

# Heaven Opened

Text : Matthew 3:13-17

13 Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John.

14 But John tried to deter him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"

15 Jesus replied, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." Then John consented.

16 As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him.

17 And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

## ❖ Introduction

Good morning! It's so good to see you.

Yesterday I heard from Pastor Mike that he injured his back and is having difficulty moving. I've experienced back pain myself, so I know how challenging that can be. Please keep him in your prayers. I hope he's able to get some good rest and makes a quick and full recovery.

When I received his message yesterday, I actually had a full day scheduled in the city, so I felt quite a bit of pressure. But I decided to say yes first and figure things out later, so I immediately responded that I would come and preach.

As I prepared for today, I found myself reflecting on how meaningful it is that Pastor Mike thought of me and asked me to stand in his place. It reminded me how beautiful it is to stand in for someone else. And I felt deeply grateful for the opportunity to reflect on what it means to "stand in someone else's place."

## ❖ A Life of Standing in for Others

We are now in the season after Easter, what the Church calls the "Great Fifty Days of Joy." As you know, this is a time when we are called to live out the life of the risen Christ in our daily lives.

Earlier, I showed you a lemon tree and an avocado tree. When you plant a lemon seed, a lemon tree grows. When you plant an avocado seed, an avocado tree grows.

If Christ lives in us, then it is only natural that we begin to live like Christ. And what did Christ show us? He showed us the cross and the resurrection.

Just as Jesus bore our sins and carried the cross in our place, when we begin to live lives that more willingly stand in for others, we begin to experience the power of the resurrection in a real and tangible way.

So I say this with confidence—if I end up completely failing this sermon today and experience a kind of “social death,” I trust that I will also experience resurrection.

### ❖ The Mystery of Heaven Opening

Today’s passage from the Gospel of Matthew describes the moment when Jesus is baptized by John. And in this moment, something extraordinary happens: heaven is opened, the Spirit of God descends like a dove, and the voice of God is heard.

Have you ever experienced a moment when heaven seemed to open in your life?

A moment when your finite, fragile life suddenly feels connected to eternity...

When a life as delicate as a flower that will fade in a few days suddenly takes on infinite meaning...

When everything around you feels closed off, and yet—not somewhere else—but heaven itself opens...

If we want to understand that kind of experience, we first need to understand what baptism means.

### ❖ The Meaning of Baptism and Water

When we are baptized, we use water. Sometimes a person is fully immersed in water, and sometimes water is simply poured over the head.

What does water symbolize?

**First**, water represents cleansing. It symbolizes the grace of God that washes away the sin that has stained our lives. Human beings cannot cleanse their own sin. The wages of sin is death. Because God is holy and cannot dwell with sin, sin creates separation between God and humanity—and that separation is death.

When God created humanity, He gave life. But because God Himself is life, there is a separation between God and sinful humanity. Yet God Himself washes away that sin. Baptism is the moment when we receive that grace.

Water also represents death. The flood in Noah’s time was a water of destruction. In Christian tradition, crossing the Jordan River has often been understood as a symbol of passing into the next life. In that sense, entering the water represents death.

So baptism is the moment when we die. The anxious self, the greedy self, the angry self, the self that craves recognition, the self that wants to appear superior, the self-centered self—all of that dies.

But at the same time, water is life. All living things contain water. About 70% of our bodies is water.

There's a humorous story: a man once asked a woman he liked if she liked water. She said yes. He replied, "Then you already like 70% of me."

Water is essential for life. A baby is protected in amniotic fluid in the mother's womb, and when the baby emerges from that water, it begins to breathe.

So water represents both death and life. Through baptism, we die—and at the same time, we receive new life.

#### ❖ The Baptism of the Sinless One

But there is something very strange in today's passage. Jesus, who is without sin, receives baptism.

John is confused:

"I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"

John's reaction makes perfect sense, because his baptism was for sinners. Yet the sinless Son of God comes to receive a baptism meant for sinners. Why?

Because Jesus stands in the place of sinners. He stands in their line. He takes upon Himself the sins of all humanity.

The hardest thing in life is to carry a burden that is not our own. We struggle most when something feels unfair. We instinctively say, "That's not my fault."

But Jesus does not say that. Instead, He says,

"I will carry it."

This is the gospel.

#### ❖ The Physics of Love

There is a Korean poem called 'The Physics of Love.' I'll read it for you.

The size of mass is not proportional to its volume.

That tiny girl, small like a violet,

that girl fluttering like a flower petal,

pulls me with a mass greater than the earth.

In that instant,  
like Newton's apple,  
I rolled helplessly toward her.  
With a thud, with repeated thuds,  
my heart kept swinging  
like a dizzy pendulum  
from heaven to earth.  
It was my first love.

Isn't that beautiful? "The size of mass is not proportional to its volume." In other words, something very small can have enormous power.

In the poem, a tiny girl, delicate like a violet flower, pulls the poet toward her with a force greater than the earth itself. Why? Because of love.

My 19-year-old daughter recently started dating. Both of them are busy students with part-time jobs, so they don't have much time. Sometimes they meet early in the morning. Normally, she struggles to wake up—but now, she wakes up early without hesitation.

When people are in love, they find strength they didn't know they had. Someone who doesn't want to walk a block will travel across a city, even across countries.

Love changes what we are capable of.

And today's passage shows us the greatest power of love.

### ❖ The Moment Heaven Opens

When Jesus was baptized, heaven opened. The Spirit descended, and a voice was heard:

"This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

When did heaven open?

Not when Jesus performed miracles. Not when crowds applauded Him. Heaven opened when Jesus stood in the place of sinners. Jesus went to the cross grounded in the assurance of the Father's love. People live by love. Children who are deeply loved develop resilience. The same is true for us. When we are deeply immersed in God's love, we gain the strength to carry the cross.

## ❖ Gift and Faith

Many years ago, when I was serving as a youth pastor in Korea, I was preaching about faith. While preaching, I took off the watch I was wearing and offered it to one of the students.

But the student hesitated and didn't take it.

So I turned to another student and offered it again. That student, a bit confused, smiled—and took it.

After the sermon, did I ask for the watch back? Of course not.

No matter how valuable a gift is, if the person doesn't receive it, it cannot be given.

Our faith works the same way. God gives us incredible gifts, but if we don't believe that He truly gives them, we cannot receive them. But the one who receives by faith gets to enjoy it.

Dear brothers and sisters, Jesus stood in the line of sinners. That path led to the cross—but it was there that heaven opened.

The same is true for us. When we are filled with God's love and willingly carry the burdens of others, heaven opens in our lives.

And in that moment, we hear the voice of God:

“You are my beloved child; with you I am well pleased.”

Brothers and sisters,  
remember this: the risen Christ lives in you.  
Even when life feels difficult,  
His life is at work within you.  
So go in peace,  
and live as people of resurrection.  
And now may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,  
the love of God,  
and the communion of the Holy Spirit  
be with you all,  
now and forever.  
Amen.