

"OPENING UP HEAVEN"

A Sermon By

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INTRODUCTION

This morning's Scripture reading deals with the baptism of Jesus.

I came across a story recently about a machinist with the Ford Motor Company in Detroit who had, over a period of years, "borrowed" various parts and tools from the company which he had not bothered to return. While this practice was not condoned, it was more or less accepted by management and nothing was done about it. The machinist, however, experienced a Christian conversion. He was baptized and became a devout believer. He took his baptism and his vows quite seriously.

The very next morning, he arrived at work loaded down with all the tools and the parts he had "taken" from the company across the years. He explained the situation to his foreman, and added that he'd never really meant to steal them...just borrow them...and hoped he'd be forgiven.

The foreman was so astonished and impressed by the man's action that he cabled Mr. Ford himself who was off visiting a European plant, and explained the entire event in detail. Immediately Mr. Ford cabled back,

"Dam up the Detroit River and baptize the entire city!"

We could only hope that every Christian takes his or her baptism that seriously!

DEVELOPMENT

This morning, however, we want to narrow our focus and to concentrate on one aspect of this great event of the baptism of Jesus as it's recorded for us in Luke's Gospel. We read in chapter three:

"Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus Himself had also been baptized, and WAS PRAYING, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon Him in bodily form - as a dove - and a voice came from heaven, 'Thou art my Beloved Son; with Thee I am well pleased.'"

Please note those important words. After Jesus' baptism He was praying and the heaven was opened, the Spirit descended and the voice was heard, "Thou art My Beloved Son". As we approach another Lenten Season, it would be good for us to deal with the subject of prayer. Was it not entirely natural that Jesus, immediately following His baptism, should pray? Prayer played a major role in His entire ministry. Here He was...the very manifestation of God here on earth....and yet He felt the need to be in continuous communication with God, the Father. Contrast His example with the practice of many of us. We have a very limited acquaintance with the Father and yet we spend only a nominal time in prayer.

When Sally in the Peanuts strip was called on in Sunday School to lead her class in prayer, she used the only prayer she knew. "Now I lay us down to sleep..." Who knows, maybe her prayer was a commentary on the Sunday School class. It's more likely, however, that we see here revealed the attitude that many of us have about prayer and that is that prayer is not really that important. No wonder we so rarely experience the "opening of heaven" and the descent of the Holy Spirit in all of its power and mystery and peace.

Herb Miller, in one of his books, tells of a student work director at a large University who was giving his guest speaker a tour of the campus ministry building. As they walked down a hallway, the guest saw a sign marked, "Prayer Room" over a doorway. As they moved past, it became obvious that the director didn't intend to show him that room. Curious, the speaker reached for the knob. His nostrils were assaulted by a musty smell. The room was stuffed with boxes, boots, clothes hangers and junk. On the little altar stood a pair of worn cowboy boots, an old Gilby's Vodka box, and a roll of toilet tissue. A bit embarrassed, the director quickly explained, "We used this for a storage room during the Summer break and just haven't gotten it cleaned out yet."

At first it seemed like a sacreligious thing to the visitor...stacking a prayer room full of junk. But then he realized that the room was a pretty good parable of his own life. He was so busy travelling around the country speaking and doing things....good things...he had lost the habit of praying. The time he had formerly spent talking with God each day was now crowded full of other things.

I'd venture to say that something like that has happened to many of us! We are so busy that we have crowded out the one necessity for a truly successful life. Jesus never let that happen. After He was baptized, He was praying and what happened? We read that "the heaven opened". What an exciting statement.

WE PRAYED Charles L. Allen in his book, God's Seven Wonders For You, recounts Captain Eddie Rickenbacker's story of three awful weeks on a little raft lost in the far Pacific in World War II. When asked how they were able to endure that experience, his answer was simply, "We prayed".

For days they had drifted helplessly under that scorching tropical sun. The heat, the hunger, the exhaustion brought Rickenbacker and his young, inexperienced crew to the breaking point. But Eddie Rickenbacker believed in prayer.

And the heaven opened. However, this time it was not a dove but a sea gull that descended from the heavens. A sea gull flew in from nowhere and landed on Rickenbacker's head. They had food. Also, they had bait for the two fishhooks they had. Then came their first rainstorm, and they had water. The survivors were sustained and their hopes renewed by that lone sea gull, out there in the ocean...hundreds of miles from any land.

Miraculously, nearly two weeks later they were spotted and rescued. Rickenbacker's explanation offered in two words, "We prayed".

And another story of how prayer made a difference. Sister Elizabeth Kenny was called to the bedside of a seven year old girl who lived in the bush country of Australia. The girl had extreme pain, a high fever, and the muscles of her leg and foot were contracted. Sister Kenny did not recognize the symptoms and so she sent a rider to the telegraph station 20 miles away to get expert advice over the telegraph wires. Finally, back came the reply,

"The symptoms you describe indicate infantile paralysis.
There is no known cure. Do the best you can."

Out of the necessity Sister Kenny devised an unique program of treatment for this dread disease - a program that has benefitted hundreds of thousands of

polio victims. She was asked, "What did you do first? Did you tear up a blanket for the hot packs?" "No" Sister Kenny replied, "The first thing I did was to kneel down and say a prayer".

