

No one in the growing crowd saw anything out of the ordinary. Not even those standing a few feet away from John heard the voice. Not a single person felt the ripping of the air above their heads. Only one person saw it. Only one person heard it. Only one person felt the sky rip apart. Even without witnesses we know the account was absolutely true. We know it occurred because the one who told about it was Jesus, the Son of God, who could not lie. It is the event that began the ministry of Jesus as he started his march to the cross. In Mark, both the vision & the voice are intended for Jesus alone. (Interpret.)

The scene began with John the Baptist baptizing people in the River Jordan. John's is a great story, integral to the beginning of Jesus' ministry. John was the forerunner predicted in Malachi 3:1. John was a fulfillment of a prophecy that meant that the kingdom of God was at hand and the Messiah was coming soon. His message was a message of hope. It came from a man who had given up the comforts of the world. He wore a tunic made of woven camel's hair tied at his waist with a leather belt. It was not silky and smooth. It was rough and scratchy. He shed the comforts of the world because the soft and silky materials were for the kings and the apparent leaders of his faith. John's clothes also identified him with Elijah because that also fulfilled an Old Testament prophecy.

John had gone into the wilderness. He existed on a diet of locusts and honey. Locusts or grasshoppers were both a permitted food source for Jews to eat and a tremendous source of protein. They were most populous at certain times of the year and near water sources. Being a baptizer would put him near the water's edge and near his source of food. He sought no human comfort but existed to preach the coming kingdom of God and the coming Messiah.

On this day, as John was baptizing and preaching he noticed a man stepping down to the shore then into the water with him. John had been in the wilderness for a long time. He would not have known his cousin at first glance. He would have heard the story of both his own birth and Jesus' birth. He knew the prophecies. He knew who Jesus was but had not seen him lately. When his cousin reached him in the River Jordan, John said to him and those standing at the shore, "Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is the one about whom I said, 'After me comes a man who is greater than I am, because he existed before me.' I did not recognize him, but I came baptizing with water so that he could be revealed to Israel."

John felt that he needed to be baptized by Jesus but for the purpose of identifying with John's ministry, Jesus went under the water to be baptized. Then John testified, "I saw the Spirit descending like a dove from heaven, and it remained on him. And I did not recognize him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'The one on whom you see the Spirit descending and remaining, this is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' I have both seen and testified that this man is the chosen one of God" (John 1:29-34).

As Jesus came up out of the water, John saw the Spirit descend upon Jesus. But it never says that he saw the sky being ripped open by God the Father. He never said that he heard the thunderous voice of God say, "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." No one witnessed those events. No one heard it. No one felt the blast of air as the sky was split so the Father could get to his son. We know it is true. We know that it happened because Jesus gave testimony that it did.

Many of us have had experiences where God has moved heaven and earth to reach us or we know the stories of people who felt God had to rip through the layers that blinded us or the sins that had bound us. Sometimes it happens in a church. Sometimes it happens at a funeral. Possibly it happens in a foxhole but more often than not as we sit crying out to God. We never feel the sky ripping apart. We never see the veil of the material life splitting from top to bottom. We don't realize that God is pulling one side of the heavens apart from a part of the heavens to reach into our lives. We never know it until it happens.

It may have happened to you. You didn't see or feel it. But you know when he reached you. You know when he pulled away the things that blinded you to his love and to his salvation. What God did to reach his Son, God is doing for us. God does not want the barriers between us. God wants you in perfect communion with God's eternal glory. During Lent, we need to use that time to open ourselves to the works of God in our lives. It is a time to draw closer, to feel his presence and to prepare ourselves for that moment when God tears open the heavens and reaches us.

As a pastor, I have been honored to sit with good members of the church as they waited to draw their last breath. The rooms were often somber, some were joyful at the home calling of a beloved one. Some were filled with tears. In every situation, I have never seen the sky tearing open yet that is the exact kind of God we have. He was tearing open the sky to get to my dying friend, to bring that person home to his eternal home. God was working. He was tearing the sky. And me, like all the others, we sat unaware. We didn't hear the voice of God. We didn't see or feel the air splitting because that experience was not for us. It was for the saint that laid, drawing their last breath.

As the season of Lent marches on, God is bringing us into a deeper relationship with him. That is if we are seeking it. For too many, Lent begins with a dab of ashes and then hurries toward a basket of candy. Some people may have given up some pleasure as a sign of identifying with Christ's sufferings in the forty days in the wilderness. But Lent is a time when we should be watching the sky. We need to be anticipating the moment when God tears the sky open and reaches deep into our hearts.

God was not finished with his work of tearing. Lent ends at the cross and the resurrection. At the cross there is a wonderful scene that occurs in the temple where the holy of holies is kept. The people were separated from the holy of holies by a thick curtain. The curtain was so heavy it took three hundred priests to carry it. The thickness was that of a man's hand. It was woven like a carpet so it would not tear.

At the end of Christ's journey to the cross, the scripture tells us that when Christ gave up his spirit that this sixty foot high, five inch thick, majestically woven veil was torn. That is the same word as used in today's reading from the gospel of Mark. The veil was torn beginning sixty feet in the air, and ripping down through the entire veil to expose the holy of holies to the people. God was tearing that curtain so he could get to his people and so his people could get to him. Christ's death on the cross was the end of his earthly ministry. To illustrate that Jesus had fulfilled the sacrifice for our sins, God tore the curtain that separated God from God's people. That tearing was seen by thousands.

*Episcopal priest Barbara Brown Taylor explains in her book, Learning to Walk in the Dark: "John of the Cross, Catholic priest & mystic of the 1600's says that the dark night is God's best gift to you, intended for your liberation. It is about freeing you from your ideas about God, your fears about God, your attachment to all the benefits you have been promised for believing in God, your devotion to the spiritual practices that are supposed to make you feel closer to God, your dedication to doing and believing all the right things about God, your positive and negative evaluations of yourself as a believer in God, your tactics for manipulating God, and your sure cures for doubting God."*

These weeks before Good Friday and Easter is a time for you to seek God. God will tear the sky to get to you so you can experience full access to God. On your Lenten journey, be looking up, for God is ripping the sky to bring you closer to God.

Amen.