

“Spirit Descending”  
Delivered Sunday, January 8, 2012  
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Mark 1:1-11

“O, that you would tear the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before you! As when fire sets twigs ablaze and causes water to boil, come down to make your name known to your enemies and cause the nations to quake before you!” (Is. 64:1-2)

These are verses from the prophet Isaiah as he laments a godforsakeness that has left the people bereft and vulnerable. The prophet pleads for God to intervene in ways that are dramatic and vindicating. Of course, Isaiah isn’t alone in that lament. The psalms are filled with such pleas; here are a few verses from Psalm 83:

13 Make (my enemies) like tumbleweed, my God,  
like chaff before the wind.

14 As fire consumes the forest  
or a flame sets the mountains ablaze,

15 so pursue them with your tempest  
and terrify them with your storm.

16 Cover their faces with shame, LORD,  
so that they will seek your name.

Such cries for God’s dramatic intervention aren’t confined to Biblical times. Most every believer I know, and even some self-professed non-believers from time to time, cry out to God with such sentiments. I once asked my husband if he wanted me to pray a smiting prayer in regard to one particularly difficult citizen of the fair city he was managing at the time. I imagined that Far Side cartoon with God looking at the image of someone on a screen and then pressing the button that read “smite” on it, a virtual tearing of the heavens that might cause some well deserved quaking. It was rather a satisfying thought, I must admit. My husband, always the nicer of the two of us, declined my offer and told me, “Seriously, we need to pray for him. He has lots of problems.” I hate when he truths me like that. Sometimes I just long for some heaven tearing, mountain quaking, fire and brimstone action from God not directed at me, of course.

“O, that you would tear the heavens and come down, that the mountains would quake and tremble before you...come down to make your name known to your enemies and cause the nations to quake before you! Tear the heavens, God, come down, descend” and kick some ... well, you know. Tear open the heavens and descend and wipe out the wicked and let them know who is boss and that you aren’t going to take it anymore. Tear open the heavens and descend and end poverty and suffering and violence and smite those who perpetuate those things, which of course doesn’t include me. Come on, God, we want some undeniable burning bush, river parting, fire and rain come down from heaven sort of stuff, that way everyone will know you are in charge and you aren’t going to tolerate all this evil anymore and furthermore you are on our side.

And then we come to Mark, in his matter-of-fact brevity he states: Just as Jesus was coming out of the water he saw the heavens being torn apart and the Spirit descending upon him like a dove. What?! First of all, only Jesus sees the heavens being torn apart. We get an inside look, we, thanks to Mark, are voyeurs to this private moment between Father and Son, but no one else gathered sees the heavens torn open. The mountains don't tremble, the water of the River Jordan doesn't boil, no one is quaking, in fact God descends ... as a dove! A dove! A dove is sent out by Noah to see if the waters of the flood have subsided. Dove is one of the pet name the lovers give each other in the Song of Songs. Doves are likened by Isaiah and Ezekiel to God's people when they moan mournfully for their sin and lament their disobedience. Doves are sacrificed in the temple by those like Mary and Joseph who can't afford a more costly offering. Jesus tells his disciples that as they are sent as sheep among wolves and are to be as innocent as doves. What is going on here? Somehow, God's heaven tearing descent isn't what I'd hoped it would be. Far less spectacular and evident than I'd imagined, not nearly as cut and dried as I would have thought appropriate.

O God, tear open the heavens and come down! And God does ... with Jesus, in the form of a dove ... and no one seems to notice ... the dirty, jostling crowd is coming to John and being dunked in the muddy water and one more sinner, they all suppose, comes to him, too. John knows who he is, but at least according to Mark, he says nothing, but puts his arm around his cousin's back and pushes him under, just like all the others, and brings him up and then, like none other, the heavens rip apart, but no one but Jesus sees it, and God descends, like an innocent, vulnerable, surely to be sacrificed, dove. No one else sees or hears a thing ... not yet anyway. Not until Jesus breathes his last and the temple curtain is torn apart do human beings understand that heaven has been torn apart with the coming of Jesus. It is only then that the centurion proclaims, "Surely, this man was the Son of God."

God has torn apart the heavens and come down, the Spirit has descended, like a dove, in the middle of a crowd of sinners and perhaps we'd hoped for something different, something more obvious, something that required much less of us, something that clearly delineated the righteous from the defiled, the winners from the losers, something that didn't call us to delve like a dove into the sinful crowd, too. But in Jesus' baptism, the one without sin consented to be just like the sinners and go down into the muddy waters with them and **that's** when heaven was torn apart and the Spirit descended and God, in declaring at that moment that Jesus is his beloved Son, with whom he is well pleased is telling us: if you want to see me intervene, here is where you look. Look for me in the crowd of needy sinners, **of which you are a part**. Look for me where innocents are sacrificed, and where people mourn their disobedience and repent. Look for me where foolish, embarrassing, love is expressed. Look for me where my people dutifully offer their best, whatever it is, to me. Look for the chasm between heaven and earth to be bridged by the cross and in the graveyard of the empty tomb. Look for heaven and earth to touch in foot washing and in feeding, not in vengeance and destruction. If you truly want to find me, those are the places you'll go, those are the things you will do, and **that's** where the Spirit will descend upon you, too.

God has torn apart the heavens and come down, not to smite, but to save ... the beginning of the good news ... to the sinful masses who may not know it yet but surely will ... when they gather around a table and hear Jesus say, "This is my body, broken for you" and through the power of the Spirit they are lifted into the presence of the ascended Christ and know that the chasm between heaven and earth has been bridged, by God's beloved Son, the one who received the dove-like Spirit, and was sacrificed for our sake.

Amen.