

Knox Uniting Church Cluster.

Sunday January 11th 2026 – (RCL: Year A. First day of Epiphany)

Sermon (reflection) by Russell Croxford at Scoresby Uniting Service

Bible passages: Isaiah 42:1-9 and Matthew 3:13-17 (NRSVUE)

“Heaven was opened”

INTRODUCTION TO THEME (EARLY WORD / PREAMBLE):

As I read through the gospel story today from Matthew, about the time when Jesus came to John the Baptist to be baptized, the line that stood out to me was the part that says, “heaven was opened” (v16). What exactly would that have been like for those present? We are told that Jesus saw the Spirit of God coming down on him like a dove, as he came up out of the water. And there was God’s voice speaking from heaven, saying, “This is my Son whom I love” (v17) Did only Jesus see that dove or hear that voice? Or did others experience that as well? But this got me thinking about my own experience. Have I had times when ‘heaven opened’ to me? I think I have. Not in the same way as Jesus experienced, but it has happened, maybe in more subtle ways. And I want to pose that question to you to think about today as well. How, when and where might ‘heaven be opened’ to you? Does that even happen? What might that actually mean?

MESSAGE:

I’m sure I’m not the only one here who has a love-hate relationship with computers. On one hand I love computers because they do fantastic things. As someone who grew up without them, I am constantly amazed at what my computer (and phone) can do. On the other hand, I sometimes hate my computer with a passion because it doesn’t do what I want it to do, or it stops doing what I urgently need it to do, and I can spend many frustrating hours trying to fix the problem. Often, I just give up and get help – almost always from a person who *did* grow up with computers! Now here’s the thing: When you get that answer or solution you need, it is one of those ‘aha’ moments in life – when we declare, “Wow, I never knew that. It’s so good to now know that!”

‘Aha moments’ are wonderful. They are those times of revelation or enlightenment – often called an *epiphany*. And guess what...we are in the season of ‘epiphany’ - when we celebrate the way God, through revelation, gives his people spiritual and theological ‘aha moments’ – moments of manifesting something new about himself. And that’s exactly what happened in our gospel story today.

The big ‘aha moment’, or epiphany in this story happened when, as it says, ‘heaven was opened’ (v16) and the Holy Spirit descended like a dove onto Jesus and God’s voice came from heaven saying, “this is my son, whom I love, with him I am well pleased” (v17).

This was a real ‘breakthrough’ (or perhaps ‘breaking in’ is a better term) moment, when something new was revealed. But what exactly was revealed? What was the purpose of this event?

We note that this is the first appearance of the adult Jesus in the gospel story, and his words here are his first spoken words recorded. So, it’s the beginning of something for sure, and that ‘something’ was his public ministry, which began soon after his baptism. So, in a way, this ‘opening of heaven’ event was like a commissioning by God, of his Son, for ministry - like God officially sending him off to do his work.

But it’s really important not to limit this event to just a commissioning of Jesus. This ‘heaven opening’ was perhaps more intended for the gathered witnesses than for Jesus himself. Now this is where the biblical scholars have a bit of a theological tussle. If it was for the witnesses (including Matthew’s readers) then was this event intended mainly to inform people of the *identity* of Jesus

as the Messiah? Or was the intention for it to be a *model* for our own baptism? What do you think about that?

Most commentators say that Matthew's intention was clearly to communicate *who* Jesus was – his *identity* as the true Son of God, the promised Messiah, in the line of David, as fulfillment of the scriptures. This has to be a key purpose of the 'heaven opening' revelation to people (and to us) in this story. But is that the only intention?

Is Jesus' baptism a model for our baptism too? It has to be, even if it wasn't Matthew's main intent. And I'm not necessarily talking about the physical method of full submersion in water. (Many of my Church of Christ friends might argue this point!). I'm talking about the imparting of the Holy Spirit, and a message from God to each of us, saying, "This is my daughter, my son, whom I love, and with whom I am well pleased".

