

Sermon
Epiphany 1: Baptism of Christ
St. Andrew's, Methuen
January 9, 2022
William Bradbury

Isaiah 43:1-7
Acts 8:14-17
Luke 3:15-17, 21-22
Psalm 29

"Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened...."

What is this heaven that is opened as Jesus is praying?

Bishop and Bible scholar N. T. Wright says, "**Heaven is God's dimension of the created order**.... Normally hidden from human sight, heaven is occasionally revealed or unveiled so that people can see **God's dimension of ordinary life.**"

It's like what happens in the 1989 Movie, "Field of Dreams", starring Kevin Costner and James Earl Jones. Costner's character, Ray Kinsella, begins hearing voices tell him to cut down most of his corn crop and replace it with a baseball field, which he does. He builds the field because the voice tells him, "If you build it, they will come."

And sure enough, one lovely evening Shoeless Joe Jackson and other long dead baseball players come walking out of the remaining tall corn into the outfield.

When they have played awhile, they walk through the outfield and back into the tall corn and disappear.

This is a proper image of heaven, in which heaven is a dimension of ordinary life. It is right here and right now, and Luke tells us that from heaven God pours out onto Jesus the Holy Spirit, God's own self.

Shortly after I saw the movie, I was raving about it to my Sunday school class at St Peter's, in Washington, North Carolina. The following week one of my leaders said he had run home, rented the tape (back in the day of videotapes). **He said it was the worst movie he had ever seen.**

His rational mind couldn't enjoy the players coming out of the corn and the other "out of the box" things that happen. He was like Ray's brother-in-

law, Mark, who sits on the bleachers while the old-timers are playing, but he simply cannot see them. All Mark sees is an empty field.

Of course, we all have a Mark living in our heads, because we were raised inside the myth of Modernity that says we live in a closed universe in which there is no such thing as a heaven connected to earth.

Modernity wants to get a bush hog and rip up every last bit of that corn and prove there are no long-dead baseball players living out there.

“You think there’s a heaven, I’ll show you!”

But here’s the thing: you can do exactly the same thing to the human body and brain—you can cut it open and take it apart cell by cell and you know what you’ll never find?

You’ll never find a person living in there. You’ll never find a name or a personal history, or any sign of a human life whatsoever.

And when we forget the miracle and mystery of our own being, we create a dull gray world in which all you get is what you got with your five senses dulled down to senselessness.

ON the other hand, young children see the mystery of heaven in everything they pick up. But soon enough Modernity will train them not to see the sacredness of life, so as adults, they will assume it simply doesn’t exist.

One of the chief duties of a church is **to train adults** to recover the imagination we are born with, so we can see heaven opened up and God pouring God’s Self upon us and all creation—cause if we don’t see that we can’t be the church.

The prophets of Israel had this ability.

Ezekiel wrote: “In the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, on the fifth day of the month, as I was among the exiles by the river Chebar, **the heavens were opened,** and I saw visions of God.”

Isaiah is in the Temple when heaven opens up in front of him and he sees God high and lifted up, with his train filling the temple, surrounded by angels who cry “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; **the whole earth** is full of his glory.”

This is the same song we will sing in a few minutes as we open up our hearts to God in The Great Thanksgiving.

So, Luke says that Jesus, still dripping from his immersion in the River Jordan, and in deep prayer, sees heaven open and the Spirit of God filling his life.

Fifty days after his death and resurrection heaven opens again with wind, fire, and noise as the Holy Spirit descends on the disciples, so they too not only experience God, but also can be God's servants and friends.

This is what Peter and John are doing in the reading from Acts, as they lay hands on the half-breed Samaritans so they too can fully participate in heaven's grand opening.

In our own power we can't see God.

In the movie no one can see the players on the field except those who have been called to see them. Ray's brother-in-law can't see them and therefore is convinced Ray is certifiably crazy and tells him he is going to lose the farm since Ray can't pay the mortgage.

Until...

Until his young niece begins to choke on a hotdog. Everyone is panicking until one of the baseball players walks off the field and turns into the pediatrician he became after baseball. The good doctor saves the girl and suddenly Mark's eyes are opened. **And he screams, "Ray, do not sell this place. You cannot sell this place."**

He was blind but now he sees.

Saint Augustine said, "The whole purpose of life is to restore to health the eye of the heart whereby God may be seen."

The Gospel is not just about getting to heaven when we die, but about being flooded with God while we live. And this is why people come to church looking for God.

As the movie ends, the camera climbs into the night sky and you can see in the distance the lights of hundreds of cars filled with people who are coming to experience for themselves the field of dreams.

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Let us now, therefore, renew our Baptismal Vows on page 292.