

**February 18, 2024 First Sunday in Lent**

**Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church**

**Mark 15:33-39      Mark 1:9-15**

**"Step into the Tear"**

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If you could eat only one food for the rest of your life, what would it be?

Ice breaker questions or activities are an introvert's nightmare. They are random questions that try to facilitate conversation by "breaking the ice" - as though asking what your favorite food or favorite thing to collect will be the ideal launch for new friendships and relationships. They usually catch you off guard, they don't make sense, but sometimes they can make us smile. Their intention is simply to break the ice - to start something that might resemble the start of a friendship or a working relationship. But an ice breaker should really be called an ice-chipper - it just gets the conversation started.

In our text this morning we encounter the ultimate icebreaker as God tears open the heavens and the Triune God enters the world. This is an icebreaker that does not just get the conversation started - it sets God's promise into motion.

The Gospel of Mark does not begin with Jesus's birth. It begins with the birth of the Kingdom of God. It does not begin with stories of Jesus's childhood. It begins with the call to repentance.

In Mark chapter 1, Jesus is baptized by John in the Jordan River. John guides him into the water and as he brings him out, the Gospel of Mark says, "Jesus saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him." This is God's ice

breaker - he tore open the heavens to enter this world in a new way. God says, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Jesus Christ is God in the flesh, but it is in this moment that we have a full picture of our Triune God - the Father who art in heaven, the Spirit who descended like a dove and is with Christ and us, and Jesus Christ who is the confirmed Son of God. God is answering the prayer of the Prophet Isaiah whose words we said this morning as we together proclaimed the call to worship, "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence...when you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence..." God answers this cry. He tore open the heavens and he came down - the Spirit descended; the Spirit came into this world. But Isaiah's words continue, and perhaps resonate with us especially on this first Sunday in Lent saying, "But you were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself we transgressed. We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth..." Isaiah is describing the reality of sin - it is constant, it is defiling, it is destructive - but worst of all, it creates its own barrier between us and God.

As you read through the Old Testament, you know that God is not very far from us. He hears us, sees us, and comes down from heaven. But then he would return. Jacob wrestled with God only for a night, the burning bush was for a moment, the pillars of fire and wind were for a season, God came to Sinai to deliver his law...he was there. He was present. And his presence was great and caused mountains and people to shake. But there were also periods of profound silence. Stretches of time where it seemed like God hid himself.

But God hears the plea of his people, and he loves us deeply. It is out of his love for us that he sent his son into this world, and he tore open the heavens so that nothing could separate us from his glory, from his work of redemption, or from the establishment of his kingdom.

After the heavens were torn, the Spirit descended, and God confirmed Jesus Christ as his son, the Spirit threw Jesus into the wilderness to be tested and tempted. Mark's version of the temptation is incredibly brief, especially compared to the rendering in Matthew and Luke's gospels. But Mark is not belittling the significance of Satan's testing. Mark says, "He was in the wilderness forty days..." This reminds us of Moses being on Mount Sinai for 40 days. It reminds us of Elijah in the desert for forty days before reaching Mount Horeb. It reminds us of Israel's forty years in the wilderness. Each of these are times of preparation. Jesus is preparing for his ministry.

Mark does not need to show us the interaction of Jesus and Satan in the desert because as you read through the gospel, Jesus continues to encounter Satan and demonic forces throughout his ministry. The Kingdom of God will face opposition - as each of you have gotten close to the tear, close to Kingdom, and close to God, I am sure you have experienced this opposition. It is in these moments that we need to trust that we are on the right path. Opposition is not an indication that we are astray - it's an indication that we are right where we need to be. Lent gives us an opportunity to use these forty days as preparation for our own spiritual journey.

Take this season to intentionally turn toward God so that we can be prepared to face the challenges and oppositions that are guaranteed the closer we get to the truth of the Gospel.

Mark uses vivid language to describe God's revelation of himself in the world. Our passage this morning is not the only place where Mark uses the word "tear open or rend." The Greek word, "σχίζω," is found in one other place in this Gospel. As John read for us this morning, Mark uses this word at the end of the Gospel as he describes the events of the crucifixion. Mark chapter 15 says, "Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. And the curtain of the temple was *torn* in two, from top to bottom." In Jesus' death, the tear God created to open the heavens and come into this world is permanently set.

Through his death we are invited into the tear, into relationship with God. Nothing can separate us from the love of God - not sin, not the heavens, not a curtain in the temple. The tear testifies to this truth.

Today is the first Sunday of Lent. Lent is a liturgical season of grief, a time of prayer, and a season of self-examination as we prepare for the celebration of the Resurrection. Our Easter celebration will be incomplete if we do not acknowledge and sit with the reality of Jesus's death. There is no resurrection without first Christ's death. Lent is the time when we are called to join Christ in his passion.

This morning's passage began with John baptizing Jesus. When we celebrate baptism in the life of the church, we proclaim the truth: that in baptism we are dead to sin and alive in Christ. When we commit to following Jesus Christ and join the Body of Christ through Baptism, we are saying that we will join

him in death so that we can experience new life in him. To share in the joy of resurrection we must also share in Christ's death.

This Lent we are invited to step into the tear - into a deeper and closer relationship with God in a new way. There is nothing that separates us from God - so let's take that next faithful step towards God.

This morning, we will affirm our faith with the Apostles' Creed. This Creed is traditionally proclaimed during a baptismal service. I have heard the Apostles' Creed described as a tapestry of faith because it is saturated in Scripture and rooted in tradition.

In the Spirit of baptism, of taking Lent as the opportunity to step into the tear, I invite you to reaffirm your baptismal vows with me. For those of you who are baptized, you know we only do baptisms once in our tradition - but we are encouraged to return to our vows, to remember our faith that we publicly proclaimed, and to reaffirm our faith. For those of you who are not baptized, I encourage you to take this as an opportunity to think through the baptismal vows you may want to take. Let each question be an invitation to step into the tear - that we can join God in his Kingdom.

These are the church's icebreakers. If able and willing, please respond with "I do or I will" accordingly.

Trusting in the gracious mercy of God, do you turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world?

Do you? **I do**

Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Lord and Savior, trusting in his grace and love? Do you? **I do**

Will you be Christ's faithful disciple, obeying his Word  
and showing his love? Will you? **I will, with God's help**

Hold on to these questions. We are entering into Lent - a season of repentance, a season of remembering our sin and the lengths God went to for our salvation, and a season of stepping into the tear, of encountering God in a new way and being open to a relationship with him that is not hindered by the barrier of our sin, the heavens, or the curtain in the temple.

Hebrews chapter 10:19-23 beautifully articulates this truth saying, "Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh), and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful."

My prayer for us this Lent is that the reality of the Gospel and Jesus's passion will resonate with us. We are not supposed to be removed from the Gospel - God tore the heavens open to be with us, to walk with us, and to save us. Let us enter the tear and see God and his Gospel in a new way. Amen.