

**EPHPHATHA! ISAIAH'S PROMISE
AND JESUS' MIRACLE
Isaiah 35:5-6 and Mark 7:37**

Jesus is traveling incognito about the coastal regions of Tyre and Sidon to the region of the Decapolis ("ten cities")—Gentile territory. He seems to be avoiding Galilee for the moment. It might have been the crowds and his spreading fame. Or perhaps just avoiding the powers that be among the Jews. Whatever the reason, Jesus is in Gentile territory. And why not? The Messiah of Israel is also the world's messiah!

They bring a man to Jesus a deaf mute. The people beg Jesus to lay His hand on him, the usual gesture of the healer. In other words, the people have a plan, a preconceived notion as to how Jesus is supposed to work. He's supposed to do what every other healer did—lay hands on the sick person and pray. But Jesus is no ordinary healer. He's the Lord of all healing.

We sometimes approach Jesus the same way as those people of the Decapolis. We not only present the problem, we also present the solution. Here's what we want Lord, and here's how we think you should do it. A little bit like the kid who specifies his Christmas present by circling the toys he wants in the department store flyers. In my day it was the annual Sears Wish book! With two other brothers, we'd circle the things we wanted and write our initial in the catalog and hope for the best! Here's the problem, however: The more you specify a gift, the less of a gift it becomes. It turns into more of a transaction, really, a bargain, which is how the old Adam in us would love to deal with God. Lord, give us what we want exactly in the way that we want and thank you in advance for your cooperation. Give me patience, but don't let me suffer. Give me wisdom, but spare me the pain of experience. Give me healing, but spare me the doctors... and so forth.

Jesus doesn't go that route with this man. He takes him aside privately, away from the crowds. This poor man's plight is no circus side show for the curious masses. He has lived his entire life on the fringes of his society. Unable to speak, unable to hear. Imagine a world like his where you've never heard the sound of laughter, or music, or your children's voice or any human voice. You've never heard the sound of birds singing at the break of day... or the voice of your mother saying "I love you" as she tucks you I bed at night. Imagine that you couldn't speak clearly, because we learned how to speak by listening to our parents speak and trying to imitate the sounds. Your thoughts are there, clear enough, you have feelings you want to express, ideas you want to exchange, but you can't get the words out. They refuse to form on your tongue.

People who have had a stroke know what this is like, the futility and frustration of not being able to communicate. I remember visiting a woman who lived at Rosewood Care Center when I first came to Zion. She had suffered a rather serious stroke. It was obvious she could understand every word I was saying to her. And it was equally obvious that she couldn't say a single syllable of what she wanted to say to me. The frustration on that woman's face was overwhelming, almost too difficult to bear. Over the years we were able to learn to communicate with hand signals, and when we'd pray familiar portions of the liturgy she tried very hard to get the words out but to no avail. God heard those words however! But it was like words were imprisoned inside of her and couldn't escape.

To be deaf and mute is to live in a world without words. You can read, but you've heard what those words sound like. And you've heard your own voice say them. It's a picture of our spiritual condition before God. We are born deaf to God's Word, unable to hear it, unable to discern the will of God in it. We are born mute to God's praises, unable to open our lips and loosen our tongues so that our mouths

may declare the praise of God. It's a spiritual deafness. We can hear the world just fine; it's the Word that our ears are not naturally attuned to. It's the Word that our lips do not naturally conform to.

God must act if we are to hear and believe and speak. Jesus takes the man aside private and He does a strange thing. He puts his fingers into the man's ears—a way of communicating to the man what he was about to do. He spits, yes spits! and touches the man's tongue. He looks to heaven, to the Father who sent Him to let the man know the source of the coming healing. He sighs a deep sigh and said a single word "Ephphatha." Be opened.

The incident has a lot in common with an exorcism - the spitting, sticking the finger into the ears, touching the tongue, the sighing, and the word of command. And while the text doesn't say that the man was demon possessed, as the individual earlier in our gospel was, it's all part of the same thing, the fall of man and the fall of creation, the subjection to decay and disease and death. Christ came to set things back in order. Perhaps some of you may have seen the movie entitled "The Green Mile." It's a Tom Hanks movie, and in it, a death row inmate has a rather unusual ability. He's able to absorb into himself the sicknesses of others into his own body. And that's what Jesus does in reality here in our text. He begins to put creation back in order as he takes this man's deafness and muteness and absorbs it with a sigh into Himself and speaks a word into the man: "Ephphatha."

