Sunday, January 11, 2004
HEAVEN IS OPEN
Luke 3:15-17,21-22

Competitive team sports that have a time limit on the duration of the game, such as football, basketball, hockey, and soccer, allow a certain number of "time-outs" when the clock is stopped, and the team can consult with its coaching staff. A longer "time out" is the "half-time" break when, according to the clock, the game is half over. During half-time, the competing teams go to their respective locker rooms, and with the coach's leadership, reassess their game plan and make the necessary adjustments for the second half of the game, with the hope that these changes will help them overcome their mistakes and be victorious. Sometimes amazing things happen during half-time. A team that seemed to lack energy and motivation will return to the field and be a different team altogether. What made the difference? Was it the coach's motivating speech? Was it the new game plan? Was it a new sense of purpose?

Although your life cannot be neatly and equally divided into two halves because you do not know when your life will end, you've probably taken a number of "time-outs" at certain points in your life and done your best to reassess your life's purpose and plan. Some people call it a "mid-life crisis." Many people have more than one mid-life crisis. It's possible that some of your "time-outs" or "half-time" breaks were not of your own choice. Maybe you were fired from a job, or you had a heart attack and couldn't work for six or eight weeks, or you were diagnosed with cancer and needed treatment, or your spouse died suddenly or filed for a divorce. If you're a student, maybe you got a failing grade or discovered you were majoring in the wrong subject, or headed toward the wrong vocation. These can be major breaks in your life.

A half-time pause, a major time-out in the life of Jesus, took place when he was about 30 years old. That's what the story in Luke's gospel is describing, which you heard earlier as the scripture reading. Little is known about the first 30 years of Jesus' life. Luke tells the story of his going with his parents to Jerusalem at age 12 and staying behind in order to learn as much as possible from the religious teachers in the Temple. That's it.

Now, all of a sudden, at age 30, he appears among the people who are followers of John the Baptist, and he is baptized by John. Whether or not Jesus, during those first 30 years of his life, thought much about what he would be doing later in life is not known. Maybe he was like many people today and did not have the time or take the time to think about how he would spend the rest of his life.

Consider your life. Maybe you are a student in middle school, high school, or college. Or maybe you are in your first job after high school or college. And it could be that you are recently married or have been married for a few years and have your first child. In these early years of your life, you may not have taken much time or felt you had much time for reflection and reassessment.

It's possible that this was true for Jesus. Some scholars believe that he worked in his dad's carpenter's shop until he was a young adult. Then maybe he left home around age 20 and became a disciple of John the Baptist. No one knows for sure.

What is known is that around age 30, he was baptized by John the Baptist and at the same time experienced anew the Holy Spirit of God. The four gospels — Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John — give slightly different versions of the baptism of Jesus. However, all of them include

the mysterious phrase, “The Heaven was opened.” They also report that Jesus heard God say, “You are my son, the beloved, and with you I am well pleased.” He experienced God’s affirmation.

The story is pivotal in the life of Jesus. Heaven is open, which is to say, Jesus had a vision and experience of another dimension of reality. Heaven and earth are joined. Creation is one. This experience changed him. He knew that now it was time for a new direction in his life. It was time to begin his public ministry of teaching and healing.

Madeleine L’Engle writes of the baptism of Jesus from Mary’s perspective, the view of this young mother who was told such unbelievable things by such improbable beings. Mary, who pondered these mysteries in her heart, doubted and wondered.

L’Engle imagines Mary thinking and saying, “Yes, of course, on many days I doubted. My faith grew out of doubt...and I was waiting, remembering in my heart the very things that caused my doubt: the angel’s first appearing to me and then to Joseph; shepherds, kings, the escape to Egypt. But I had to face it all as true the day Jesus was baptized.”

Heaven is open. I like this phrase, this metaphor. In the deepest sense, heaven was open to Jesus’s mother that day also. It can be true for you. In the major breaks in your life, if you stop and listen, you can rediscover God’s purpose for your life. Heaven is open. You see new possibilities. You sense God’s affirmation of your life as you consider new options. You gain a new understanding of the power of God.

Note especially what Jesus did after this “heaven is open” experience. Although it is not included in today’s reading from the gospel, Luke tells us a few verses later that he went into the desert for 40 days of meditation and prayer to consider his next steps. In the language of sports, he took time to consider what God’s new game plan for him might be. If you are hearing an inner voice trying to get your attention, it is time to head for the locker room, catch your breath, listen to your coach, and get ready for the second half.

Heaven is open! Not only is this statement about what happened to Jesus and what can happen to you in the “half-times” or “time-outs” in your life, but it’s also a statement about the Holy and the Sacred, that which the Jewish tradition and the Christian faith call “God.” This story is proclaiming that heaven is open to you and to everyone. It’s another way of saying that God’s grace is for everyone.

