

“SKY OPENERS”

By

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Text – Genesis 1:1-5 and Mark 1:4-11

I live in Newport News about a block from the James River and about three miles upstream from Huntington Park and the James River Bridge. A Fourth of July night was clear and balmy, moonless and dark, a perfect night for the fireworks which were going to be launched from the park. My son, Dan, and I took folding chairs over to a bluff on the river bank to join others who had gathered with chairs and blankets to watch the display downstream. The fireworks began, and there was a chorus of appreciative ooohs and aaahs with each burst of colorful aerial bombs even though they were far enough away that they looked somewhat diminutive. Invisible in the black sky beyond the bridge a storm cloud moved in, and right in the middle of the fireworks display and almost directly above them that sky was suddenly split by a towering streak of lightning and a fantastic clap of thunder which made those man-made aerial bombs sound like penny firecrackers. All of us who had been ooohing and aaahing let out a cheer and broke into applause. I could almost see God beaming with pride at what had been wrought with a divine flick of the wrist.

In the Bible, when something really important is happening, there is often some kind of aerial display which accompanies the event and calls attention to the fact that it is connected with certain other events.

Take the baptism of Jesus to start with. He goes down into the water of the Jordan. The heavens open up. The Spirit descends upon him, and he hears the voice of God from heaven confirming who he is and what he is. It is a very impressive ceremony.

And then we begin to realize that the water and the Spirit and the voice from heaven remind us of something else. Of course, the creation of the world as recounted in Genesis 1. There was the dark water of chaos. The Spirit hovered over it like a dove. And then God’s voice from heaven said, “Let there be light!” And the whole sky—I mean the *whole* sky!—lit up. It is fascinating. The special effects at the baptism of Jesus have a striking similarity to those at the creation of the world. It is clear that there is a connection.

Then, we jump ahead from creation and see the liberated Israelites at the foot of Mt. Sinai, staring up with wide eyes at the top of the mountain which is shrouded in swirling clouds and is being bombarded by lightning. And Moses, standing there with his arms stretched out like a human lightning rod, hears a voice from heaven outlining the moral law for human life in The Ten Commandments. It is another very impressive ceremony with a voice from heaven. Jesus’ baptism seems to have a connection, not only with the *creation* of life, but with the *law* of life.

At the birth of the one who was later baptized by John, it was a star which stood out against the darkness, not a streak of lightning. But then the sky opens up again, and a chorus of angels the size of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir (or bigger) scares the wits out of surprised shepherds before one of the angels sees what they have done and hastens to comfort and reassure them. “Don’t be afraid. We’ve just come to bring you some really good news.”

The next display *after* Jesus’ baptism is not a happy one. The manger child, the baptized man, the servant rabbi is crucified on Calvary in atonement for human sin. The sky turns black, and the earth quakes in memory of a time when there was no light. And the voice speaks loudly this time, not *from* heaven, but from a cross *toward* heaven, “My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me?” And the partition between heaven and earth splits right down the middle, as the Temple curtain separating the holy from the secular is ripped apart like a stage curtain. Sin is forgiven. Restoration and wholeness are offered. The baptism of Jesus, which has already been connected with the creation of life and the law of life, is now connected with the redemption and reclamation of life.

The body is taken from the cross and buried. Two days of deathly stillness pass. Then the earth begins to rumble with the power of this mighty spirit buried within it, and the great stone rolls away; and then, not long after, about forty days as a matter of fact, the same length of time it took the earth to be destroyed and restored in the days of Noah, the heavens open up again, and the baptized, crucified and resurrected one ascends to the right hand of the Father like some mighty Saturn rocket.

It is a truly breathtaking series of events, and they need to be seen in the mind’s eye the way the biblical writers want us to see them, because what they believe and want us to accept and believe is that these sky-opening events are the crucial events, the truly significant events, for all of human life and history.

For some of us, “The Miracle on 34th Street,” “It’s a Wonderful Life” and “A Christmas Carol” are productions to which we return every year because they help us re-embrace what Christmas is all about. That is what the biblical witnesses want us to do with these life-giving, law-giving, birth-giving, salvation-giving, power-giving, sky-opening events. They want us to do it because we so quickly forget them and so easily fall back into operating as though other events were of ultimate importance.

Listen. What is happening today in Iraq and Afghanistan and Palestine and China and America is important, and it is important that you and I be personally involved in these events, bearing witness to what we believe the principles of justice and righteousness require. The Bible makes it abundantly clear that when one is baptized into the community of God’s people, that person is called to care about God’s world and about what is going on in it. However, what we really need to keep before us are those events which remind us that the world belongs to God the Creator and that the world is being reclaimed by God the Redeemer and that the world is being supported by God the Sustainer.

