a tame God who will let you suffer alone, who will not rip the heavens apart to find and comfort you. Be encouraged. Believe. Make the most of Lent. Because Lent is a season of reflection and repentance—but also a curious type of joy. Let it be a time of intimacy with God where we move from past regret and into action. May it be joyous and wild! Amen.

**The Revd Carla Vicêncio Prior,
Canon for Community Learning**