

Narrative Lectionary, The Beginning of the Good News, December 29, 2019

Always at the end of a year, it's interesting to remember back on some of the news events of the year. Instead of making a list of political events, here is a list of scientific breakthroughs:

-A drug combination approved in the United States this year aims to turn cystic fibrosis from a progressively damaging lung disease into a manageable chronic illness for most patients. That is great news for a number of patients and their families.

- A team of physicists claimed its rudimentary quantum computer performed a calculation in 200 seconds that would overwhelm a conventional supercomputer, an achievement known as quantum supremacy. Things will continue to get faster with our technology.

- This year, an artificial intelligence system beat professional poker players in thousands of six-hand poker games called no-limit Texas Hold 'Em, a vastly more complex challenge than the two-person games it had been playing. I'm not sure what that will mean at Spirit Mountain Casino or Ilani. But these were all breakthroughs that will have real ramifications in the world.

Mark the Gospel writer says that the day Jesus was baptized, there was a "breakthrough" in the world. The heavens were torn apart, and the Spirit came down on Jesus like a dove, and the world has never been the same. The ramifications continue. That's different language than in Matthew and Luke's account of the baptism, by the way. Those gospel writers say that when Jesus came out of the water after his baptism, the heavens were "opened" to him. Not very dramatic. When a door opens and then closes, we don't see much difference afterwards around the doorframe, do we?

Mark says the heavens were torn apart when the Spirit came upon Jesus and he began his ministry. When something is torn apart, it's hard to put back together in the same way. When something is torn apart, there are jagged edges that don't fit together anymore. When a child on Christmas morning tears apart the wrapping paper on a gift, it would be difficult to smooth it down and use it again next Christmas.

When Mark says the heavens were torn apart, he uses the Greek word *schizo*, from which we get the word schism, a very harsh division, and schizophrenic, where there is a division in a person's mental condition. Mark says that when Jesus is baptized in the muddy waters of the Jordan River by John, everything changes! God is tearing open the heavens to reach us in a new way. The baptism of Jesus is the beginning of his ministry; it is his commissioning service; it is God saying to Jesus, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." (Mark 1:11)

Apparently God needs to tear things open to get our attention. Later in Mark's Gospel, after Jesus has done healing miracles and fed lots of people and cleansed people of demons, the disciples still don't seem to get it. And he says to them: Do you still not

perceive or understand? Do you have ears and fail to hear? Do you have eyes and fail to see? (Mark 8:18) And at the end of the Gospel, they are falling asleep when he is asking them to stay awake and pray with him for a while.

We followers of Jesus have a hard time staying with him. We have ears and do not hear. We have eyes and do not see. Jesus heads off in this direction in our world, and we want to be over here where it's more comfortable. Jesus is over here with the people on the edges, and I'm over here making judgments about them. Jesus is taking risks to stand up to power, and I get complacent in the way things are. Jesus is calling us to be born again every day, and we get used to our habits and lifestyles and character faults, and say, Well, that's just the way I am. God tears open the heavens at Jesus' baptism, and sometimes something needs to tear apart in our lives for God to get our attention. We have ears that do not hear and eyes that do not see.

Some years ago I read the story of Gerard Straub, and how the heavens were opened one day. Straub was a TV producer of soap operas for many years. He was making tons of money, but he wasn't really happy. He walked into a church in Rome some years ago and sat down and picked up a prayer book and read Psalm 63. Psalm 63 says: O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you...I will lift up my hands and call on your name....He was reading his story in Psalm 63! Let me tell this in his own words: "Something happened. I just felt this presence of God. I just was overwhelmed by this sense of love. And then I remember getting up, and I bowed before the crucifix in the tabernacle and just, like, electricity went through my body." I might say, the heavens were torn apart for him.

