

**BAPTISM OF OUR LORD – January 7, 2018**  
*The Day the Heavens Were Torn Apart*  
**(Mark 1:4-11)**

My Dad died a little over three years ago, in November of 2014 at the age of 93. Some of you here at Hope knew him. Or at least perhaps remember him.

He was an ordinary guy in most respects; kind of quiet, shy even. And he was not one to talk about himself very much, or to “toot his own horn,” so to speak, so he remained something of an enigma to most people, myself included.

But while he was not one to readily share his deepest inner thoughts and feelings, and emotions, there was one thing of which there was never any doubt; none whatsoever. That is, he loved his family and would do anything, literally *anything*, to care for and protect us.

Now there is one more thing I need to share with you so that the story I’m about to tell you will make sense. Something most people did not know about him. You see, my Dad was also a veteran of World War II. Not just a veteran, but a *combat* veteran. And not just a combat veteran, but a *decorated* combat veteran. He received the Purple Heart with an Oak Leaf Cluster, signifying that he had been wounded not once but twice. In addition, he was also awarded the Bronze Star for heroic achievement.

I knew all this, of course, but I never knew any of the specifics; especially about the Bronze Star. All he ever told me and my brother, while we were growing up, was that during an attack he shot back at the enemy. (*Shrug*)

I always suspected that there was probably more to the story, but I never knew *how much more* until a couple of years ago; after his death.

Out of the blue one day, I received an email from the daughter of a man my Dad had served with during the war and, after she and I began to correspond, and I told her that I wished I knew more about my Dad's Bronze Star, she encouraged me to look online. Apparently many of these records are in the National Archives and folks have now taken the time and the trouble to make photocopies and then upload them and make them accessible on the Internet.

Long story short, after obsessively pouring through the daily General Orders of the 80<sup>th</sup> Division for about a day and a half, I finally came across the citation describing the awarding of my Dad's Bronze Star. There it was, "EDWARD KROPA, 33348149, Sgt, Co B, 319<sup>th</sup> Infantry, Army of the United States."

*For heroic achievement in Luxembourg on 29 December 1944, in connection with military operations against an enemy of the United States. During the defense of Ringel, Luxembourg, the enemy counterattacked and succeeded infiltrating into the company's position. With disregard for personal safety, Sgt. Kropa exposed himself and fired continuously with his automatic rifle, thus killing five of the enemy and forcing the rest to surrender. His courage and devotion to duty are commensurate with the highest traditions of the armed forces of the United States...*

There it was. More – *much more* – than I was expecting to find, quite frankly. Although I never saw my Dad in a fight or a physical altercation or confrontation of any kind, not even close, I nevertheless knew, however, that my Dad had this... well, this certain *look* about him. A look that said, "Don't even *think* about messing with me!" The look of someone you didn't ever want to tangle with. All he had to do

was just glance at someone with that “look” and, even though I only saw it a handful of times over the years, other people, including grown men, invariably and quickly backed down and backed away in the face of it. In other words, there was clearly an element of fear and danger about him.

Now the story...

I was about eight years old at the time – we had not yet moved down here to Freehold. And a few weeks prior, a gang of teenage boys, high school kids, had suddenly descended upon and began to terrorize our neighborhood. At one point, they had grabbed me and a friend while we were playing up in the woods. (My brother Dave had somehow managed to wiggle free and run home.) They briefly tied us up, and smeared cold cream, from an old bottle they had found somewhere there in the woods, all over our faces. Then, after taunting and making fun of us, and doing their best to intimidate, humiliate, and scare us, they finally untied us and let us go free; laughing at us, mockingly, all the while.

And then for the next several weeks, they *continued* to strut around our neighborhood menacing all the little kids, including and especially me. Until one day, that is.

On that particular day, Dad and I were in the car going somewhere and there up ahead of us, on the sidewalk, was the ringleader of this group of teenage terrorists. He was walking on the opposite side of the street from us, but going in the same direction we were, so – in other words – we were coming up behind him. Without thinking, I quickly pointed him out to my Dad and told him that this was the kid who had been terrorizing us, never imagining at the time what my father would do next.

“That him?” he asked with that stone cold look on his face. “Uh oh,” I thought to myself, as I nodded meekly. And with that, my Dad quickly swerved the car into the oncoming lane – fortunately there was no traffic coming at us, although I don’t think my Dad ever looked or even cared. So now we were on the wrong side of the street but directly *alongside* this bully, who suddenly sensed what was happening and glanced over at us.

Recognizing me, he stopped dead in his tracks and gave us a startled look, like the proverbial deer in the headlights. And then, turning his attention to my Dad, and seeing that look on my Dad’s face, an expression of unmistakable fear immediately swept across his *own* face.

Dad then slowly rolled down his window (for effect I think) and just stared back at this high school kid. Again, with that blistering, “you’ve ticked off the wrong guy,” kind of look. Finally, he said, motioning over at me with his cigar hand – back in those days he always seemed to have a cigar stuck between his two fingers – “This is my son... You see him?” The bully nodded slowly. So Dad said, “If you *ever* bother him again, if you ever even *go near him* again, I’ll come looking for you... I’ll hunt you down and find you... and I’ll beat you up!”

And then after a long pause to let that warning sink in for a few moments, he continued. “I know what you’re thinking. You’re thinking you’ll go home now and tell you dad. But don’t even think that your dad can help you... because you know what? I don’t care who he is, I’ll come over to your house *and beat him up too!*”

With that, Dad rolled up his window and we drove away. And you know what? I never *did* see that kid again. *Ever!* In fact, he and his cronies never even dared to step foot on our *street* again. And, as my

brother Dave tells it, “I think he and his whole family probably moved away!”

