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Open our hearts, O Lord, and open our minds that we may hear your word for us today,. Amen.

January is a time when we think about new beginnings. Our calendars tell us so when we turn the last page of the old calendar year and begin a new one. And our lectionary tells us, too, but at a different time. In the church, we start a new year with the beginning of Advent, four weeks before Christmas. The lectionary during Advent and Christmas addresses the nativity. Then, in January the lectionary moves on to Jesus' baptism. So at this time of year, we symbolically turn to a new page and let go of the old year. We think about letting go of old habits and starting new practices.

For us, the new practices might take the form of resolutions. But in the story about Jesus' baptism that we just heard from Mark's gospel, the people who were being baptized were doing more than making resolutions. They were starting a new life. They were letting go of their old sinful ways and committing to a new more hope filled life with God. This was an important step for them. It was an important step in the life of the Hebrew people. The fact that this story is prominent in all of the gospels lets us know that it is of utmost importance. This story's prominence tells us that understanding the baptism of Jesus is the key to grasping the magnificence of God's incarnation, the key to unlocking the mystery of God choosing to come into our midst and dwell among us.

Mark's gospel was the first one written. The author of it may have been a man named Mark. Let's assume for today that Mark wrote it. Mark made the baptism of Jesus his opening story. All the rest of his gospel is built upon this foundation. That tells me that Mark was really taken with the moment; that it made an enormous

impression on him. It still makes an enormous impression on us. But it is different for us than it was for him. Two thousand years have passed since then. Two thousand years for humans to accumulate knowledge of biology, physics, astronomy, geology and psychology. That gives us a different perspective than Mark would have had on the experience that took place in the Jordan River that day.

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. For Mark, the expanse of creation was quite limited compared to all the vastness that we know as our universe today. The ancient Hebrews imagined the heavens and the earth as something like an upside down bowl. The earth was the firm ground over which the heavens arced. The stars that they gazed upon and were guided by, at times, were perceived as openings, like windows that passed through to the realm in which God dwelled. It is fascinating to explore references through the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, on the instances where God was perceived to have opened heaven.

In Genesis, the ancient writers wrote that God opened the heavens on Noah. Genesis Chapter 11, Verse 7 tells us, “all the fountains of the deep burst forth, and the windows of the heavens were opened.” God, they perceived, exercised his wrath upon humanity when he opened the heavens and caused a flood to come upon the earth. Then, hundreds of years later in the days of the prophet Isaiah, God was seen as operating toward humanity slightly differently. By that time, the Hebrew people had experienced captivity in Babylon. It was during that time, when they were forcibly removed from the temple in Jerusalem, that they realized that God was with them wherever they went; even when they were so far from home. They realized that God could not be contained in a temple, even though the temple remained the central

location for their faith practices. Isaiah prophesied that God would continue to be moved to act when His people did not obey His commandments, no matter where they were. He prophesied that when God opened the heavens His action would cause “the foundations of the earth” to tremble. Later the prophet Ezekiel would envision that the heavens opening up would allow him to see God.

So you see, over time, after living with and being with God, the Hebrew people began to know God more intimately and began to see him as a God of steadfast love for them. The prophets and the Hebrew people began to know Him as a God not of anger but as a God of mercy; a God with whom not to dread and an encounter but, rather, to desire one.

Mark did not yet have knowledge of science or of the vastness of space and so the way he perceived the heavens was still much like his ancestors. God reigned up there and the people lived down below. But Mark’s description of Jesus’ baptism signals a change in his understanding; an epiphany, if you will. He says, “And just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him.” What Mark saw, and what Jesus saw, was the breaking of the boundary that stood between God and humanity; the unlocking of the door to the Holy of Holies. God had come amongst us, as never before!

Jesus participated in the sacred human act of baptism, not because he needed to be cleansed of sin, but to demonstrate that baptism opened the door to a new opportunity for full life. Mark witnessed to the remarkable shattering of the barrier between the human being and the divine, in whose image all beings are created. By

cleansing themselves from sinful behavior and turning to a new way of life, a way that would be modeled by Jesus.

In yesterday's paper, there was a political cartoon depicting the Dow Jones Industrial Average as an arrow moving upward and piercing through to the heavens. The picture showed the arrow ripping through the clouds. Two angels are standing there and one says to the other, "That's gotta be a new record for the Dow!" I don't believe that God cares much about the Dow, and I don't believe that God occupies space "up there somewhere." I believe that God is down here, in the midst of us, working in and through us by way of His Holy Spirit. The baptism scene in Mark's gospel emphasizes that.

Today is the day we celebrate the Baptism of our Lord. In some Episcopal and maybe other churches there will be baptisms of infants, children and adults; a celebration that welcomes new souls into the Christian life. Here at St. John's, because we will not be celebrating the sacrament of baptism today, we have an opportunity to consider the meaning of our own baptisms and the meaning of a baptisms yet to come. We can take this time to really consider what happened on that day at the Jordan River; what God initiates for us in that action. In a moment, we will be reciting the words of our baptismal covenant in the place of the Nicene Creed. In that moment, we have the opportunity to commit or recommit ourselves to it.

God has opened the door to a new year, given us yet another opportunity to get it right. How might we do things differently this year? When we consider our own gifts and promises, how might our promise to use them to meet the present and pressing needs of the world? How might we meet the needs of this church and the needs of our

own community of Lynchburg? God has opened the door for us. Let us walk together prayerfully through it and enter a renewed life with our God.