He went from being an atheist to being a pilgrim, and God called him to identify with Christ in the poorest and least among us. That's where he recognized Jesus. His core belief is that to get close to God, you must first get close to the poor. He began a ministry to the poor in this world, and he realized that instead of making daytime soaps, he would begin photographing and filming the plight of poor people around the world. He never just began filming people, he developed relationships with them, he heard their story. This is what he says: "I think it's immoral that people are starving to death. I think it's immoral that so many people are living on the streets. I think it's immoral that our lives are so centered on acquiring more things when quite clearly the gospel has a totally different message. It's about caring for each other."

He started a ministry of service to people on Los Angeles' Skid Row. He says: The amazing thing about being on Skid Row was to learn just how many women and children were living on the streets. How many people that were not alcoholics, that were not drug addicts, that the bottom simply fell out. I mean, you began to see how many people are just a paycheck or two away from having nothing."

He used to make \$10,000 a week; he now makes about \$300 a week. At the time of this interview, he was about to lose his home, because he puts all his money into making films so that people can hear the story of the poor. Here's how he ended the interview:

“I’ve never been so fulfilled in my entire life. I didn’t want to just make a living; I wanted to make a difference.”

Sometimes our world gets torn apart, and that’s when God’s light can find a way to get through! And what is the message that God wants to get through to us? “You are my child; with you I am well pleased, and I’ve got a job for you to do!”

I don’t think we believe that sometimes. That would be true of Jesus, of course. God’s voice from heaven says to Jesus, You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased. Of course God would be pleased with Jesus.

But would God say to us, With you I am well pleased? We aren’t the people we are supposed to be. We don’t meet God’s expectations. We haven’t loved God with our whole heart, and we certainly haven’t loved our neighbors as ourselves. Why would God be well pleased with us? But in our baptism, we are made a new creation! We are buried and rise again to new life in Christ.

Our baptism is the beginning of a whole new creation! And as we remember our baptism daily, the new life of Christ is formed in us. We are forgiven, we are offered a new way to walk; we are given Holy Spirit power to walk a new way.

God can take whatever parts of us that have been torn apart, and shine through those events to help bring healing. And we can help bring healing to the world.

Ralf Fiennes, the actor, was interviewed in Parade Magazine a number of years ago, after he acted in the movie *The English Patient*. The interviewer asked, "Don't fame and success isolate you from what you were before and those you loved?"

Listen to what Fiennes said, and I don’t know if he’s a Christian or not, but I believe what he says about love is Christian. "Success?" Fiennes gave the interviewer a withering look. "Well, I don't know quite what you mean by success. Material success? Worldly success? Personal, emotional success? The people I consider successful are so because of how they handle their responsibilities to other people, how they approach the future, people who have a full sense of the value of their life and what they want to do with it.

“I call people 'successful' not because they have money or their business is doing well but because, as human beings, they have a fully developed sense of being alive and engaged in a lifetime task of collaboration with other human beings -their mothers and fathers, their family, their friends, their loved ones, the friends who are dying, the friends who are being born.

"Success?" he repeated emphatically. “Don't you know it is all about being able to extend love to people? Really. Not in a big, capital-letter sense but in the everyday. Little by little, task by task, gesture by gesture, word by word.”

God called Gerard Straub to make a difference in a way only he can. We don't have to be him. But God calls us to be us. God calls us to make a difference in our world for the sake of the Gospel. The church doesn't exist for ourselves; we exist to love and bless and serve the world.

Jesus at the end of this reading calls out to some fishermen, and says, Come follow me. And he says to them, I will make you fish for people. One of my questions is, In a world that is always marketing something, in a world that is pluralistic, what does it look like to invite people into a closer relationship with the God we know in Jesus? In his book, *Blue Like Jazz*, Portland writer Donald Miller tells the story of a Reed College student he knew named Penny. She spent her sophomore year in France. Penny was someone who perceived her life as having been incredibly painful. Her parents had been hippies; they had lived on a commune; they had experimented with drugs. Her mom had been stoned when she gave birth to Penny. They moved away from the commune to Florida, where her mom and dad worked on boats.

