

Heaven Was Opened

Luke 3:15-22

Have you finished opening? That part of Christmas, for us, has lasted longer than ever this year. We planned a get-together and someone got sick. We planned another get-together and someone else got sick. We finally saw Darla's parents yesterday. And so there were presents to open. They sent some back with us for Stephen and Anne and Hannah and Joe. We delivered the in town ones yesterday afternoon, and will take the others to Webster City this afternoon. Then, I think we will be finished with opening.

God has a history of opening. And I am thinking of several that involve water.

God had delivered His people out of Egypt. They had made it as far as the Red Sea when they realized Pharaoh had changed his mind. Horses pulling chariots full of soldiers were baring down on them. The Israelites were trapped up against the waters of the Red Sea. They thought for sure that they were lost. But God had a plan. He opened a way for them through the waters of the Red Sea so that they walked across while He held back the Egyptian army with the thick cloud of His presence.

Forty years later another body of water presented a problem for them. After so much time spent in the wilderness, they had finally reached the border of the Promised Land. But something was in their way: the Jordan River. At that time of year it was at flood stage. There was no way across ... until God opened a way. God instructed the men who carried the Ark of the Covenant to pick it up and start walking right into the flood waters. They did, and as soon as the feet of the first two touched the water piled up on their right and flowed away on their left so that the Israelites again walked across on dry ground.

Fast forward 1,436 years, and we find ourselves at the Jordan River again. It could be a few years one way or the other, but John the Baptist is there baptizing people. Luke describes it this way: *Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heavens were opened, and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form, like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."*

Matthew adds a brief conversation between John and Jesus as Jesus presents Himself to be baptized. *John would have prevented him saying, I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me? But Jesus answered him, "let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness."*

There is a lot of agreement among the different Christian denominations regarding what Scripture teaches us. One of the few exceptions is baptism. There are five congregations in Manchester that baptize babies. There are three that don't.

For the three that don't, the focus is on the individual's confession of faith – what that person is bringing to baptism. "I believe in Jesus as my Savior, and so I am going to be baptized as a public proclamation that I have been given this gift."

Those of us who do baptize babies, we understand what Scripture says a bit differently. We see it as being about what God is doing through water and His Word, not about what we bring to the font. We believe that all means all. Jesus said, *[M]ake disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.*

In his Pentecost sermon Peter preached, *[B]e baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for who are far off,*

everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself (Acts 2:38-39). He also writes in 1 Peter 3:21, *Baptism now saves you*.

We cling to God's promises about what He is doing in baptism rather than making it about what we are doing. I wonder, though, if we are still a little too focused on ourselves.

The promised gifts we receive in baptism are great! We are given the gift of faith and the forgiveness of sins. We are rescued from death and the devil, and promised eternal salvation. These things are amazing! And what makes them Gospel is that they are for us.

But what if baptism is really more about Jesus? There are two verses, one from Matthew and the other from Colossians, that make me wonder. The Matthew one you already heard about fulfilling all righteousness. The Colossians one says this: *For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities-- all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together* (1:16-17).

[A]ll things were created through him and for him. For Him. At His baptism Jesus was fulfilling all righteousness. He was fully identifying with us and taking on Himself our sin to begin to carry it toward His cross. We are baptized to remove sins. Jesus was baptized to put it on and wear it all the way to His cross. There He would be crushed under its weight. He would be forsaken by His heavenly Father for it. The Father would turn His face away from Jesus, so He can make His face shine on us and be gracious to us.

We make a big deal of Jesus' death and resurrection. It is all about Him and what He has done for us. And that's what makes it Gospel – that He did it for us. He died for sins and rose from

the grave – that's nice. But when we know that He did those things for us, for you, that's when it becomes really good news!

We make a big deal of Jesus' death and resurrection, and rightly so. Maybe we should make a big deal of His baptism too. It was created for Him to fulfill all righteousness. It just so happens that it becomes a big deal for us now, too. Jesus' baptism was the really important one, but that makes ours important also.

It is good to remember that we are baptized. We begin our worship services with a remembrance of baptism as we gather in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Martin Luther strongly encourages every Christian to remember daily our baptism by beginning our day with the sign of the cross and the in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

As you remember your baptism, remember that of Jesus as well. That's when He started carrying your sin. He had you in mind. Already then He was thinking about opening heaven for you. As you remain in your baptismal grace, eternal life with Christ is yours.

Opening Christmas presents is fun, but just think – heaven has been open for you by Jesus! Amen.