WHAT HAPPENS? What happens when we pray? It's as if "the heavens open".
And the Holy Spirit descends in its power and mystery and peace...and our lives are touched...changed...sustained.

In the north of England they have been digging coal for over a century. The miners go miles and miles away from the central shaft, out under the North Sea...so there is always the danger of men getting lost. I once crawled on my hands and knees about a mile in one of those dark tunnels. On one particular day two miners did lose their way. Their lights finally went out and they were in danger of losing their lives. After wandering around in the darkness for a long time, they sat down and one of them said,

"Let us sit perfectly still and see if we can feel the way in which the air is moving because it always moves toward the shaft".

They sat there for a long time...when suddenly one of them felt a slight touch of air on his cheek. Up he sprang to his feet, exclaiming, "I felt it". They went slowly in the direction in which the air was moving and reached the central shaft and freedom from their dark captivity in that tunnel. We also need to feel the movement of the air, do we not? We need to experience the gentle touch of the wind of God's spirit on our hearts...and respond and follow.

Emil Brunner, the great theologian, once put it this way:

"As children - lost in a woods - are fearful of the sinister darkness....and then, suddenly, hearing a sound from the somber blackness, a familiar voice, a loving, seeking, helping voice, their mother's voice - so prayer is our reply to the voice from the Word of God in Jesus Christ which suddenly cries out to us in the mysterious, dark universe.

He calls us...seeks us...wants to bring us to Himself.
'Where are you, my child?' Our prayer means, 'Here I am, Father...I was afraid until you called. Since You have spoken, I am afraid no longer. Come, I am waiting for you. Take me. Lead me by the hand through the dark, terrifying world'".

"Let inward prayer be your last act before you fall asleep and the first act when you awake" Thomas Kelly wrote, "And in time you will find as did Brother Lawrence, that 'those who have the gale of the Holy Spirit go forward even in sleep'".

WHAT HAPPENS? WE DISCOVER WHO WE ARE! What happens when we pray? Yes,
the heaven opens. The Spirit
descends. And we discover who we are. "A voice came from heaven, 'Thou art My beloved Son'. 'With Thee I am well pleased.'"

We all need to know who we are. I like Morris Bishop's little poem, entitled The Perforated Spirit. Let me read it to you.

"The fellows up in Personnel,
Thy have a set of cards on me.
The sprinkled perforations tell
My individuality.
And what am I? I am a chart
Upon the cards of IBM.
The secret places of the heart
Have little secrecy for them.
Monday my brain began to buzz,
I was in agony all night.
I found out what the trouble was -
They had a paper clip too tight."

Remember that closing, moving scene in that movie of a year ago, The Empire of the Sun. Let me try to reconstruct that scene for you. In the weeks that followed the end of World War II in August of 1945, there were children from the West in China who had been separated from their families back in 1940 when the Japanese had gone into China...separated from their homes, their friends, their mothers and fathers. Boys and girls totally separated from their origins.

The provisional government got word out that all families who had relatives missing in action or children who had been separated from their parents should come to a certain location on an appointed day. For this occasion, a large area in the out-of-doors was selected. With the families...the mothers and fathers...gathered around that large area, the children were brought out one by one in the hope that somebody would recognize them...and be reunited with their loved ones. And many of them were...including the boy who was the main character in the movie.

We all need to know who we are. We need to know that our lives matter. We need to be told that we are loved.

It is written that when the ancient Greeks built their little ships, in a formal ceremony, they erected the mast. Always underneath the mast, the ship-builders placed a gold coin, so that even when the ship was wrecked there would always be something of value left hidden down their under the mast, deep under the darkness of the sea. The gold coin within each of us is the knowledge that we are God's own children. Never forget it.

I think this is what Wendell Phillips meant when - after hearing a moving sermon by Lyman Beecher, "You Belong to God" went home and in the quiet of his room knelt down and said, "O God, I belong to you. Take what is your own".

CLOSING Baptism is a symbol. It is a symbol of a new life. And most of us who are here, following the example of our Lord, have already taken that step of faith and of commitment. Most of us took it long ago. Perhaps that little "gold coin" at the heart of our life...buried under the layers of sophistication and of life's many experiences...needs to be taken out, looked at and polished up. Lent is providing us with that opportunity.

These coming forty days can be the beginning of a new time for us. Let us begin this season of soul refreshment in a posture of prayer that we, too, like our Lord, might see the heaven open, the Spirit descend and discover anew

that we are indeed Children of God and that our lives are precious in His sight!

PRAYER Now help us, O God, as we prepare to draw apart from the world during this Season of Lent that is approaching...this season of spiritual refreshment and renewal....and to see Jesus with new eyes and with a deeper understanding...and to find in Him that which makes Him unlike all others who have ever lived.

Visit our sick with the quiet assurance of Thy care. And encircle the bereaved with Thy warming, healing presence. Point our markers along the trail for those who have lost their way.

Make us sensitive to the gentle invasion of your love...to the quiet voice speaking within our hearts....bringing us home once again to You.

May the bread and cup open our eyes, O God, to the lifting presence of Christ among us now. Bind us more closely to each other and to Him and lift up our hearts and minds to You, dear God, that we may go out of here renewed in body and soul, nourished, forgiven, made new. In the name of the Good Shepherd who seeks His own and brings them, we pray. Amen

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