



**St. Anne's Episcopal Parish**  
**Church Circle • Annapolis, MD • 21401**

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Parish Offices & Education Building  
Location at 199 Duke of Gloucester St.  
Annapolis, MD 21401

Phone : 410-267-9333  
Fax 410-280-3181  
[www.stannes-annapolis.org](http://www.stannes-annapolis.org)

The Rev. Amy Richter  
1 Epiphany B: Mark 1:7-11  
St. Anne's Episcopal Parish, Annapolis, MD  
January 8, 2012  
*Nothing Between Us*

Perhaps you have experienced an Epiphany of some sort during your life, a moment when you realize a truth, behold a reality, see something for what it is for the first time truly. An epiphany experience touches you and shapes you, and, if you let it, may sustain you long after the moment has passed. Epiphany comes from the Greek word for *appearance* or *manifestation*. In this Epiphany season, we celebrate the manifestation of Jesus Christ in the world and tell stories of how Jesus made God known to the people around him. The Feast of Epiphany was this past Friday, January 6. On January 6, we remember the story of the Magi, the wise men, the first Gentiles to worship the baby Jesus, the first Gentiles to whom the identity of Christ was made manifest. Starting today, we tell stories about the adult Jesus and his ministry. And those stories begin with today's Gospel reading, the story of Jesus' baptism, a moment of epiphany.

I had a moment, if not of epiphany, then at least of greater understanding, one clear night on a little jetty of land in Nova Scotia. Joe and I were spending our summer holiday in a house in a remote area of this maritime province, a place with no light pollution, and at night, amazing starry skies. One night the stars were so many, so brilliant, so close, it looked like the sky was a big black bowl turned upside down, with holes punched in it with light blazing down from above. Or, the sky was a big dome and the stars were somehow fixed to the inside of the glass.

I know better, of course. I know that the sky is not an upside down bowl, and in our scientific age I understand that I was just one small person looking up at the sky that extends up and out and out and out from one small planet that travels around the sun, one of billions of stars in a galaxy in a universe so huge it boggles the mind.

The sky is not a bowl, but when I saw the sky that night I could understand how primitive people could look up at the starry, starry sky and imagine the sky as a big dome with holes punched in it here and there to let



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light or rain or snow through. That's sort of how our forebears in faith, the ones whose stories became the Bible, saw it. "In the beginning," says Genesis 1:1, "God created the heavens and the earth." On the first day, God created light. Our reading this morning stops after the first day and God declares the creation good. But the story continues. On the second day, God created a firmament, something firm between the earth and what's above it. Listen to how it's described: "And God said, Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters. So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so. And God called the dome sky." The ancient Hebrews understood the earth to be like a round plate surrounded by water on the sides, and above and beneath as well. A firm bowl, that firmament, kept the waters out, but had gates or windows in it to let the rain and the snow through. From below the plate, the waters came through as rivers and seas and wells, but the earth stood firm on pillars sunk into the waters like the pilings of a pier.

In this view, the world looks rather like a wooden plate that you might put a wedge of cheese on, with a glass dome put over top of it. Below the plate, and all around that dome is water, and above that water some place is the dwelling place of God.

If you keep that picture in mind, some other Old Testament stories make more sense. Like in the story of Noah, where we hear, "In the six hundredth year of Noah's life, in the second month, on the seventeenth day of the month, on that day all the foundations of the great deep burst forth, and the windows of the heavens were opened." Imagine, God reaches down to the dome of the sky, opens up some windows, and lets water pour through to flood the earth. This is how the ancient Hebrews pictured it.

It's a primitive view of the earth, and my point in mentioning it isn't to say how far we've come in our understanding. The point is to better understand Mark's telling of the baptism of Jesus.

So hear the good news of Jesus Christ as recorded in Mark's gospel. "In those days," --in those days when people still thought of the sky like a dome and God is up there looking down, and John the Baptist is preaching,



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“Repent and be baptized,” and being pretty open about the fact that God could reach down through one of those heavenly windows and squash those who do not repent like a bug-- “In those days, Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the sky ripped open and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’”

Mark says the sky was ripped open.

Just about a month ago, during the season of Advent, we heard a reading from the prophet Isaiah, “Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down!” Isaiah wants God to tear open the sky, smash through that dome. And I get the feeling he thinks God should come down here and kick some--people in the pants to set things right. “Tear open the heavens and come down!” Today we hear Epiphany’s answer to Advent.

The sky is ripped open, says Mark, and here comes, not a deluge of water to wipe us all out, not an angry God to take some names and knock some heads together, but the Holy Spirit, fluttering down like a dove, and the voice of God saying, “Here is my Son, the Beloved.” In this single, startling act, God our Creator smashes through the barrier that has separated us. God does it not in anger, but in love, and in that moment, God bridges the gap between us forever, starting on God’s side.

I believe God never intended for us to be separated from God like we imagined, to watch us from above like someone looks down on a slice of cheese under a glass. God didn’t separate from us, but we separated ourselves from God, and if anyone put up a firmament between us, maybe it’s a barrier of our own making. It may be that our early ancestors, as maybe some of us do today, just felt safer thinking of God on the other side of the glass up there and away. But our Bible tells us that God doesn’t want to be separate from us. In the story of the Incarnation, the sending of Jesus Christ to be a human for us, we meet Jesus living with us, under the same sky we do. In this Epiphany story we hear of God trying to become known to us by cracking through that dome and calling out, “Here is my Son! If



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you want to know me, get to know him.” And at last, the sky is ripped open, the dome is cracked, the barrier is gone.

This image of a ripped-open sky shows us God's determination to know us, and to be known by us. Epiphany is illustrated in this action, but that's not the end of it. Epiphany happens over and over again as God comes to us again and again, breaking down all those barriers we put in God's way. We see this in the story of Jesus as he heals and teaches, feeds and prays, and dies, all so we can be close to God.

There will also be another tearing apart, a ripping open, in Jesus' story. When he is crucified, the curtain in the temple, which separates the holy of holies from the rest of the temple will be torn in two, so that the holiest place is open to everyone, just as the crucifixion makes possible salvation for all.

At Jesus' baptism, the sky is torn open, the barrier comes down. At our own baptisms, the same happens. In our baptism we are also named as God's own children. In your baptism, you received the pledge that in you God is well-pleased. Because of Christ, there is nothing that can separate you from God's love. You can allow the fruits of faith grow in you and let them show forth in your life. You may find that God so fills you with love, that you have love to give away, love that can spill over into acts of love for others.

In baptism, the sky is ripped open, the barrier is gone. This is a promise guaranteed by God who tears the heavens open, who tears temple curtains open, who cracks our hearts of stone, to come to us, to hold us close and whisper to us, “You are my beloved child. I am with you always, and I will never let you go.”

Amen.