

Our church office is graced during the workday week by the presence of Liesl the dachshund, who recently celebrated a birthday.

She is getting to the point where it is no longer seemly to ask her age, but her vigor is unabated, especially when one of her presents is a squeaky chew toy.

As soon as she bites down on it and hears it make a noise, she turns relentless, a fierce flurry of paws and teeth intent on ripping it to shreds until she can find the magic inside.

It is a striking parallel to earnest human spirituality.

We too want to know about how things work, so we tear them apart, deconstruct them as intellectuals or dig into them as archaeologists or grave robbers, pierce them with lasers and x-rays that will give us pictures and clues to explain the squeak, that external manifestation of some internal mechanism.

We scrutinize and shred celebrities, athletes, politicians, truth claims of every stripe, anything that seems to have some sort of magic inside that we can sense but not see, experience but not control.

It is no different with the ultimate, the maddening, squeaky mystery we call God, and if we could we would tear open the sky itself in our search for the wizard behind the curtain.

Israel's prophet Isaiah, as unable to reach or to rend the heavens as the rest of us, knowing there was a magic inside them that had gone strangely silent, famously prayed on behalf of his people, *O that you would tear open the heavens and come down...*

He sighs and pants like a desperate dog unable to chew open a toy more resilient than even his relentless effort, and his poignant plea cascades down across so many frustrated generations, resonating with so many people of faith throughout the ages who claw and scratch at the mystery but cannot open it, cannot reach it, cannot grasp it, cannot get a satisfying handle on the all-consuming magic that is Life, Meaning, God.

So Isaiah asks God to do it, asks the voice inside to rip itself open and come down, to release the magic on behalf of his frustrated people.

Who knows if the prayer is even heard, much less whether the wizard is willing to risk parting the curtain?

Why, after all, would any plastic squeaker with any sense willingly subject itself to the teeth of the dog?

The good news, Mark writes, is that Isaiah's impertinent prayer is answered with a startling yes.

It happens for Jesus, and it also happens to be Jesus, who appears on the scene now for the first time after Mark began with only his name, spoken at the very start as if by a voice behind a curtain: *The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*

After this announcement we first see John the baptizer.

Now, here, Jesus appears, and we barely see him until his head is dripping wet with promise, which is when Mark really wants us to look at him and to watch what happens.

*Just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him.*

God rips open the sky and releases the magic inside.

The Bible's word for this is *spirit*, which also means breath or wind.

It is the magic inside all of us as long as we are alive, the irreducible mystery of our identity and personality and sound and fury, the thing inside all of us that makes people want to tear us open one way or another, for reasons both noble and not, to find out what makes us tick.

It is the Spirit that sweeps across the waters at the baptism of creation, now the magic outside that pulls forth from the wet, swirling chaos the miracle of dry land.

This is the truly good news of creation, if you're an ancient Israelite, because you have been terrified of water ever since that episode with the Red Sea that fully convinced you that the desert was the place to live.

Dry land means that humanity has a safe place to stand, and of course that's what Jesus means too.

In this figure that the Spirit pulls forth from the water we have a safe place to stand with the perilously powerful God.

Connected to him in our own baptisms, and filled with the same sacred breath or Holy Spirit, we are given both the security of safe footing in our relationship with God and with it the power to create and re-create the world, the power to make beautiful magic happen ourselves, the power and also the responsibility of bringing forth safe footing and good standing for others.

Infused with the Spirit and following Jesus, we are called in our own baptisms to *serve all people and strive for justice and peace in all the earth*, which is to say to keep making room for others to live and to thrive.

This, however, as our slain brother Martin Luther King, Jr. reminds us, is often dangerous work. The world is a violent and fearful place.

Lives get torn open.

Heavens get emptied.

Immediately after his baptism, the Spirit sends Jesus into the wilds to be tempted, into the crucible where the squeaky toy is product-tested for the violence sure to come.

He must be prepared and toughened for the public marketplace, where humanity doggedly continues its tireless quest for control of the magic by ripping people apart.

Mark's gospel quickly becomes a battleground where forces of separation that would rip open people engage against a God who will rip open the sky in order to reach people in order to put them back together again.

Story after story presents a new theater in the same struggle: authorities question and ensnare and conspire to kill as Jesus teaches and inspires, heals and restores.

The conflict continues to mount until finally, inevitably the magic squeaker gives way to the teeth of the dog.

Surrounded for the last time by his friends, the cowards that will betray and abandon him, Jesus takes bread and tears it open like the heavens above him and says, *This is my body*.

He must show them now because they will not be around tomorrow when it actually happens, when his body is ripped apart on the cross.

Three agonizing hours in, the dog silences the toy.

It squeaks its final sound and goes limp, and at that moment, the curtain in the temple, the barrier between God and humanity, the symbolic sky, is torn apart.

The holy breath has escaped.

The magic is released.

It is *the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God*.