So, it's *both* a revelation of the true identity of Jesus as the Christ, *and* a revelation of what baptism can mean for each of us.

Our Old Testament reading today from Isaiah 42 provides some excellent background thoughts about this 'dual' nature of Jesus' baptism, without even directly referring to Jesus or his baptism. In this passage we are introduced to 'the servant' (v1) who will have God's Spirit on him (v1) and who establish justice on the earth (v 3-4). It sounds very much like Jesus being described, doesn't it? And, in a *prophetic* sense it is describing who Jesus would one day be. But in the context of the troubled times in which it was written, these words are just as likely to be talking an individual, probably a new king, who will bring them their long-desired justice.

Or it could be talking about the *whole* of Israel, collectively being called 'The Servant'. In verses 6-7, when the Lord says, "*I have called you in righteousness; I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness*", (cf Luke 4:18), we could think of that as God's words to his Son, but also to all of us.

If we, also are 'the servant', as this passage seems to suggest, then we must hear these words as God's call to all of us. In Isaiah, 'The Servant' is anyone doing God's work of justice in the world. Relating that to baptism, we all share in the baptism, and the call of Jesus! So, we as his servants, in our baptism are invited into what God is doing in the world, into his purposes of spreading to others his love, grace and peace.

So, the 'opening of heaven' at Jesus' baptism, is potentially an 'aha moment' for all of us. This brings me back to the question about the ways in which each of us might experience the 'opening of heaven' personally. How is heaven opened for you? In what ways have you felt God reveal himself to you in some special way? Put more simply, how and when have you felt particularly close to God? What draws you to him?

As I reflected on this a few thoughts came to mind about how one might experience 'heaven opening' in a deeper more real sense.

Well, there are the obvious ways of course, like prayer and worship for example which are like doorways into a closer experience of God, as long as we are not simply 'going through the motions' and these activities are sincerely coming from our hearts, not just our heads.

This true 'heart-response' needs to start, I believe, by *admitting our need*. When I mention the phrase, "the heavens opened", what images come to mind? Often, we say "the heavens opened" when it starts to pour raining. This of course is so relevant to us after the heatwave and dry weather we've had over the last couple of weeks. Our gardens have been wilting. The ground is becoming dry and cracked. How good was it that some rain eventually came late in the week. The dry ground was groaning for water. This is a great illustration of us admitting our need. We are like that dry, cracked earth, needing so much the life-giving flow of water which only God can provide.

It also means surrendering and submitting. This is what Jesus did. John the Baptist knew that Jesus was greater than him and so he thought it should be Jesus baptising him. But Jesus had to model for John and for us what it means to submit to being humble, human, and in need of God. To put all pride aside, in other words.

Diane G. Chen ('Working Preacher' January 8th, 2023), commenting on Jesus' baptism, offers an interesting insight about this, saying that there was a real culture of 'honour and shame' in Jesus' time. Thus, for any self-respecting, 'dignified' person with any pride, to get baptised by John, would actually be a very hard to do, since it meant admitting one's need and submitting to this humble act, at the risk of it damaging their reputation! I hadn't ever thought of that. Jesus, who in one sense didn't need to be baptised, in submitting to John and to his Father, stands in solidarity with all of us in our human weakness, and in that moment the heavens are opened to him and all of us.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the heavens open when we *act like Jesus*. That is, when we follow him, journey with him, do what he does, bringing hope to a damaged world, just like 'the servant' in Isaiah. It's in the doing, that the heavens open – not just for us, but our doing opens heaven for others.

So, we must 'read ourselves' into Jesus' baptism and make it our own. We must aim to re-live, daily our own baptism, if indeed we have been baptised. We must always be seeking the 'new things that spring forth' as it says in Isaiah (42:9).

Bless you as you experience heaven being opened to you and to others around you as you take on the likeness of Christ and share it with others.