I am not cynical, as some people seem to be, about the pronouncements of Paul Krugman or George Will or about the prognostications of Sarah Palin or Joe Biden or about the pontifications of Dick Cheney or Al Gore or other politicians and pundits whom you might name. I think they say things that are worth paying attention to. I also think that *they* sometimes think they are talking about events of ultimate significance. If I thought they were, I would feel a heaviness beyond endurance. I do not feel that way, however, because I believe that the events of ultimate significance are the sky openers celebrated in Scripture. What I believe was stated this way by Maltbie Babcock in 1901:

This is my Father's world:
 Oh, let me ne'er forget
 That though the wrong seems oft so strong,
 God is the Ruler yet.

This is my Father's world:
 The battle is not done:
 Jesus who died shall be satisfied,
 And earth and heaven be one.

I believe that Arthur Campbell Ainger was saying what is unequivocally true when he wrote in 1894

God is working His purpose out
 As year succeeds to year:
 God is working His purpose out,
 And the time is drawing near;
 Nearer and nearer draws the time,
 The time that shall surely be,
 When the earth shall be filled with the glory of God
 As the waters cover the sea.

Bring it down to yourself. What is going on in your life right now is important. What is happening in your work is important. If you have taken a severe beating in the stock market, that is important. If your body has developed fuel consumption or transmission problems, or worse, that is important. If you have done some things of which you are ashamed, things which cannot be undone, that is important. If someone you love seems to have gone haywire, that is important. But if *any* of those things is of ultimate importance to you, you are in deep trouble. Any one of them has the capacity for undermining your health, your happiness and your hope. Put a few of them together at the same time, and they have the capacity for destroying you.

When Jesus was baptized, what he knew in his heart was that he was in the hands of the One who created life, that he belonged to One who would always hover over him in loving care, that he would be sustained by One who would see him through even a baptism of pain and death.

You need continually to remember that in your own baptism you were connected up with Christ and that through Christ you are plugged into the love and power of the

creating, guiding, forgiving, restoring, strengthening God of all. You need to remember that your relationship with God in Christ and his relationship with you and with those you love is the ultimate reality of your life. You need to remember the penultimate character of those immediate circumstances which threaten to undo you. Your baptism, which you may tend to view as an event of less than sky-opening importance, is in fact, the most profoundly important event of your life.

And you need to remember that the fate of this world is not going to be determined finally by the nation which wields the most power for destruction or by the cult which has the least regard for life, despite what the self-appointed, fear mongering, so-called realists among us say. It is going to be determined the benevolent and invincible power of Almighty God.

A group of theological students got together regularly for late-afternoon basketball games in the seminary gym. The gymnasium janitor would often remain beyond his working hours to close up when they left. While he waited, he would sit in the bleachers reading his Bible. One day the students were surprised to find that he was reading the last book in the New Testament, *The Revelation to John*, which is one of the most formidable of all of the books of the Bible.

One of the students ventured to ask him, "Do you understand what that book is saying?"

"Sure do," the janitor replied confidently; "It's saying that Jesus wins."

It also means that those who belong to Jesus are winners too. The fireworks at Huntington Park were great. The fireworks over the James River Bridge made them pale by comparison. The immediate circumstances of the world's life and of your life are important and sometimes deeply threatening. They are not of ultimate importance, however. The events of ultimate importance are those sky openers celebrated in Scripture, events in which your life can be rooted and grounded.

PRAYERS OF PEOPLE AND LORD'S PRAYER

Dear God, we know that you care about this world and about the way all human beings, who are your children, conduct our affairs in cities and states and nations. And so we pray for mayors and governors and presidents and kings and for persons who hold power alongside them, that they may resist the temptations which come with power and may exercise power with honesty, humility, wisdom and with freedom from the misguided fear which can hinder them in doing that.

We know that you care about the way all of us here live our lives from day to day. You want us

To be hopeful when things look bleak;

To be patient and kind even with people who irritate us;

To be morally strong in the face of temptation;

Neither to neglect ourselves in an exaggerated concern for others nor to neglect others in an inordinate preoccupation with ourselves.

You want us to work without compulsiveness, to play without guilt and to rest without fidgeting.

And you want us and all people everywhere to know that the only way we human beings can become what you want us to be is by recognizing you as the Maker and Owner of the world,

by obeying you as the Giver and Enforcer of the moral law,
by turning to you as the Source of mercy and forgiveness of sin,
by embracing you as the Dispenser of grace and salvation and
by serving you as the only reliable Guide for life.

Grant, O God, that we may keep always before us those all-important events in our history which reveal to us your way and your will, and in which our lives can be rooted and grounded.

We pray in the name of our baptized, crucified, resurrected and ascended Lord, who taught us to pray: Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever.

Amen.