

A Glance and a Sigh

Mark 7:31-37

Ordinary 23

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³¹Then Jesus returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. ³²They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. ³³He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. ³⁴Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, **“Ephphatha,”** that is, **“Be opened.”** ³⁵And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. ³⁶Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. ³⁷They were astounded beyond measure, saying, “He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.”

Of all the many things that I did this summer, one sticks in my mind this morning. I learned a scripture verse. It goes like this: “O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth shall declare your praise.” (Psalm 51:15) Why don’t you say it with me? That’s a line from Psalm 51, and it is a pretty good theme for today.

In the high desert of New Mexico, there’s a monastery at the end of a one-lane road. It’s about two and a half hours past the last suburb. There are no power lines, no cell phone coverage, no internet access. Just thirty-five people trying to live the Christian life in a Benedictine community.

It is a silent monastery. There is no talking. If a chatty person should visit there, people back home take bets on how long the silence will be kept. (Before my visit, one of my friends said, “I’ll bet you can stay quiet for seven minutes, unless there are people around.”) Can you imagine keeping quiet all day? The only time anybody speaks is in worship, when they join together in singing the scriptures.

Out there in the desert, the day ends at 7:45 in the evening. From the time on, there is a deep silence (except for the coyotes), until a bell rings at a quarter of four in the morning. The monks gather in the chapel. All guests are welcome to join them. And everybody joins in the first words of the day: “O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth shall declare your praise.” They say it three times: “O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth shall declare your praise,” and then the day can begin in worship.

When you leave the chapel about an hour later, the birds are finally awake, and a symphony of song declares the goodness of God. “O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth shall declare your praise.”

That’s a pretty good refrain for us on a day like this. We jump-start the fall church program. We return to two services to provide more pew space. We open our lips to teach children and adults in our Sunday School. At ten o’clock we open our lips to taste a delicious breakfast.

How fitting, then, that the Gospel of Mark would give us a story about a person whose lips are opened by Jesus. Until that moment, he could not hear. There was also some block to his speaking. Some suggest he was a stutterer. Others think his tongue could not function. Maybe, in the words of the Pennsylvania Dutch, “his tongue tripped over his eyeteeth, and he couldn’t see what he was saying.” Whatever the case, his world was closed in. There was no input through the ear, and no output through the mouth.

So, some of his neighbors brought him to Jesus. Jesus took hold of him, touched his ears and tongue as any of the healers would have done, and said, “*Ephphratha!* Open up!” With that, the man’s world was opened up. He could hear and he could speak.

Now, the curious thing in all of this is that, while Jesus frees the man to speak, he immediately says to the people standing around, “Be quiet. Don’t talk about this!” But everybody refuses. The more he tells them to hush, the more they chatter on about it.

It is a curious thing. For whatever reason, this seems to be a recurring theme in the Gospel of Mark. Jesus often helps somebody, and then says, “Don’t talk about this.” He cures a leper and says, “Tell no one.” He raises a young girl from the dead and says to her family, “Keep this to yourselves.” As we’ll hear next week, Jesus discloses his hidden identity to the twelve disciples and then says, “Don’t tell anybody about this. Not yet...”

Ah, it seems to be the “not yet” that’s the point. Mark wants us to remember that sometimes we speak without understanding what we’re saying. It takes time for the Gospel to sink in. You can say “Jesus is the Messiah,” but we don’t understand what that means until we see him on the cross. Or on Easter, we can declare “Christ is risen” -- but that has no power until it dawns on us that Christ is completely free to start meddling in our lives. It takes a while to understand what God is doing in Christ; so Mark reminds us to be careful with our words.

