

Be Opened

Isaiah 35: 4-7a

Psalm 146

Mark 7:24-37

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Isaiah 35: 4-7a

Say to those who are of a fearful heart, “Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you.” Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool.

Psalm 146

Praise the LORD! Praise the LORD, O my soul! I will praise the LORD as long as I live; I will sing praises to my God all my life long. Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals, in whom there is no help. When their breath departs, they return to the earth; on that very day their plans perish. Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD their God, who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them; who keeps faith forever; who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry. The LORD sets the prisoners free; the LORD opens the eyes of the blind. The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down; the LORD loves the righteous. The LORD watches over the strangers; he upholds the orphan and the widow, but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin. The LORD will reign forever, your God, O Zion, for all generations. Praise the LORD!

Mark 7:24-37

From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” But she answered him, “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” Then he said to her, “For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.” So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, “Ephphatha,” that is, “Be opened.” And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. They were astounded beyond measure, saying, “He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.”

The hills are alive with the sound of music for Maria von Trapp, as this is where her eyes and her soul were opened to God's calling on her life. As she confessed to the Mother Superior when she was again in trouble for being late, she explained,

"Yes, you see, the sky was so blue today. . . .and everything was so green and fragrant, I had to be a part of it. The Untersberg led me higher like it wanted me to go through the clouds. That's my mountain. I was brought up on it. It was the mountain that led me to you. When I was a child, I would come down and climb a tree. . . .and look in your garden. I'd see the sisters at work and hear them sing."

When Maria was then asked, "What is the most important lesson you have learned here,?" she responded, "To find out what is the will of God and do it wholeheartedly."

The hills opened Maria's eyes to where God was calling her in her life, it was how she first began to know that she wanted to do what was the will of God and then to do it wholeheartedly.

Her eyes and ears were opened on the mountain. For many people it is in nature that they feel closest to God, to be in the beauty of creation, to see and climb and touch and explore what God has created. For others it is through music—music played, heard or sung—that brings the divine closer. For others it is acts of compassion, caring and service, that mimic the healing, caring, teaching, welcoming actions of Jesus Christ. While we are always in the midst of God's presence, there are particular ways in which we are more opened to that presence, more attuned, more aware.

Be opened. Being opened to the presence of God is so important, so essential, to Jesus' teachings that the gospel contains his original Aramaic word, "Ephphatha." This is the word he used when he healed the deaf man with a speech impediment. This unnamed man was isolated from the community as he was cut off from hearing others or from speaking with them. When Jesus healed him and spoke the word, "Ephphatha," he literally opened the gates that kept this man from the fullness of his life. The way to life was opened by Jesus. He could now hear conversations, laughter, cries, and all the sacred stories and history of God's loving relationship with Israel, the accounts of God's action on behalf of God's people, and he could hear Jesus speak of God's love for him.

"Ephphatha." There are only a few times in which the bible quotes Jesus in his native Aramaic, a language similar to Hebrew, rather than being translated into Greek, the original language of the gospels. Jesus called God, 'Abba,' an Aramaic word for 'father' that is more closely related to 'daddy.' When he raised Jairus' daughter from the dead, Jesus said, "Talitha koum," an Aramaic tender term of endearment meaning 'my little lamb.' And it was on the cross that Jesus cried out, "Eloi, Eloi, Lama Sabachtani," meaning "my God, my God, why have you forsaken me!"

Retaining these words, the gospel writers wanted to emphasize the original power and emphasis of Christ's original utterance, to truly convey the emotion that welled up from within the core and depth of his very being. The original Aramaic words deliberately call us to see the intimacy of the particular moment and the personal relationship of Jesus with the one to whom he is speaking.

'Be opened' is as intimate and personal as 'Daddy', as 'Little Lamb,' as 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me,' and that is certainly something for us to notice. There is intimacy, closeness, and emotion from Jesus as he leads us to be opened. This is not casual or unintentional when Jesus leads us to be opened to God in our lives. Whatever his fingers need to touch, whatever personal and intimate way he can, Jesus opens the way for us to hear the voice

of God in our lives, to tell our faith story and journey, to hear of God's love for us. Ephphatha to the presence of Jesus, the presence of God, for the fullness of our lives.

In all of the healings that Jesus offered throughout his ministry, this is the only one in which we hear "Ephphatha, be opened," and it happens just after Jesus himself has been opened by an outsider, by an unclean, Gentile Syrophenician woman who is unaccompanied by a man and yet speaks to man. She broke down a series of traditional barriers and taboos to seek help for her daughter who was acting in ways that were bizarre and anti-social. When she fell to her knees begging for his help, Jesus harshly rejected her for being an outsider. Jesus will not take away from the children, from Israel, to feed the dogs, the Gentiles. The racial undertones are clear in his dismissal, yet the bold and tenacious mother is witty and quick with her response, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Whether Jesus was testing her faith or was having an exhausted human moment or truly intended to stay only among the Jews, this unnamed mother has opened Jesus' eyes, and for this, her daughter is healed. God's love and grace is unbounded by ethnic, cultural, political and social boundaries.

Ephphatha, be opened, be opened to the presence and love and call of God in your life, in our world. Be opened to the God who calms a fearful heart, who comes and saves, who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry, who open eyes and ears. Be opened to the eternal Spirit more than those whose plans perish when their breath departs. Ephphatha to the One who sets us free from the prisons that seek to bind and limit us in despair and darkness, to the One who strengthens and heals us when we are bowed down, to the One who upholds us when we are at our most vulnerable.

My own "Ephphatha" came as I was walking down a hospital corridor to visit my first patient for Clinical Pastoral Education, a semester long chaplaincy experience as a part of my seminary training. I was feeling so anxious, overwhelmed, unprepared and out of place. Yes I had had several classes on pastoral care and the bible and ethics, and so much more, but that was all abstract as I was going to support a woman on her way to a radical, life-changing surgery, and she was rightly, naturally, terrified of all that lay ahead. Despite wanting to turn back down the hall, I kept walking and praying for the right words, the right presence, to offer her. Just as I was about to enter her room, a very clear voice whispered in my ear, "You can't change what is going to happen, but you can impact how it happens." That holy spit empowered me to enter the room, to be the listening and calming presence that she needed as we spent time together, as I was able to walk beside her almost to the operating room door, and then visit her as she was recovering. That holy spit lingered with me so that I could serve as a hospice chaplain for 16 years, and continue to minister to, to walk with, people through any experience.

An unexpected, intimate, close, Jesus 'Ephphatha' moment, experience in your life will be with you long after you have climbed down from the mountain, or enjoyed the stunning splendor of a sunset, or sung a favorite hymn, or served another in Jesus' name. It will linger with you long after Jesus has called you aside from the busy crowd of your day, touched you, healed you, and whispered "Ephphatha." Amen.