

**Sunday 8 January 2023**

**Message for Glynde Lutheran Church**

**Matthew 3:16-17**

**Theme: The baptism of Jesus - When heaven cracks open...**



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## **Introduction**

Do you ever get up early to see the sunrise?

Last year Klaus and I went on a road trip up through outback Queensland and spent a week in the remote Boodjamulla National Park (formerly known as Lawn Hill NP). This is a sacred place on the traditional lands of the Waanyi people. It is a beautiful gorge carved out of an escarpment which rises above a vast arid plain that stretches for miles.

One of our travelling companions, Caroline, and I decided to get up early one morning and to walk up out of the gorge where we were camped to the edge of the escarpment to watch the sunrise. We walked for about an hour, first with head torches, because it was very dark and the way was rocky and not that obvious, and then by the delicate light that was heralding the dawn. We got to a place where we could gain a good vantage point and quietly waited for the sun to rise.

At first the eastern horizon was a long, flat line of indigo, then it changed to yellow and then orange, but we still couldn't tell exactly where the sun would pop up. And then suddenly it did! Just as the sun peeked over the horizon there was a blaze of light and it seemed for a moment that heaven had opened. It was like there was a crack in the fabric of heaven and the sun had burst through.

And we had seen the birth of another new day. As we walked back, the whole landscape was transformed as light and shadow played across the plains and

light poured into the hills and valleys and gorges, turning the cliffs into a fiery orange backdrop against a pale blue sky. It was stunning.

It reminded me of the prophecy (in Luke 3: 78-79) of Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, who foretold the coming of Jesus, the Saviour: :

**<sup>78</sup> Our God is merciful and tender. He will cause the bright dawn of salvation to rise on us <sup>79</sup> and to shine from heaven on all those who live in the dark shadow of death, to guide our steps into the path of peace.**

Or as another translations puts it: “the light from heaven is about to break upon us” - the light from heaven being Jesus, God’s son and our Lord and Saviour.

**So that is what I want us to think about as we turn to the text for today - to think about and to look for times when the light from heaven breaks open and God reaches down to earth.**

In our text for today, heaven literally breaks or cracks open at Jesus' baptism.

We will look at this theme in two parts: firstly what did this mean for Jesus? And secondly what does it mean for us as followers of Jesus?

### **Part 1. When the heavens opened... what did it mean for Jesus?**

Jesus’ baptism starts with two protagonists, Jesus the son of Mary and Joseph, and John the Baptist (his cousin). Jesus comes to John and asks to be baptised. After a short discussion about whether Jesus is a satisfactory candidate for baptism, John agrees to undertake the task. His baptism occurs on the banks of the River Jordan. However as soon as he is baptised something dramatic and unexpected happens.

In our gospel reading we learn:

#### **The Baptism of Jesus Matthew 3: 16 -17**

<sup>16</sup> As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At **that moment heaven was opened**, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. <sup>17</sup> And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”

Today we will look at 5 different things that this meant for Jesus:

1. The most obvious thing that it meant for Jesus was it marked the start of his public ministry, but it is not the only time when heaven cracks open in the Bible in relation to Jesus. For example:
  - When Jesus was born, heaven cracked open when the host of angels appeared to the shepherds telling them “Do not be afraid” and telling them to go to Bethlehem to see where their Saviour would be lying in a manger.
2. When the heavens cracked open for **Jesus it firmly established his identity as the Son of God**. This shifts the significance of Jesus’ baptism and John the Baptist from the waters of the Jordan to the very heavens above. This is the moment that heaven cracked open and the Spirit of God descended like a dove and landed on Jesus with a voice from heaven (God) saying “**This is my son, whom I love, with him I am well pleased.**”

One of the amazing things about God’s proclamation to Jesus is that this happens before Jesus has really even done anything, before he has even begun his public ministry,

It happens

- Before he is tempted by the devil
- Before he calls his followers, begins preaching or story telling or teaches about prayer
- Before he does any miracles, heals the sick, feeds the 5000, or restores sight to the blind
- Before he tells us to love one another.

Before Jesus starts his public ministry, God identifies Jesus as the Chosen One, and gives him his identity. **He tells him he belongs to God (he is his Son) and that he loves him and he is pleased with him.**

3. The heavens crack open and we get a glimpse of the Trinity - of Father, Son and Spirit. In this passage, all three persons of the Trinity are present and active. God the Father speaks; God the Son is baptised and God the Spirit descends on Jesus. (See also other passages that speak of the Trinity: e.g. as Matthew 28:19; John 15:26, Ephesians 2:18)
4. For Jesus, this moment also is the beginning of his public ministry and is the start of Jesus following the path that God has set before him. And as we know, God's affirmation of his son means a ministry that proclaims God's love for all, that calls for justice and mercy, but that also leads to his suffering and death. If we look back at some of the prophecies about Jesus we see this was foretold hundreds of years before his birth. The Old Testament reading for today, Isaiah 42: 1-9 prophecies the servant nature of Jesus -
  - it talks about the servant whom God strengthens, is filled with God's spirit and who comes to the weak, the blind, the marginalised, to those living on the edges: (v 2,3)
  - It talks about Jesus being the One whom God will use to crack open the heavens (bring light to the nations) (v 6,7)

*Through you I will make a covenant with all peoples;  
through you I will bring light to the nations.  
7 You will open the eyes of the blind  
and set free those who sit in dark prisons.*

- Isaiah 53 also predicts his suffering and death: this well known famous passage predicting Jesus' suffering became the inspiration for the wonderful spiritual song:
 

*He was wounded for our transgressions,  
He was bruised for our iniquities  
Surely he bore our sorrows  
And by his stripes we are healed*
- 5. Lastly, there were a number of other times when the heavens cracked open when Jesus was on earth: here are a couple more:
  - When Jesus died, the temple curtains were torn - and heaven cracked open so that we could enter God's sanctuary and become

his saints, his priests. He opened heaven so that we could become a new creation, and are identified by God as his sons and daughters.

