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OPENING UP HEAVEN

William Barker tells the story of a machinist in the Ford Motor Company in Detroit who, over the years, had “borrowed” various parts and tools from the company without bothering to return them.

- Now, while this practice was frowned upon, it was more or less accepted by management, and nothing was done about it.

The machinist, one day, experienced a Christian conversion.

- He became a devout believer and was baptized.
  - Moreover, he took his baptismal covenant seriously, that the very next morning, he arrived at work loaded down with all the tools and parts he had taken from the company over the years.
    - He explained the situation to his foreman, and added that he’d never really meant to steal them and that he hoped he’d be forgiven.

The foreman was so astonished and impressed by the machinist’s actions that he cabled Henry Ford, himself, who was visiting a European factory, and explained the events in detail.

- Immediately, Ford cabled back, “Dam up the Detroit River and baptize the entire city!”
  - If only every Christian would take his or her baptism as seriously!
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This morning our text relates the story of the baptism of JESUS.

- And it tells us that, after JESUS was baptized, the heavens were opened and the HOLY SPIRIT descended upon HIM.
  - What an exciting moment!
    - Luke’s version gives us a bit more insight into the event by telling us that after JESUS was baptized, HE was praying and the heavens were opened.
  - It should be no surprise to us that, immediately following HIS baptism, JESUS prayed.
    - Prayer had a major place in HIS life and ministry.
      - Even though JESUS was literally “GOD made flesh,” JESUS felt the need to regularly be in conversation with the FATHER.
  - But when we look at our own practices—we who have been baptized—communication with GOD is occasional at best.
    - I will admit that aside from my morning conversation with GOD, a prayer before meals, and at the close of the day, my communication with GOD is more miss than hit.
    - Perhaps you, too, may have a similar relationship.
      - Instead of utilizing prayer as tool for growing closer to GOD, we spend only a marginal amount of time in dialog with our heavenly FATHER.
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A student director at a large university was giving a guest speaker a tour of the campus ministry center.

- As they walked down a hallway, the guest saw a sign marked “Prayer Room” over a doorway.
- When it became clear that the director did not intend to show his guest the room, the speaker opened the door.
  - At once, his nostrils were assaulted by a musty, dank smell.
  - The room was filled with boxes, clothing and hangers, and junk.
    - On the altar stood a pair of worn cowboy boots, and old vodka box, and a roll of toilet tissue.
- A bit embarrassed, the director quickly explained, “We used this room for storage during the summer and we haven’t gotten it cleaned out yet.”

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Filling a prayer room with junk may seem a very irreverent thing to do.

- But when we think about our own lives, isn't that story reflective?
    - Isn't it easy to fill our lives with so many little, unimportant things that our time with GOD each day is pushed aside or buried under?
      - We become so occupied with day-to-day "junk" (so to speak) that we do little at best to live out our baptisms.
  - JESUS never let that happen.
    - After HE was baptized, JESUS prayed...and what happened?
      - Heaven was opened...and the HOLY SPIRIT came down.
        - What a wonderful possibility that is!
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In his book, GOD'S Seven Wonders for You, Charles Allen tells of Captain Eddie Rickenbacker and the three awful weeks he and his crew spent in a small raft lost in the Pacific after their plane was shot down.

- When asked how they were able to endure that experience, stranded in the middle of the ocean, Rickenbacker simply answered, "We prayed."
- For days they drifted helplessly under the scorching tropical sun.
- The heat, the hunger, the exhaustion brought Rickenbacker and his young, inexperienced crew to the breaking point.
  - But Eddie Rickenbacker believed in the power of prayer.
    - He led his crew in prayer each day, and indeed, one day the heavens opened.
    - Rather than a dove, though, it was a seagull that descended.
      - It flew down from out of nowhere and landed right on Captain Rickenbacker's head.
        - He managed to grab it by the leg.
        - Now they had food, and they had bait for their fishhooks.
  - They continued to pray and the heavens were opened again, this time with rain and they had fresh water.
    - The crew was sustained and their hopes renewed.
  - Each day they prayed, and after three weeks, the heavens opened and they were spotted by a passing plane and rescued.
    - Rickenbacker's explanation to their survival and rescue: "We prayed."
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What happens when we pray?

- The heavens open and the HOLY SPIRIT descends to inspire us with promise hope and new life.
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In the north of England, they have been digging coal for more than a century.

- The tunnels wind and branch off miles and miles away from the central shaft, so there's always the danger of men getting lost.
  - On one particular occasion, two miners did, in fact, lose their way.
    - When their lights failed, they were now in danger of losing their lives.
- After wandering around in the darkness for a long time, they sat down.
- One of the men suggested prayer.
  - They sat and prayed for what seemed like hours when, suddenly, one of them felt a slight touch of air on his cheek.
    - Air in the mine always moves toward the central shaft.
  - Up he sprang, exclaiming, "I felt it!"
    - They went in the direction the air was moving and reached the central shaft and their freedom from their dark captivity.

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We also need to feel the movement of air, do we not?

- We need to experience the movement of the breath of GOD'S SPIRIT in our lives to bring us out of the darkness into the light.

We are just a week removed from the beginning of a new year.

- This can be a time of new beginnings for us.
- I don't know where you are with New Year's resolutions, but let me suggest that we recommit ourselves to our relationship with GOD, begun in baptism.
  - Let us today renew our baptism and endeavor to take seriously the commitments we made in baptism.
  - Let us seek to begin and end each day in conversation with our heavenly FATHER.
  - Let us strive to make prayer an important part of our lives each day in this new year.

Toward that end, let me offer some things to try to help make prayer a regular practice for you:

- When you hear a siren, pray for those who are going to serve and protect others and pray for those to whom they are going to assist.
- Look around you and pray for the situations you notice:
  - for the relationship between couples, or parents and children, or friends, or for the lives of those who seem to be alone.
- As you listen to the news, pray for our leaders, our community, nation, and world.
- Pay attention to how you are feeling and allow those emotions to guide you in praising GOD or seeking GOD'S intervention or guidance in your life.
- Before you sit down to have a conversation with someone, speak a prayer for that person and for your time together.
  - And then see if you can't discern from your conversation one thing for which you can pray when you are done.
  - Perhaps even challenge yourself to offer that prayer while with the other person so that s/he might be blessed to know that you are speaking to GOD on that person's behalf.

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When JESUS came out of the water after baptism, HE prayed.

- And it was not the last time HE did so.
- JESUS prayed often, and when HE did, the heavens were opened.
  - Let us commit to following HIS example, to pray regularly, so that we might see the heavens open, the SPIRIT descend, and discover anew the ways that GOD blessings are poured down upon us through the guiding and the power of the HOLY SPIRIT.