Notice the earthiness of it all. Fingers in ears. Spit. Tongues touched. Not hovering hands, magic wands, and incantations. God comes down to us, reaches down to where we are, sticks the fingers of His Word in our ears, grabs hold of our tongues and says, "Ephphatha" to our deafness, "Ephphatha" to our stammering muteness.

And the Word of Jesus does what it says. His Words are spirit and life. They have that power to do what they say. Just as in the beginning when God said "Let there be light" and light there is. Immediately, the man's ears were opened to hear, and his tongue was loosed to speak. Words were his again by the power of that Word sighed by Jesus.

The prophet Isaiah had seen and foretold this day in our Old Testament reading: "Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy. For waters break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water." Those are the messianic signs, the signals of the age when God would come with a vengeance to save.

You'll remember when John the Baptizer was in prison and sent his disciples to Jesus with the question, "Are you the One we are expecting, or shall we look for another?" Do you remember Jesus' response? He said "Go tell John what you see and hear. The blind see, the deaf hear, the lame walk..." etc. He points John and his disciples to the signs of Messiah in Isaiah. Jesus was fulfilling these messianic signs! He is who He says He is!

I'm sure there were plenty of deaf mutes in the Ten Cities. But Jesus didn't simply come to provide health care to the Decapolis. He came to bring ultimate healing, to reverse the ravages of sin and death, to flex the mighty arm of God to save and redeem. This man became a messianic sign, a visible, historic sign that Jesus was indeed the Messiah of Israel, the Christ, and that He is the creative Word in the flesh come to bring the new creation by His own dying and rising.

He opens the man's ears and loses the man's tongue and then tells everyone, "Shhhh! don't tell anyone!" What!? Did we hear that right? What's the point in opening the man's lips if his mouth isn't supposed to tell everyone about Jesus? Why the secret? Simply, because Jesus knew all the ways the people would get this wrong. They would see Him as nothing more than a wonder worker, a source of free health care, a vending machine for blessings. They would think "Messiah" and conclude that Jesus was going to use His power to overthrow the Romans, to put Israel on the map, to lead a revolution, to wipe out hunger and disease and poverty in this world and become a great king ruling by the power of God. They would get all the wrong ideas about Jesus, and so He keeps it all quiet.

But the truth is, you can't keep quiet. The more He charged them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. They said, "He has done all things well. He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak." And they hadn't seen anything yet. Wait until they see Him lifted up on the cross, bearing the world's sin in His own flesh. Wait until they hear the cry from His own lips, "My God, why have you forsaken me?" as His prayers seem to fall on DEAF ears. Wait until He becomes DEAF and MUTE with our sin and death. But then there were no crowds, only a handful of disciples. But there the price for this healing was paid. "By His wounds we are healed." There on the cross, was the ultimate show of God's might. There on the cross, was the recompense of God Isaiah spoke of. God did justice that day in His Son who became deaf and blind and mute and lame in death to save you.

Jesus wants to do for you what He did for that man in the Decapolis that day. He wants to stick His Word into your ears, to cut through deafness, to open your ears, your minds, your hearts. He speaks His Ephphatha to you. "Be opened." He wants to grab those tongues of yours, tongues that don't naturally know how to pray, to praise, to give thanks, to confess, and He wants to loosen them for His praise. He wants to turn our tongues into instruments of worship and witness, declaring the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His light, who raised you from the grave of your sin, who shed His blood for you that you might live under Him in His kingdom, who glorified you at the right hand of God in His own glorious flesh.

And it's OK to talk about it! No commands of silence now. The work is done. It is finished! Jesus has accomplished His mission. He has died and risen and reigns. Tell everyone.

If He healed your deafness and cured your muteness, you'd be talking about it. You couldn't stop yourself. Jesus has healed your sin and death. He has given you eternal life. He has baptized you and placed His Body and Blood on your tongues and opened your ears with His forgiving words. There is much to tell, and much to praise, and much to sing. He has done all things well. In the name of Jesus, Amen.