### “Heavens Torn Apart” Steve Finlan for The First Church, January 7, 2024

**Mark 1:6–11**

6Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 7He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. 8I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

9 In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 10And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. 11And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

This reading from Mark has John proclaiming that one greater than himself will come, of whom he is unworthy, and who will baptize people with the Holy Spirit. Then Jesus came to John to be baptized in the water, and as he came out, “he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him” (Mark 1:10). Then there is a voice from heaven, saying “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased” (1:11). This same voice will speak over Jesus at the Transfiguration. Hearing the voice of God is a miraculous occurrence. We don’t know if any of the people beside the river saw the Spirit descending and heard the voice speaking. Both Matthew and Mark only say that Jesus himself saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending (Matt 3:16; Mark 1:10). It’s not clear if anyone besides Jesus heard the voice. In the gospel of John, however, John the Baptizer sees the Spirit descend (John 1:32), and hears a voice (whether then or at a later time, we don’t know) telling him that this is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit (1:33). So John, who already knew something about Jesus’ special role, had that knowledge confirmed by a divine voice, according to the Gospel of John.

John the Baptizer has an extraordinary experience, hearing a voice, and seeing the Spirit descend upon Jesus. God granted these experiences to him. We read how the Magi were guided to Judaea to find a promised savior, and how Simeon was alerted by the Holy Spirit to the coming of the Messiah to the temple. Again, God guided certain people to recognize the Messiah.

There have been many real and intense experiences of Spirit messages to people. What about us? Can we receive such messages? Possibly. Usually we only have such experiences if we are at a crucial crossroads in our lives, or even in a serious crisis. It seems that we receive guidance when we most desperately need it, and are actively seeking God’s will. But we need to be careful, and to be ready for the possibility of being misled by imagination, or by the power of suggestion. When we see selfishness and egotism tainting the messages that some people claim to have heard, we have reason to put these down to the power of auto-suggestion. Actual prophecy is fairly rare.

I do believe in the supernatural experience that Jesus and John had when the former was baptized by the latter. It is a key moment at the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry. God takes a hand in publicly affirming Jesus’ mission. The baptism is one of the two events celebrated at Epiphany, the other one being the Magi meeting the Christ child. Epiphany means appearance or manifestation. There was the manifestation of the Spirit at the baptism, and there was the appearance of the Christ child to the first group of Gentiles, the Magi. Both events have been celebrated at Epiphany, which was, technically, yesterday.

How does all this become meaningful for us? What is Epiphany for us? I think we can contemplate this idea of an appearance or manifestation of God, whether in the life of the Messiah or in a spiritual experience that you have. Hold up this idea of today as commemorating an appearance of God, and contemplate how that can be meaningful for you. Is there some event in your life where you felt that God got through to you? Was there a time in your life when you experienced a deep change, when you were saved, or when you got some kind of message from God? Did you have an experience where you recognized Jesus as divine? Do you sometimes find yourself having deep thoughts while you hear the gospel read, or even when you hear a hymn?

I think we, too, are meant to have personal revelations from time to time. God is still speaking. That is a slogan of the United Church of Christ. God is still speaking. Open your hearts and be ready to hear some kind of message from God, even if it is only the whispering of the Spirit, telling you to love or forgive or have faith.

The baptism of Jesus was an extraordinary moment. God marked the beginning of Jesus’ public career with a public recognition of Jesus.

*Our* revelations are bound to be less spectacular than this, but maybe no less special, to us. Has God warmed your heart or spoken to your mind? Treasure the very personal relationship with God that *you* have.