

Are the heavens still torn apart? (*Genesis 9:8-17; Mark 1:9-15; Lent 1B*)

From where I'm sitting in 2021, it seems like maybe they are.

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“You all may not realize it, but my son is going to die today.”

Many years ago, a former seminary professor of mine preached at the service where his own son would be baptized, and he opted for this jarring opening. He went on: “Oh, and he’s going to be brought back to life, and it will happen so fast that we won’t even be able to tell what’s happened. But be very sure, he will cease to exist under the powers of this world, and will be transformed to a new and different kind of existence.”

This sermon from Stan Saunders appears in his book *Word on the Street*, co-written with Chuck Campbell. I can’t recall which Gospel story was the accompanying text, but my money’s on Mark. Mark’s is the most blunt and unsentimental: after Jesus’ baptism, the curtain of the heavens is “torn apart,” not simply “opened” as in Matthew and Luke. And only in Mark is the baptism followed “immediately” by Jesus’ grueling 40-day trial in the wilderness.

I’m so intrigued by the image of the heavens’ being torn in two at Jesus’ baptism, through which the Spirit descends on Jesus. What happens to the skies following that theophany? Does the rip in the heavens get put back together? Is it all sewn up and fixed, pristine as before? Does it heal like a wound, perhaps leaving behind a scar?

I like to think that the gash in the heavens remained. From where I sit in early 2021, it feels more honest, after what we've all been through, to have it not neatly repaired but still in ragged pieces. I imagine such a sight would provide a strange comfort to Jesus. Perhaps during the trying moments of his life, he could look up and see the skies rent apart and remember his time in the wilderness, remember that God's heart wept enough over the state of the world that God poured the divine Spirit into human form and called that humanness beloved. Perhaps Jesus could see that sight and remember the words that came pouring from the sky on that baptismal day.

It wouldn't be the first time the heavens provided a potent reminder. In the text from Genesis, God makes a promise to Noah and to creation following a flood that destroys the earth. "Never again," God says. "I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant."

Rainbows are rare and beautiful events, and it's hard not to think about God's promises when we see one. But notice: the rainbow is not intended to be a covenant reminder for *us*. It is a sign for *God*. "When the bow is in the clouds, I [God] will see it and remember." God says this twice, in different ways, in the story. God is the initiator of the covenant, and God provides a self-reminder.

As Terence Fretheim writes, "The covenant will be as good as God is. God establishes it in goodness and love and upholds it in faithfulness. It will never need to be renewed; it stands forever, regardless of what people do. Humans can just rest in the arms of this promise."

But rainbows don't reveal themselves on pure, clear-weather days. They require just the right combination of sunlight and rain droplets for the proper refraction to occur. It's a meteorological as well as a spiritual truth: the promises of God are empty platitudes without a backdrop of challenge, adversity, even despair. Just as Jesus' baptism is punctuated by a tear in the heavenly curtain, the covenant of God stands in the midst of a world that is still not as it should be. Given what so many of us have been through in recent times, that is comfort indeed.