

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church - Watertown, WI
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“Ephphatha!”

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September 5, 2021

“. . . Some people brought to him a man who was deaf and could hardly talk, and they begged him to place his hand on the man. After he took him aside, away from the crowd, Jesus put his fingers into the man’s ears. Then he spit and touched the man’s tongue. He looked up to heaven and with a deep sigh said to him, ‘Ephphatha!’ (which means, ‘Be opened!’). At this, the man’s ears were opened, his tongue was released and he began to speak plainly” (Mark 7:32-35).

Jesus is back in the region of the Decapolis. This is Gentile territory, off the eastern shores of the Sea of Galilee. You remember what happened here before. As he stepped off the boat He encountered a demon-possessed man who lived among the tombs. God knows they tried, but no one could help him anymore; they couldn’t even subdue him with ropes or chains. Night and day he was always crying out and cutting himself with stones. When Jesus asks him his name, the man says, “My name is Legion, for we are many.” Jesus cast out the demons for him. They entered a herd of pigs and drove them into the sea. But the loss of those pigs hit the townspeople hard, and they begged Jesus to just leave. And He does. He gives them the freedom to reject Him.

Understandably, the newly healed man, doesn’t want to go back to those townspeople. He’s been given a new life and begs to go with Jesus and His disciples. But Jesus tells him, “Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how He has had mercy on you” (Mk. 5:19). Clearly the man did just that. How do we know? Because Jesus has come back to the region, and this time the crowd welcomes him, gathers about him, and brings Him their sick, including a man unable to speak or hear.

Blindness tends to separate us from things, from stuff. Deafness separates us from people. It makes communication to or from very awkward and difficult, and especially two thousand years ago, usually resulted in isolation and loneliness. Jesus had compassion on this man, and Mark wants us to see how it all unfolds.

Usually Mark is propelling us forward, racing from one thing to the next, with few details. That is, until he gets to the Passion of Jesus and His suffering on the cross, where even Mark slows down, because this is the main thing Jesus came to do. But Mark also slows down here, as an exception, to show not just a wonderful miracle, but *how* he went about healing the man.

This deaf man had been thrust in front of the crowd. It was well-meant, but it could not have been easy for the man to find himself suddenly the focus of attention. So, before anything else, Jesus takes the man aside from the crowd privately. Then Jesus uses simple sign language. He puts His fingers into the man’s ears to indicate He knows this is the place in need of healing. He spits and puts His finger on the man’s tongue – to show He intends to do something about his heavy tongue as well. Jesus’ own spit is apparently touching the man’s tongue. It’s all very close and personal.

He touches the man where he is most vulnerable. Doing so, he communicates to the man that He knows, He understands. He grasps the hidden depths of his suffering.

More sign language follows. Jesus looks up to heaven. The man watches and understands Jesus is relying on the Father in heaven. Then, Jesus sighs heavily, exhaling all His breath. There’s sadness in this sigh. Things aren’t supposed to be this way. Ears and tongues were meant to work better than this.

Then He speaks just one word. Mark preserves it for us to know the very syllables and sounds. “Ephphatha”. It’s an Aramaic imperative. It means “Open up.”

Ephphatha. One simple word. But when you take a word like that and put the power and authority of God behind it, things happen . . . immediately. Mark says, “And his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly.” Literally, the Greek says his tongue was “untied”, and we know what that means because we often say we’re tongue-tied.

“Ephphatha.” One ordinary word! But when God’s power and authority and grace are behind ordinary words, extraordinary things happen. “Let there be light.” An ordinary sentence, but even before the period is on the end of that sentence there is dazzling light. “Ephphatha” and he spoke plainly.

Following this private miracle, Jesus and the man return to the crowd. It’s clear to them the man is no longer deaf or mute, and they can’t help but say of Jesus, “He does everything well.” It makes me think of Genesis 1, “God saw all that he had made and behold, it was *very good*” (v. 31). At least, that’s the way it was in the beginning: very

good, until we mostly ruined it with our sin and rebellion. So now there are bodies that don't work the way God intended them to, bodies ruined by war and terrorism and old age. There are cemeteries and there are tires burning in the streets and E-Coli and disappearing species. The whole creation groans, Paul says, and not just the creation, but we also groan under the heavy weight of living in a broken world. But in our text, the Lord Jesus also groans. He has entered into our suffering. He's going to help, but He's not going to do it from a distance. He's going to make it right in a very personal way.

