The baptism of Jesus was every bit as significant an event. Mark records that when Jesus came up, out of the water, three things occurred: heaven is torn open, the Holy Spirit descends as a dove, and God’s voice is heard claiming Jesus as a beloved Son with whom God is well pleased.

I want to look at these in reverse order. When Jesus is baptized, God announces to the world that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah, the Anointed One whom God promised would set God’s people free from sin and death. This acknowledgment is sealed by the presence of God’s Holy Spirit, descending as a dove, to mark Jesus as special, beloved, and commissioned by God.

Lastly – or firstly – Mark says that Jesus saw “the heavens torn apart” at his baptism. Various translations of the Bible say it differently: heaven is rent asunder, ripped open, split apart, broken open, torn open, or parted. The actual words matter less than the sentiment they convey: with the baptism of Jesus, heaven is irrevocably altered, and the world will never be the same. What started at Jesus’ baptism could not be stopped or undone. God’s ultimate purpose to restore creation begins when Jesus came up out of the waters of the Jordan.

I love the idea of heaven being torn open and God let loose on the world. Even more, I love the idea that when heaven is torn open we have unlimited access to God! If the fabric of heaven is torn open, it can never be shut up again. Like a split pair of trousers, or a shredded piece of paper, or a torn ligament what is broken can never again be what it once was; it may be patched or mended or glued, but it is fundamentally changed. Forever. In this case, when Jesus received his baptism, God drew near, and the Kingdom of God began, and nothing could stop it or shut it up in heaven again.

It turns out, this is not the only time the Bible speaks of heaven being torn open. This is one of a dozen references to the rending of heaven signifying the launch of some divine initiative. In Genesis 7:11, in the time of Noah, “the windows of the heavens were opened” and the floods came and wiped clean the earth. By this rending of heaven, God re-started creation with Noah and his family and the animals.

In Exodus 19:11 at Mt. Sinai, thunder and lightning split the sky as God descended to give the Ten Commandments to the Hebrew people. By this rending of heaven, God transformed a rabble of slaves into the nation of Israel, the people of God.

In Isaiah 64:1, the people of Israel cry out to God, begging God to “tear open the heavens and come down” and save them from their enemies. The nation of Israel is besieged and will soon fall, her enemies will take the people into exile and God will be silent for generations. By this rending of heaven, the people hope to draw God down to protect them.

In Ezekiel 1:1, God’s people are in exile, overrun by enemies as punishment for disobedience against God. The prophet sees visions of God’s preferred and promised future for God’s people: a future where they are restored, forgiven, made whole. By this rending of heaven God gives hope to God’s people, assuring them that God is near, and they are not lost.

In Malachi 3:10, God challenges the people to be faithful and to bring their full tithe into God’s house so that the “windows of heaven” will be opened and God’s blessing will pour down upon the people. By this rending of heaven, God promises to provide for God’s people.

In John 1:51, Jesus tells Nathanael that he will see “heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.” By this rending of heaven, God offers Jesus as our mediator, providing access to God.

In Acts 7:56, Stephen sees a vision of heaven opened and “the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” By this rending of heaven, God give further proof that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God.

In the Revelation of John, the apostle looks and sees heaven as “a door stood open” (4:1). He hears a voice inviting him to come up and into heaven, that he might see God’s plan for the restoration of the world. Later, John sees “heaven opened” and a white horse with a rider called Faithful and True coming to judge the world and to establish God’s eternal kingdom (19:11). By this rending of heaven, God shows that the world, with all its trials and tribulations, is not how things will always be: God, in Christ, is making all things new.

Which leaves Matthew 27:51, which is a little different from the others in that it doesn’t specifically say that it is heaven which is torn open. When Jesus dies on the cross, the heavy fabric of the temple curtain is torn in two. This curtain hung at the center of the Temple in Jerusalem, across the door to the Holy of Holies where God resided among God’s people. God allowed no one access to God’s person, except once each year when the High Priest faced God to make intercessions for the sins of the people. Now this curtain is torn, rent from top to bottom, never to be repaired. Once again, this time by the death of Jesus, God is let loose on the world, and the world gains access to God. By Jesus death and resurrection, heaven is opened for us and eternal life is assured for all people, forevermore.

So, as you can see, heaven being opened is a pretty big deal. The baptism of Jesus marked the beginning of God’s Kingdom on earth. God came in human form to begin the transformation of the world, and what God began, God will bring to completion, for the God who promises is faithful. As we gather at the communion table, we are reminded that because Jesus died and rose again, heaven is forever opened to us, God is always near to us, and God’s Spirit dwells within us.

I threw a lot of words and ideas at you this morning, but all you really need to remember is this: “In AD 33, Jesus died and rose for me.”

Prayer: O God, your only-begotten Son has appeared in human flesh; grant that he, whose outward form is like our own, may reshape us inwardly by his grace. We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God forever and ever. Amen.

**Heaven Opened**

Baptism of the Lord Sunday, January 7, 2018 Mark 1:9-13

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN Isaiah 64:1-9

There are some events that are so significant, so momentous, so traumatic that we can remember exactly where we were and what we were doing when we heard about them. The attack on Pearl Harbor, December 7, 1941. The assassination of President John F. Kennedy, November 22, 1963. The terror attacks on the World Trade Centers, September 11, 2001.

There are some dates so pivotal that we committ them to rhyme so as not to forget:

* The Magna Carta: “In 1215 at Runnymede (doo-dah, doo-dah), the nobles and the king agreed (o-the-doo-dah-day).”
* Columbus sails: “In fourteen hundred ninety-two Columbus sailed the ocean blue.”
* Boston Tea Party: “In 17 and 73, the Patriots dumped lots of tea.”
* “The Constitution was signed in 1787 with the Bill of Rights, one less than eleven.”
* The fall of the Berlin Wall: “In 1989, Berlin erased the line.”

Then, there are other special events, less historic perhaps but no less important personally: graduations, weddings, the birth of children. But the one special event that most of us do not remember is our baptism. Many of us received our baptism as infants or young children. My Grandfather, a Presbyterian minister, baptized me when I was just a few months old. I’ve seen the pictures. I’ve heard the stories. But I do not remember my baptism.

Which is sad, really, because baptism is an event filled with meaning. Baptism is the moment when someone gives their life to Christ, pledges to be his disciple, and begins to live as the child God created them to be. Some faith traditions deem baptism so pivotal an event that they will only allow adults to be baptized so that they may profess their faith and then remember when and where their life changed course.