- It happened again when Jesus rose from the dead - early on Sunday morning as the new day was dawning, on the third day of his death, the grieving women went to visit the tomb of their crucified Lord. But God had raised Jesus from the dead and, as Matthew reports, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were the first to hear this amazing news and raced back to tell the other disciples.
- And finally, it happened as Jesus ascended to heaven to be with God - In Luke 24: 50 we read “ *Then Jesus led them (his followers) to Bethany, and lifting his hands to heaven, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up to heaven*”.

## **Part 2. When the heavens opened... what does it mean for us? What does it mean for me and for you?**

So when does heaven crack open for us? And what does it mean for us?

When we look at 2022 it seems like the heavens are firmly closed in our broken world:

- The news cycle of shock and conflict leads us to fear for the future, particularly as nations across the globe are at war - we look at the hideous situation in the Ukraine, but also other places where peace is precarious, with rumblings in North Korea, Iran and China. The recently retired head of ASIS talks of war between world powers as “no longer unimaginable”
- We look at the toll of the global pandemic - the impact on our health system, the consequences of shutdowns stretching well beyond the time of state-imposed restrictions, the ongoing waves of the virus, the social isolation of many and the number of people suffering the lingering effects of long Covid
- We see the decline for so many christian churches in the western world, including Australia. As Stan Grant, the ABC journalist wrote in July last year: “God is dead and we have killed him....In my lifetime I have seen Australia change from being an almost completely Christian country to one where now just 44 per cent practise Christianity.”

Pastor Vince Gerhardy writes:

“ It often feels like the heavens are closed. We feel far from God, far from unity with the Spirit, far from Jesus. But the truth is that the heavens are opened for us “

How are the heavens opened for us? Let us count some of the ways....

1. The most obvious way that heaven is opened for us is at our baptism. When we are accepted into God’s family and receive the Holy Spirit in our hearts. It is when our christian identity is formed and named and we are received as beloved daughters and sons. It is when God first pronounces and affirms us as his dearly loved children.

Jan Richardson (The Painted Prayer Book) puts it this way: in baptism “we are named as God’s holy, precious child in a way so powerful that it can’t come undone”.

Our identity as God’s children happens without us proving ourselves worthy, or showing that we are good people. Generally it happens before we have given God any service or completed any actions that would contribute to the formation of our faith. Our identity before God is not shaped by what we have done, or what we have failed to do. It is shaped by us being loved and seen as worthy and precious because we are made by God and our sins have been forgiven as we believe in Jesus

2. The heavens are opened for us in worship as we meet together as a community of faith. For you there may be moments in a song or a hymn, the readings, the prayers, the moment we approach the altar for Holy Communion... or it may be as we sit next to our sisters and brothers in Christ and realise that God’s love is here for us all whatever our circumstances, male or female, those born and bred Lutheran or those just starting to explore and glimpse the Christian faith and all those in between.

Heaven opens to give us strength to live as God’s people here on earth with the promise of eternal life in heaven.

3. The heavens are opened as we read the Scriptures and study His Word. In reading our bibles and studying God’s Word we hear God speaking to us - opening the mysteries of faith and love and hope.

Some passages we treasure for the inspiration they provide for our daily lives, some for their promises, some for the comfort that we are given in tough times and when life is bleak, some we treasure because they give voice to our wonder and praise.

And truly, the heavens are opened as we trust God's promises and we see Him working in our lives and the lives of others - even miracles!

4. The heavens are opened as we come humbly before our God in prayer and as we seek to do justice in a broken world. Paul's letter to the Ephesians 6:18 (NIV) exhorts us to be constantly in prayer:

<sup>18</sup> And **pray in the Spirit** on all occasions with **all kinds of prayers and requests**. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people.

And as we seek to live a christian life, there are opportunities to open up a glimpse of God to others, so that they too may experience heaven cracking open for them.

5. And finally, The heavens will open for us again when Jesus returns and takes us to be in heaven to be with Him forever. In the Gospel of John 11: 25-26 we have Jesus' promise:

<sup>25</sup> Jesus said to her (Martha), "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; **26** and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

And in John 14:1-3

**14** "Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God[a]; believe also in me. <sup>2</sup> My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? <sup>3</sup> And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.

## Conclusion:

In Lighthouse, there is a time at the end of each session where the children and Lighthouse leaders share a blessing with each other.

A blessing that takes up the theme of the day, e.g.

“ \_\_\_\_\_(Name), precious Child of God, may heaven crack open for you when Jesus returns to take you to be with Him forever” .

Let us take a moment to offer this blessing to each other.

As we leave worship today, may we live as God’s people with love for one another, in humility as we seek the One for whom the heavens opened on the banks of the River Jordan, in mission, knowing that God is holding our hand, that Jesus is walking with us and the Spirit is calling us to share the message of hope and life with all we meet.

Let us remember to constantly look for cracks in heaven, for times when God reaches down to us on earth and tells us he loves us. Let us remember our baptism every day.

Let us live in such a way that others will come to faith and know themselves as named and loved by God.

Amen.

## References:

Pastor Vince Gerhardy <https://www.gerhardy.id.au/index.htm> “The Heavens opened”

Jan Richardson <https://paintedprayerbook.com/2010/01/03/epiphany-1-baptized-and-beloved/>

Stan Grant (2022) The census shows Australians are becoming less religious but why have we chosen to live without God?

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-07-03/census-religion-christianity-no-religion-god/101201640>