But her mother became delusional, and was diagnosed as paranoid schizophrenic when Penny was a child. Her parents divorced when Penny was eleven, and she lived with her dad. Her mom lives on the streets of Seattle, and won't even talk to her when Penny calls the shelter.

There was another Reed student in France named Nadine, with a totally different background. Nadine's mother had been raised in a diplomat's family, with a driver, a cook, a butler, a nanny. And Nadine was raised in a very well-to-do family with the material benefits that wealth can provide.

They became friends, and Nadine listened very lovingly to the story of Penny's life. One night, walking on the beach, Nadine shared with Penny that she was a Christian. She described Jesus as a revolutionary, a kind of humanitarian, sent from God to a world living with pain. And Penny was frustrated that someone this nice would be connected with a religion that had brought the Crusades and the religious television that she hated. Here's how Penny tells the story:

"Nadine and I would sit for hours in her room. Mostly, we would talk about boys or school, but always, by the end, we talked about God. The thing I liked about Nadine was that I never felt like she was selling anything. She would talk about God as if she knew him, as if she had talked to him on the phone that day. She was never ashamed, which is the thing with some Christians I had encountered. They felt like they had to sell God, as if he were soap or a vacuum cleaner; it's like they really weren't listening to me; they didn't care. They just wanted me to buy their product. I came to realize I had come to judge all Christians on the personalities of a few Christians. I didn't have a category for Nadine. She believed that God liked her. I thought that was beautiful.

"And more than that, her faith was a humanitarian thing that was convicting. I was really freaked out, because I wanted to be good, but I wasn't. I was selfish, and Nadine, well, she was pretty good. I mean, she wasn't selfish. So she asked me if I wanted to read

through the Gospel of Matthew with her, and in fact I did. I wanted to see if this whole Jesus thing was real. I still had serious issues with Jesus, though, only because I associated him with Christianity, and there was no way I would ever call myself a Christian. But I figured I would see for myself. So told her yes.

“We would eat chocolates, and smoke cigarettes, and read the Bible, which is the only way to do it, if you ask me. The Bible is so good with chocolate. I always thought the Bible was more of a salad thing, but it isn’t, it’s a chocolate thing. We started reading through Matthew, and I found it all very interesting, you know. I found Jesus very disturbing, very straightforward. He wasn’t diplomatic, yet I felt like if I met him, he would really like me.

“I kept identifying with all the people he loved, which was really good, because they were all the people who saw themselves as broken.” One night, about a month later, sitting in her dorm room alone, she turned her life over to God. As I might frame it, she awoke to the Christ who was already within her. And it was through the love and support and care of a Christian friend who showed her the love of God in her own life, and showed her the way of Jesus.

Jesus told his first followers, Follow me, and I will make you fish for people. As we think about what it might look like to share our faith with someone else, note two things in this story: Nadine was simply being herself. She didn’t try to act differently around her friend. She wasn’t trying to sell anything. And the second thing is: she met Penny where she was. She listened to her story. She explored the questions Penny had. She really loved her into the faith.

Jesus says to us, I will help you to fish for people. In this era when many people seem turned off by what they believe is Christianity, sharing our faith starts with listening to people’s stories, and being authentic in sharing the story that we have. Sometimes that might mean sharing some of the questions we have, admitting that we don’t have all the answers. Maybe it will mean inviting an unchurched friend to our series on climate change in January, so they see that yes, we Christians are concerned about real issues affecting our world. Who are the people we could be praying for, that there might be openness in a conversation? Who are the people this coming year with whom we might be listening for that place where God’s love and acceptance might be balm to their spirit?

Remember, we are called to be witnesses, not judges. We are called to simply share what we know, without judgment, and to leave the results up to the Holy Spirit. By the way, we are going to spend the next three months in Mark’s Gospel discovering more of what it means to follow Jesus. Amen.