But stay with the story of Easter for a moment. Even though Jesus regularly steers the bystanders away from empty speech, there are moments when something must be said. Easter morning is one of those moments. The women go to the tomb and discover it is empty. Just then an angel says to these first witnesses, “You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth who was raised, but he is not here. Go, tell everybody that he is alive, and going ahead of you.” They look at one another, and they look at the tomb, and then they drop everything and run away. Mark says, at the moment when they were free to speak, “they said nothing to anyone for they were afraid.” (16:6-8)

In the story for today, it’s no wonder that as Jesus moves to heal the man who cannot speak, he looks toward heaven and groans. There’s no telling what the man will say, once his tongue is loosened, and there’s no telling what he will not say. That’s how we often respond to God. Jesus tells people to be quiet -- and they talk. The angel says, “Go announce the resurrection” -- and God’s own people are suddenly tongue-tied. Things don’t always go as God commands or desires.

So the word for us today is that short command from the Aramaic language: *Ephphratha!* Translated it means, “Be opened!” It’s a good word, an important word. The Christian life is an invitation to be opened. And the sense of the original language is to stay open, to be continually opened.

It could be, as the prophet Isaiah declares, “Morning by morning God opens my ear, to listen as one who is taught.”

Or it could be that verse from the Psalms that begins each day at the monastery, “O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth shall declare your praise.”

I don’t know what you pray for. But I think that we pray for God to open us, it’s pretty close to the center mystery of the Christian life. The United Methodist Church is running an advertising campaign, and their tag line is “open hearts, open minds, and open doors.” I think that’s a good message for every church. As Christians, we’re called to be open to one another, particularly to the stranger, and the child, and the person who has no home.

And in a deeper sense, all of us are called to be open to God. Remember that man who was brought to Jesus by friends. He could not hear. He was unable to speak freely. Now, that is an isolating experience. You are completely cut off – until somebody breaks through. And this is exactly what Jesus does: he breaks through the isolation. He opens the man up. That man does not have to live in his own private bubble, isolated and unto himself. He has been opened by the grace of Jesus Christ. And once that happens, there’s no shutting him down.

Do you ever pray for this? It could change your life. I think of that prayer by Howard Thurman, the great Christian leader. It goes like this:

Lord, open unto me
Open unto me - light for my darkness
Open unto me - courage for my fear
Open unto me - hope for my despair
Open unto me - peace for my turmoil
Open unto me - joy for my sorrow
Open unto me - strength for my weakness
Open unto me - wisdom for my confusion
Open unto me - forgiveness for my sins
Open unto me - love for my hates
Open unto me - Thyself for my self.
Lord, Lord, open unto me.

As we begin together another season of education and commitment, this is not a time for us to close in or to shut down or to shrug off. Rather it’s a time for God to open us up. It’s a time for the Gospel to sink in deeper. Maybe it’s time for us to take a new class, or to take on a

new task, or to make a deeper commitment, or to drop an old burden. Spend a little time today on the question: where can the Holy Spirit open you up?

All throughout the Bible, whenever people grow in their faith, it happens because God gets through to them somehow. Like a plant reaching for a sunbeam, they stretch toward the Light. They cooperate with what God wants to do in them.

And if nothing else, a new season for our faith is a new opportunity to speak. The Christian life is too important to keep to ourselves. It needs to be shared with others, so they benefit too. It must be talked about, even given away. If people are going to come to our church, it's not because a couple of professionals strong-arm them into a pew. No, it happens as we find hope and strength from our faith, and we invite others to discover what we've found.

Or more accurately, as we speak about what has found us.

Way back in 1523, Martin Luther put together a new baptism service. According to the service, the pastor touched the ears and lips of every child who was baptized, and repeated the words of Jesus: "Ephatha! Be opened!" They don't do that in the Lutheran Church any more, or in any other church for that matter.

But it's still a pretty good idea. From the very beginning of life, with the help of parents and pastors and Christian friends, we need to find ways to not be so bound-up with our lives, or so tongue-tied with our faith. Have courage. Grab hold to what is good. Loosen up and love a bit more freely. Support the weak. Strengthen the faint-hearted. Honor all people.

And for Jesus' sake, keep looking for those ways to open your life to the power of the Holy Spirit, drawing on that prayer from the psalms: *O Lord, open my lips, and let my tongue declare your praise.*