Yet there have been people throughout history who want to place limits on God’s grace. They don’t like the idea of heaven being open. There are churches even today that claim to have a monopoly on God’s grace. So I can understand why, for some people — and this could include some of you listening to this sermon — this is an age when you might be suspicious of spiritual realities. There are many who have doubts about the relevance of religious institutions and their liturgical requirements. This story about the baptism of Jesus is a good example.

Some churches say that unless you are baptized according to their method and accept their creed, their right belief, heaven is not open to you. Others say infant baptism doesn’t count. Some even say that unless the right words are used in the ceremony, the baptism is invalid.

You can understand why some people are cynical. They intuitively sense that the church’s bickering is an attempt to control access to God. Rather than proclaiming that heaven, or access to God, is open to everyone and that you can experience the Sacred and the Holy in

many ways, they claim that unless you do it their way and believe as they do, you are denied access. Instead of standing on the shore and being caught up in the power of a vast, beautiful ocean, some people and churches turn and look for a puddle that they can fence in as their own.

Sometimes those who are hanging around the edges of the church have the most revealing observations about Bible stories. A professor of New Testament from Yale was speaking to a high school youth group in New Haven, Connecticut. He was leading a discussion on this story from Luke's gospel describing the baptism of Jesus. One young man in the back of the room seemed not to be paying much attention. After the professor finished speaking about the significance of Jesus' baptism as a revelation of God's presence in Jesus, the young man said, without looking up, "I think it means much more than that."

Delighted that the student had been listening enough to disagree, the professor asked, "What else do you think it means?" The young man replied, "The story says that the heavens were opened, right?" "Right," the professor agreed. "The heavens were opened and the Spirit of God came down, right?" "That's correct." The young man looked up, leaned forward, and said, "It means that God is on the loose in the world. And it is dangerous."

Heaven is open. God is on the loose in the world. It is dangerous. Jesus discovered that soon enough. After his baptism, he taught in the synagogues, and it was dangerous. He healed on the Sabbath, and it was dangerous. He ate with outcasts and sinners, and it was dangerous. He talked with women and Samaritans, and it was dangerous. It was dangerous, but only to those who wanted to limit the grace of God.

Heaven is open. That was the message of Jesus in everything he did, lived, and taught. God's grace is unconditional. There are no barriers between God and human beings.

There's one other metaphor in this story of Jesus' baptism which amplifies the phrase "heaven is open." Luke and the other gospel writers add this amazing statement: "the Holy Spirit descended upon him like a dove."

Later in his ministry, Jesus described God as "being on the loose" in the world in other ways. He said, "The Spirit of God is like the wind. The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes." God's Spirit is not only like a dove, it is also like the wind.

Heaven is open! The late Henri Nouwen, a Roman Catholic priest and prolific writer and teacher, once said, "The hardest thing for us to understand is how God can love all human beings with the same unlimited love, while at the same time loving each one in a unique way." He went on to say, "Somehow, we think we can only fully enjoy our being loved by God if we believe others are loved less than we."

If you were raised in a family where you were not the only child, you probably accused your parents at one time or another of loving one of the children more than the others. The evidence seems to indicate that the first child is favored. First children have enormous wardrobes. Second children wear hand-me-downs. First children are treated like porcelain, second children are treated like tupperware. When your first child drops a pacifier, you boil it for ten minutes. When the second child drops a pacifier, you tell the dog to fetch it. How do I know this? I am a second child.

The experience of Jesus that “heaven is open” is not easy to accept. It is difficult to understand that God loves all equally and each uniquely. It is not easy to accept the fact that your enemies are not also God’s enemies, or that the people who so flagrantly abuse the standards of integrity, faithfulness, and justice to which you are committed are somehow loved by God as you are.

Heaven is open! This understanding of God is not easy because too many people in their childhood received a definition of God as record keeper, finger pointer, stern judge, giving out punishments. Anne Lamott describes her early concept of God as being like a high school principal leafing through her files and not liking what He’s finding.

But do not misunderstand. This fact that heaven is open is not “cheap grace.” One of my preaching professors at Yale was William Muehl. He once preached a sermon with the title, “To Hell With Acceptance.” It was based on the parable of the Prodigal Son. This son, he said, was up the next morning after his welcome home party and was expected to be at work in the field with his older brother.

In the same vein, the forgiven spouse is redeemed not only by special treatment, but when he or she is expected to rejoin the marriage with all its responsibilities. A husband knows that forgiveness and reconciliation have happened not only when his wife treats him with sweet kindness, but when his wife hands him the dish towel and says, “OK, buster, it’s your turn to dry.” You know then that you are not only forgiven but also that you are wanted and valued. That’s good news!

The fact that heaven is open tells you that the purpose of grace is not only to allow you to accept the past, but also to give you a future.

I hope that for each one of you a little bit of heaven has opened today. I also hope that you will experience the Spirit of God descending on you like a dove and you will hear once again God saying to you, “You are my child, my beloved, with you I am well pleased.” Amen.