

Skydiving and The Faith

The Baptism of the Lord (Year B) sermon presented by The Rev. Philip A. Rodgers presented Sunday, January 7th, 2018 at Trinity United Church in Malton, related to Mark 1:4-11

Do you know that it's harder to get a membership at Costco than it is to become a Christian and a member of the United Church? And that's a bad thing. It's bad, specifically, because if the church is easy to join, then any notion of responsible membership can just fly right out the window...*first get baptized and plan on financially supporting your church, attending, and experiencing frustration and discomfort on a regular basis. Then be advised that Christmas and Easter Sunday come only once a year respectively. None of which, of course, is mandatory – that is except baptism*

That has me thinking about baptism. It's mandatory.

What if...what if instead of a little chaste sprinkling of water on the forehead or even a full immersion on the banks of a local river or something in between...***what if the only way to join the church was by skydiving?*** The very idea makes my stomach do backflips. But think about it...free fall, then the ripcord, and then a gentle floating down to the ground...I haven't gone mad, so stay with me a moment here! Imagine what it would mean to go through that experience, with its terrors, its rushes, and its ultimate relief – and then show up at church on Sunday to be greeted by a room full of people who had been through all of that, too? Think how you would see them all, as you walked in and found your pew: the older couple that sits up front and always shares a hymnal; the super-cheery soprano, and the lady who always takes more than her fair share at all the potlucks; the guy who circles typos in the bulletin every Sunday and submits it back to the church office; and the guy who seems as if he comes because his deceased wife liked it, and he may or may not miss Jesus, but he knows he misses her.

Think how you would see them all, the heavy, the creaky, the busy, the young and the old, the happy and the sad – the people you will find in every church on any Sunday – think how you would see them all, if being baptized meant that at some point, however many years before, they had each had ***that day*** – that day when they had somehow summoned enough courage to leap out into thin air and into the hands of God....think about it.

Søren Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher and a Christian, thought about it and wrote: “...*Religion, its essence at first hand... (is) from God himself. Then it will be said: 'behold, all is in readiness, see how the cruelty of abstraction makes the true form of worldliness only too evident, the abyss of eternity opens before you, the sharp scythe of the leveller makes it possible for every one individually to leap over the blade – and behold, it is God who waits. Leap, then, into the arms of God!'*...” Pretty heady stuff, I know! But....

Think about it, because when Mark's Gospel describes the Baptism of Jesus, it's that kind of radical act that he has in mind. Mark writes that as Jesus "was coming out of the water, he saw the heavens ***torn apart*** and a dove descending."

The way we tend to talk about baptism, it would have made more sense if Mark had talked about the dove, gently cooing, or perhaps fluttering over the surface of the water. But that is not what we read. Instead, Mark talks about the heavens, *schizo*, ***torn apart***. It's the word Matthew, Mark and Luke all use to describe that moment on Good Friday when the curtain of the temple is torn in two. It's the word John uses when the Roman soldiers at the foot of the cross determine not to tear Jesus' garment and divide it between them, but to cast lots for it instead. It's a word that resonates in the prophecies of Isaiah, particularly when Isaiah says to God, "O that you would tear open the heavens

and come down," (Isaiah 63:19). Mark understands very clearly that in Jesus, this is exactly what has happened. God has torn open the heavens and come down.

And this is why, in Mark's judgment, the baptism of Jesus is so very clearly a radical act. In Jesus, God has committed the act of breaking and entering the world, and Mark wants the world to know. And yet...how much of God's active interest in us are we really prepared to admit? Because, good heavens, if we took them seriously, our baptisms might just tear **our** lives apart, too. But if God has broken through the barrier and broken into our lives, then what ensues is not something simpler and easier for us, but rather something infinitely more complex and urgent. Baptism means that we, in turn, are called to tear into the challenges and problems of the world with everything we've been given. It's a summons to be part of the remarkable, redemptive work of God. To give our lives to something more challenging than any other kind of work – and ultimately more beautiful, true, and enduring than any other kind of work.

Jesus came up out of the waters, and perhaps that is what he saw. A vision of God, and a vision of what it was to be alive that he could give his life to. That's also what your baptism and mine were pointing to...***and that's what our baptisms still point to.***

No matter where you are baptized, whether it's in front of the same font where your grandmother and mother were baptized, or by the banks of a river, or standing in the sanctuary of a place where even you can hardly believe you've found a home...no matter where it is, the water, the promise and the prayer, take just a few moments. But truly saying "yes" to our baptism is the daily work of the rest of our lives. It is saying yes to the world and "yes" to a life torn open by the love of God.

So...I suppose it's unlikely that we'll decide anytime soon to replace baptism by water and the Spirit, with baptism by gravity and parachute. But the next time you walk into a church and encounter God's people there in all our familiar shapes and sizes, remember that what unites us all is something God's Word tells us is even more electrifying than jumping out of a plane.

In baptism, the heavens themselves were torn apart. And when we experience that for ourselves, when we know that for ourselves, and feel it on our hearts at last, it is the thrill of a lifetime.

It is when everything finally begins.

Let us pray. *Lord, help us live into the promise of our baptism. Help us to live courageously and joyfully. Take us where it may so long as that is where you need us to be. In Jesus' name we ask. Amen.*