

(Need cloth to be torn into two pieces)

If I take a piece of cloth like this and rip it in half (rip cloth) you'll all agree that I've done irreparable damage to it. It could be sewn back together, but even an expert seamstress couldn't hide the seam that would show. There's no undoing what has been done. Restoration isn't possible.

You'll remember that the gospels tell us that at the time of Jesus' death the curtain in the temple is torn in two. That curtain was the large cloth that separated the innermost sanctuary, the "Holy of Holies" from the outer main sanctuary. God's presence was believed to more fully dwell in that innermost sanctuary than any place else in the world. No one knows what the tearing of that curtain is meant to convey - some suggest it is God leaving the temple, or an end to the separation between God and humans. Some suggest it prefigures the destruction of the temple some 40 years later. Whatever the case, ripping that curtain does irreparable damage.

That same word for ripping the curtain also shows up in our gospel reading for today. Just as Jesus is coming up out of the water at his baptism we are told that the heavens were "torn apart" or more literally "ripped apart". I'm sure our gospel writer Mark wants us to draw parallels between the ripping of the sky at Jesus' baptism and the ripping of the temple curtain at his death.

Exactly what happened, or how to imagine the heavens - or the sky - being ripped in half is impossible to say. Whatever we imagine, our gospel text does not let us think of this as a peaceful scene. And indeed there are numerous parallels to Jesus' death. Something is torn in both cases. At Jesus baptism the Holy Spirit descends into him like a dove - or more literally a pigeon. And yes, I said it descends *into* him, not *on* him. Our translators tend to soften the text here because the raw Greek is pretty extreme. This is not a peaceful dove gently descending from on high. I imagine a scene worthy of a Bugs Bunny cartoon. The sky is ripped from one horizon to the other. A pigeon comes rocketing through that rip at some breakneck speed and slams so uncontrollably against Jesus that it blasts right into him. Then a voice says "You are my Son, the Beloved..."

What happens at the crucifixion? The temple curtain is completely ripped from top to bottom, Jesus screams out some incomprehensible sound, and he breathes his last; again literally in Greek he "ex-Spirits". And the centurion's voice says, "Truly this man was God's Son!"

Neither scene is peaceful. Sometimes people say I wish things were the way they were in Bible times. And I want to say, "Do you know what our insurance rates would be if every time we had a baptism this sanctuary's roof was ripped in half?"

The thing I want to focus on from our gospel reading is this irreversible ripping of the sky. There's no closing this again, no going back. God has acted and the world forever holds the scar.

Wouldn't it be cool if there actually was a permanent atmospheric disruption over the Jordan River! Maybe we'd find one if they'd ever stop throwing bombs at each other!

But that's just it - I'm only being half sarcastic. How do we usually handle an aggression? We fight back. Someone drops a bomb our way and we send one their way. Why do we do it? If you don't fight back - if you don't defend yourself someone will take even more.

One thing I am certain of between Israelis and Palestinians. If one side ever stops fighting, or runs out of resources to keep fighting, that side is going to lose. It may not happen right away, but it will happen. Slowly, over time one concession will lead to another and then another and then another. And eventually that side will cease to exist.

That is the way of the world. It goes for politics. It goes for business. It even goes for many personal relationships. We may want it to be different but only by the help of God will it ever stop.

I believe a similar endless pattern also went for relationships between people and God, although this was a religious one. People believed that if they were good and righteous God would like them. If God liked them then God would

bless them and life would be good. If they weren't good God wouldn't like them and life would be bad. Goodness or badness may not come right away. Indeed it may take a while, but in time it will come. Think of it in terms of the Hindu idea of good karma and bad karma. Eventually your goodness or your evil will catch up to you. That is the way of the universe. You get what's coming to you; and if not in this lifetime, then in eternal life.

That is until God rips an irreversible hole across the sky!

At the beginning of Jesus' public ministry God changes the rules we all live by. It's no longer merit, but grace. It's no longer living in a way so that God is happy with you, but living knowing that God is already happy with you. If you're good at being good, like the religious people were in Jesus' day, you don't like this new system. If you're like most people and you're not good at being good, this is good news!

God does not like being in the sin-accounting business with us. God has ripped up that way of working and simply invited everyone to be part of his family. God ends the endless cycle

of trying to earn God's favor and then God doing us favors in return.

There's no going back to the old ways. Just like a rip is irreversible so is God's new way of acting. God will not try to put the old way back together again. That is God's promise, God's self-created limitations for our benefit.

So here's our challenge: This new way of living doesn't really fit what we experience in the world. We live every day where actions have consequences: Don't brush your teeth and you'll get cavities. Save money wisely and you'll be well off. But where God is concerned all expectations are off.

That's unnerving. It leaves us having no control and we don't like that. Isn't it ironic? God does something nice for us and we don't like it. God gives us grace - unearned value - and we desperately want to get back under the old merit system.

The deeply hard thing to believe about our gospel reading is not whether or not those events actually happened that way.

It is that God really has created a new way of relating to the world.

Let me wrap up all of this with a glimpse at our first reading from Genesis. Genesis 1 is the first of two creation accounts in the Bible. In it God creates stability and order out of chaos. You know how it goes - with each day, with each step, there is greater sophistication to life and the world gets better. Humans then become the crowning glory of creation. But if in the gospel reading God rips the sky open - the Bible's fundamental barrier between order and chaos - then will chaos break back in?

A lot of church doctrines are hard to believe, but this truth is the hardest:

Do you trust God?

By your own logic and power you can create some order to your life - but grace can look like chaos. Do you trust God's grace in the chaos?

These are hard things. I don't think any of us ever really get there; which is what makes grace all the more important.

God gets us there when we can't. Amen