Jesus groans, and then He reverses a small part of the fall in this man's life. You recall He groaned in spirit when he saw Martha and Mary weeping at the death of their brother Lazarus, before reversing the effects of the fall for them. Jesus groans also from the cross reversing the effects of sin for us, taking the teeth out of death. Whether pressing His fingers into a man's ears or bleeding out onto ruined soil as the Lamb of God, the Savior is making all things right again, and doing all things well.

Seven hundred years before Christ, Isaiah said watch for the marks of the Savior. This is how you will recognize Him. "Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy."

Jesus says "Ephphatha" and a heavy tongue shouts for joy. It's a small miracle which points to one much greater. Some are born physically deaf and mute. All are born spiritually deaf and mute . . . until God heals us. If God doesn't open our ears, we cannot hear the Word of God. Paul wrote, "The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them" (1 Cor. 2:14). That is, we need God to get close and personal with us. We need the Good Physician to put His fingers into *our* ears and touch *our* tongues.

Holy Baptism was your "Ephphatha" moment. In the early Latin Church, "Ephphatha!" was said as part of the baptismal liturgy. That is, the priest would press his fingers into ears of the baby and then place one finger into the baby's mouth and say the word, "Ephphatha!" . . . open up!" Maybe the baby screamed; maybe the baby slept, maybe the baby started sucking on the priest's finger. No matter. In Holy Baptism, it's the Lord who is doing the work and making the promises to the baby, not the baby making promises to the Lord. It is the Lord who is unstopping little ears to His Word and opening little hearts and liberating little tongues to confess one day what the heart already knows: Jesus is Lord. Holy Baptism was your "Ephphatha" moment.

It reminds me of the very first words of Matins from Ps. 51: "O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise." That is, unless you do it, Lord, it won't happen (not now, not ever), for no one can say Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:3).

The Lord's Supper is another "Ephphatha" moment. He comes as close to us as He did the deaf man. In it, Jesus invades your space and touches your tongue not with spittle, but with his own body and blood in, with and under the bread and wine. He puts forgiveness in your mouth. In the first century Ignatius of Antioch called the Lord's Supper a "medicine of immortality and an antidote to death." And we believe that too because where there is forgiveness, there is life and salvation.

"Ephphatha!" "Open up!" One word is all it took, and the ears of the deaf were unstopped and the mute tongue shouted for joy. One ordinary word. Maybe it's the word God is quietly whispering to you today, "Open up!" Don't keep it to yourself. He tells us what He told that man who had lived among the tombstones: "Go home to your friends and tell them what the Lord has done for you and how he has had mercy on you."

Ephphatha! Maybe it's the same word God will use again one day, shouting it out over a field of granite grave markers.

"Ephphatha!" Open up. Could it be it's the word we'll hear him say as we stand before the gates of heaven.

One last thing. In our world, it is becoming harder to speak a word about the Christian faith. People are not inclined to listen. Our faith is considered fantasy by some, and hate-speech by others. It is hard for us to speak a word that gets heard.

We can, however, still touch the lives of other people. With our own simple sign language, we can show them we know they are in pain and that we care. That sign language could be a meal at the door for a struggling family. It might be an invitation for coffee, because we can imagine the crushing loneliness and heavy silence in the house weeks after the funeral. With a follow-up phone call, we can show we know and care about the anxiety that wakes people in the night, or the fractured relationships that litter their past, or the struggles to get by in a land of plenty.

We know that many are not inclined to listen to our words. However, with our own simple sign language, we reveal that we not only know, but we care. One of our school families is caring for the kids whose mom is receiving in-patient mental health care. We care even for the dog, whose name is Max, until the family can reunite with one another and Max. Even without speaking, we can become God's sign language to others.

His word may be hidden behind our works, but it will be heard. Amen.