

January 11, 2014

## TORN APART

In our scripture for today, Mark does not begin his gospel with a big long genealogy like the one you can find at the beginning of Matthew's gospel, nor does he mention anything about Angels or Shepherds or even the birth of Jesus like Luke does at the beginning of his gospel. Instead, Mark begins with John the Baptist.

And after describing how all the people in and around Jerusalem were coming to hear John preach and were getting baptized by him in the river Jordan. Mark then describes the baptism of Jesus, which includes that wonderful moment that takes place as Jesus comes up out of the water and the heavens open with the holy spirit descending like a dove. And then the voice from heaven saying: You are my beloved son and with you I am well pleased.

And though this story about the baptism of Jesus gets read every year on this Sunday, not every gospel sees it or tells it in the same way. For instance, unlike Matthew and Luke who both talk about how the heavens opened, in Mark's gospel it describes how Jesus looked up and saw the heavens torn apart!

Which comes from a Greek word called schitzo as in schizophrenia or schism, which is very different from the word "open". Because first of all, whenever you open a door there is a pretty basic assumption that the door itself is still going to look basically the same.

But when something gets torn apart, all those ragged edges are never able go back like they were. In fact, it's almost as if Mark is wanting to echo the prophet Isaiah, who centuries before had cried out to God saying, "Oh, that you would tear the heavens open and come down to make your name known."

And during these next few weeks as our congregation begins talking about some of the issues surrounding justice and race, I too have found myself wanting to echo the prophet Isaiah by asking God to tear the heavens apart!

And to do so in ways that would make it clear that everyone is equally loved and equally important. And that everyone is a beloved child of God.

But kind of doubt that will happen because according to the bible God has a preference for working through people. And since that's the case, then it would seem that for us as God's people it's even more important for us to have an understanding of the obstacles before us.

And that's why I'd like to spend the next few minutes telling you about people like Scott and Vanessa Brandt, who have been members of our church for a long time now. In fact, it wasn't too long ago when Vanessa served on our church council. And together they have 3 wonderful kids named: Ty, Taliah and Skyler.

And, as a black woman with a black son and a black daughter, married to a white man, like several other couples in our church, not only do they have an inter racial marriage but also a biracial child, just like our oldest grandson Donovan....

Which means that God has not only given each of them a loving spouse to share their life with but also a unique opportunity for helping their family and friends to see everyone, regardless of their race or background, in the same way that God sees us.

Unfortunately, because of all the fear and inequality that still exists in our country, it is a calling that comes at a price.

And to give you an example of what I mean, I'd like to read a facebook conversation for you between Vanessa and one of her friends as people were reacting to the cases involving the deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner. And it began when Vanessa started sharing how...

"My sister is a police officer, and my uncles have served with the Albuquerque PD and LAPD so I have nothing but the highest respect for law enforcement!! But I also know what's right and what's not and that the problems we're facing are a lot bigger and more widespread than just the cases we're seeing in the media!

In fact, just last week, my own son was scared to call the police after a white lady rear ended him, and then drove off. And though he followed her until she finally pulled into a gas station, because he was afraid of what she might say and what the police might do he ended up calling me and Scott!"

To which Vanessa's friend responded: "Oh Vanessa, that almost made me cry! Your son should never feel hesitant to call the police, but I understand! Because my own son was recently accused of stealing a white girls wallet at school.

And so the police were called and they began questioning my baby even before me or his father could get there. And by the time they did call us our son was already so scared.

He told the police and the principal that he did not take the wallet, but they told him he was being sent home. And so by the time I got to the school my child was already in tears with two white policemen standing over him.

And even after I explained to the principal how on the day that this little girl's wallet was missing that my son was absent having oral surgery. Everybody, including the police, had to go to the front desk. And fortunately, the day before, I had sent the Doctor's excuse which was on file.

And come to find out the little girl had left her wallet in the lunch line and it was in lost and found untouched!!! My son is an honor student and has never been in trouble, but all this had to happen to prove his innocence. And in the meantime, both the police and the school had put fear in my child's heart.

And then she asked the question... "What do we do?"

And then Vanessa responded by telling her friend something that all of us should consider. She said: "Well first of all, we need to continue educating our children. And we also need to be forging meaningful relationships outside our own cultures. And.... We need to be more vocal!"

People have become so afraid to speak the truth because it's so much easier to go along thinking: Well, it's not my problem. Which won't help at all, because it's only when we start having real discussions about race relationships that things get better. And though I sometimes feel doubtful.... I'm remaining hopeful!

And after thinking about what Vanessa had shared, I then had an opportunity to visit with Trisha Walker, another member in our congregation. And she too is a mom, but as a white woman and as a detective for the Arlington Police Department, I wanted to get her thoughts.

And so she talked about how the morale amongst the police has gotten word during this past year. And then she said: Even though I'm committed to protecting and serving everyone equally and so are many of my colleagues, like in every profession, there are always a few who aren't doing a good job.

And unfortunately, with the media constantly looking for shortcomings and mistakes, every time they find an example they play it again and again and over and over to the point that a lot of people get the impression that all of us are racists... When that's just not true.

In fact, most of the time, if we've pulled you over and are approaching your car, depending on our line of sight, we don't even know your race.

And then she said: That's why, even when I get pulled over I always keep my hands on top of the wheel until the officer can clearly see me and motions me to lower my window.

And I do that because I know what's going through the mind of every single officer, which includes the awareness, that you could be on drugs, or have a gun, or that you could be feeling desperate with nothing to lose. I have no way of knowing.

And though that's often not the case, I have to treat every encounter just like that because I'm also well aware that I have two little children at home that need me. And that all it takes is one time of not being ready or prepared for the worst.

In other words, what Trisha, and countless other people in law enforcement know is that when things go bad to the point that your family and your life gets torn apart, most of the time you'll never be able to put it back the way it was.

Which is precisely what Vanessa and countless other black people, and other minorities know as well, that when things go bad, to the point that your family and your life gets torn apart, most of the time you're never able to put it back the way it was.

And though we've set aside the next couple of Sundays in order to hear your stories and your insights as well, what we are talking about today can apply to other things as well. Because, as we all know, whether it's racism or an accident or an illness or death.... There are all kinds of things that can tear your life apart.

And when that happens our hope and prayer for you is this: That our Heavenly Father, will bless your life and strengthen your faith. And also help you to remember what happened on the day that our Lord and Savior was hung upon a cross and left to die.... Because that was also the day that the curtain of the temple was torn apart from top to bottom.

So that in spite of all the fear and violence and tragedy that exists in our world, that you can still live your life with grace and hope. And with compassion for all... Knowing that you are God's beloved child. Just like Vanessa and all of her children. And just like Trisha and both of her kids. Amen