In other words, it was a moment of fear and trembling – for that *kid* at least. A moment when a loving, protective father made his presence felt, imposed his will, and said, in no uncertain terms, “This is my son.” And the implication was crystal clear...

Interestingly enough, in the first two verses of the 64<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Old Testament book of Isaiah, the prophet writes *this*: “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down... to make your name known to your enemies and make the nations tremble at your presence.” In other words, the prophet is pleading with God to come down and make his presence felt, especially to his enemies; that is, to those who would frighten and terrorize God’s people.

And it seems to *me*, at least, that it was precisely *these* verses that the author of Mark had in mind when he described Jesus’ baptism for us in today’s gospel. Now in some translations, we read that Jesus simply saw the heavens “opened.” In fact, both Matthew and Luke, who also record this event for us, describe it in the very same way: the heavens were opened.

But what Mark *actually* says here is “...as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens *torn apart*... Torn apart! *Ripped* apart, even. Just as Isaiah had in mind. God making his presence felt.

As New Testament scholar Donald Juel has written, “The image is strong, even violent.” The heavens are torn apart and they “cannot be repaired.”

Barbara Lundblad adds, “The Greek word here is a form of the verb *schitzo* as in schism or schizophrenia. It is not the same word as open.

I open the door. I close the door. The door looks the same, but something torn apart is not easily closed again. The ragged edges never go back together as they were,” she says.

So imagine with me here, if you will, the ancient assumption that the sky was this great big dome over the earth, separating the waters above from the waters below. And, even more importantly, separating the heavens from the earth, and therefore also separating *God* from his creation, from his *people* as well.

But, suddenly, in the very moment that Jesus comes up out of the water after his baptism, the heavens were suddenly torn apart, that dome was ripped open, and God himself – a loving, protective father – was suddenly intervening, making *his* presence felt, imposing *his* will, and saying in no uncertain terms, “This is my Son!”

“You are my Son, the beloved,” is what Jesus heard, we’re told, “...with you I am well pleased.” And with the tearing open of the heavens, and that voice coming down, God is now on the *loose* in his creation, and God’s Son, we are soon to discover, is about to embark upon a ministry that will utterly *transform* the world.

As Barbara Lundblad (again) points out, there are no shepherds here in Mark. No angels. No wise men. Not a word about Mary and Joseph. Just “the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ,” a beginning which opens with the preaching of John and the baptism of Jesus; a baptism dramatically pictured for us here by the gospel writer.

Scholars also tell us that this Greek word “torn apart,” which figures so prominently in that description of Jesus’ baptism, is in the present passive form, indicating that this process is ongoing, not a completed action. In other words, the “tearing apart” has only just begun, and still continues. And, therefore, nothing will ever be the same again! *That’s* what Mark is trying to tell us here at the very beginning of his gospel.

Do you see what I'm getting at here? Our usual understanding of baptism is this nice, quiet, comforting moment; quaint even. And, in the case of Jesus' baptism specifically, we usually visualize – at least I do – this gentle opening of the heavens, sun perhaps streaming through, and a dove softly and slowly descending.

And yet what I want to say to you is that the scene we have described for us this morning in Mark is *nothing* like that; nothing like it at all. Instead it's much more jarring, more abrupt. It's about a loving father, *yes*, but one who is intervening in our world in a forceful and powerful and dynamic and imposing, even violent and scary way. But a God who, despite all the mystery surrounding him, despite being something of an enigma even to his children, despite this unexpected sign of power and awe, nevertheless loves his family – his human family – and would do anything, literally anything, to care for and protect them. That's why God even dared to send God's Son into this evil, troubled world...

If I didn't know it before, when I witnessed my Dad intervening on my behalf with that teenage bully all those many years ago, I certainly realized *then* that being his son was something special, and that there was literally nothing that he wouldn't do to protect me and insure my safety and wellbeing. I was his son, his beloved son. I felt affirmed and accepted and blessed...

Another thing about my Dad. He snored something awful. And when we moved down here to Freehold, I could even hear his snoring from *my* bedroom all the way down the hall. But rather than being an irritant, an annoyance, it was actually rather comforting. You see, hearing him snore was a reminder that he was there to watch over and protect me. And since my parent's bedroom was at the top of the staircase, it was

also a reassuring reminder that someone intent on hurting me would have to get by my Dad first.

I have to confess, however, it didn't occur to my 9-year-old mind, at the time, that if my Dad was *so sound asleep*, and snoring up such a storm, any bad guy or evil doer could probably sneak by their bedroom and my father would never have even heard it! Oh well... The point is, I felt this tremendous, protective presence in my life; a tremendous, protective presence that was my father.

And *that*, I would argue, is what baptism is all about as well. About a God who does for each of *us* what he once did with Jesus; who intervenes in this world, and names and claims us as his own; as his children. A God who loves us unconditionally, blesses us abundantly, and watches over us constantly.

As David Lose once put it, "...we are passive recipients of God's blessing and favor. We are called God's beloved children not because of something *we do* but because of who *God is* – a loving parent who wants nothing more than to see us flourish."

You are my beloved child. With you I am well pleased. And God has torn apart the heavens in order to intervene on our behalf, and we need not fear or worry about *anything* ever again.

Amen.