

Ephphatha! Be Opened!

MARK 7:32-37 (*English Version for the Deaf*, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, Michigan)

While Jesus was there, some people brought a man to him. This man was deaf and could not talk. The people begged Jesus to put his hand on the man to heal him.

Jesus led the man away from the people to be alone with him. Jesus put his fingers in the man's ears. Then Jesus spit and touched the man's tongue. Jesus looked up to the sky and made a breathing sound. Jesus said to the man, "Ephphatha!" (This means, "Open!") When Jesus did this, the man was able to hear. The man was able to use his tongue and spoke clearly.

The people were really amazed. The people said, "Jesus does everything in a good way. Jesus makes deaf people able to hear. And the people who can't talk--Jesus makes them able to talk."

Several years ago there lived in the city of Oslo, Norway, an eleven year old boy named Kjell Omahr Mørk. [*"Kjell" is pronounced "Kyell."*] Since the name Kjell is so common in Norway, this lad preferred to have his friends call him Omahr.

Young Omahr liked to go out riding his bike after school, and to go visiting friends. One evening as he was riding home, his path took him down a hill. He pedaled at full steam, going as fast as he could. The setting sun was in Omahr's eyes, so he did not notice that there was a truck parked at the side of the street. Young Omahr plowed into that truck, went flying off his bike, and was knocked unconscious.

A few days later he woke up in the hospital recovering from a skull fracture.

He seemed to be recovering quite well, and soon was able to return home. But in a very short time, the city of Oslo was hit by an outbreak of spinal meningitis. Today he suspects that because of his recent head injury, he was highly susceptible to the disease.

So he found himself in the hospital again, waking up a second time from a coma, finding that his world had suddenly gone silent. Young Omahr, who was a promising singer in the boys choir and the tuba player in the school band, was now deaf.

We might think it was a tragedy; and it seemed so at the time. But if you were to ask Omahr how he felt about his deafness today, he would tell you, "God closed my ears so He could open my heart. You see," says Omahr, "Even though I was a good Norwegian, and all good Norwegians are Lutherans, personally Jesus was a stranger to me. But God used my deafness to get my attention. And through the care and concern of Christian friends, God drew me to Himself."

Through the support of Omahr's pastor, he was able to come to United States, receive a college education, and eventually graduate from one of our Synodical seminaries. After serving in pastoral

ministry in LCMS deaf congregations, Rev. Mørk returned to his native Norway, where today he shares the Gospel of Jesus Christ in Sign Language, continuing his service in deaf ministry in Oslo.

While Omahr Mørk was having this amazing encounter with God, God was working in the life of another deaf man here in the United States, Mr. Robert Case.

Like Omahr, Bob Case was deafened by an attack of spinal meningitis. But in Bob's case, he was just under four years of age when he became deaf. Through his childhood and teen years, Bob attended two residential state schools for the deaf. After graduation, he married a young deaf lady he had met earlier while visiting family in another state. Bob found employment at McDonnell Douglas Aircraft Corp. in St. Louis, Missouri, where he made a good living helping to build jet airplanes.

But the Spirit of God touched Bob in such a way that he sensed God's call to enter full time ministry. From the perspective of Bob's friends, it was a poorly timed call. Bob was fast approaching his 40th birthday. He had a wife and five children. He had a good job with good security. He had merely a high school diploma behind his name. And he was deaf.

Yet where God calls, He also provides the means. Bob Case obtained a university degree while he worked full time as a lay-minister for a deaf congregation, and eventually he graduated from seminary. Ever since then, Rev. Bob Case has served in the pastoral ministry of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod.

And the list goes on. We could tell stories of pastors, teachers, lay ministers, parish workers, even missionaries on other continents, who are all deaf. But even though their physical ears do not work, their hearts are very much in tune with the Still Small Voice of the Spirit of God. And even though you would find their speech strained, distorted, and hard to understand, their lives are an eloquent testimony of power and love of God.

Why should we hear their stories? So we can be moved with pity over the plight of the people we now label as "disabled?" No, not that. Or are we to praise the heroic achievements of successful deaf people? No, not even that.

The stories of people like Omahr Mørk and Bob Case cause us to consider: How is it in our lives?

What is more tragic: Ears that do not work, but a heart that is sensitive to the Voice of God; or ears that hear just fine, but are so filled with noise and clatter that God cannot get a word in edgewise?

What is more pitiable: A tongue that has never learned the skill of fluent speech; or a tongue that talks all the time, but never says anything of the Law and Love of God?

Let us look again at the story of the healing of the deaf man in Mark 7, and put ourselves in the place of that deaf man, to consider our condition of spiritual deafness that all of us suffer from birth, and recognize the healing that Jesus offers us.

While Jesus was there, some people brought a man to him. This man was deaf and could not talk ...

Apparently this man was born deaf. He was unable to speak the ancient Aramaic language exactly for the same reason you and I are unable to speak the ancient Aramaic language: He never heard it as he was growing up.

Notice that he was brought to Jesus by some friends. Why couldn't he have brought himself? There is no indication in the text that he was mobility impaired. He had two good legs and could walk. Certainly he must have heard stories about this one called Jesus who had come to this same region just a few months earlier and worked a mighty miracle [Mark 5]. He must have heard about Jesus...

But there was a problem: he *couldn't* hear. It is possible that someone attempted to give him the gist of the story in gestures and home-made Sign Language. But in the end, a friend or a relative had to bring him to Jesus, even before the man really knew who Jesus was.

And so it is for all who are the lost of this world. The Bible asks: How can people call on Jesus if they do not believe in Him? And how can they believe in Him if they have never heard about Him? And how can people hear about Him, unless someone tells them? (*Romans 10: 14*)

The same is true for us. All of us are spiritually born deaf. There is a communication barrier between us and God, and no amount of desire or effort on our part will break that barrier and open communication with God. Just like the man in the story, we had to be brought, brought by someone who loved us and cared for us enough to bring us to the One who could heal our spiritual deafness. [Who in your life can you point to and say: "You introduced me to Jesus!" ?]

The people begged Jesus to put his hand on the man to heal him. Jesus led the man away from the people to be alone with him ...

Jesus desires the same for us. He wants to lead us away from the multitude to be alone with us. Yes, He commands and commends that we meet regularly in worship and fellowship. But He also desires that we meet alone with Him regularly, as we tell Him in prayer what is on our heart, as He tells us in His Word what is on His heart, and as we pray for the burdens of His heart.

It is a trite but true saying: "If you are too busy to pray, you are too busy." When our schedules are so full that we cannot spare a long quiet moment to be alone with God, then there is something in our schedule that God didn't put there.

Now, when Jesus was alone with the man in our story, Jesus communicated with him in a way that the man could understand. Our Lord did not shout at him. Nor did Jesus push under the man's nose dusty theological tomes written in a language the man couldn't understand. Nor did Jesus employ any

sort of mystical meditation technique. But Jesus communicated His gracious will for the man's life in a very simple and obvious way:

Jesus put his fingers in the man's ears. Then Jesus spit and touched the man's tongue. Jesus looked up to the sky and made a breathing sound ...

Jesus chose to communicate with the deaf man in a language the man could understand: Sign Language.

And God does the same for us: He seeks to communicate with you and me in ways our poor pea-brains can comprehend. He does this in a number of ways. First, He communicates His plan and purpose for us in everyday human language through the Bible. And there in the Bible, we see the most wonderful communication of God's character and love in His Son, Jesus Christ. God communicated Himself to us on our level by becoming one of us: *"The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have beheld His Glory" (John 1:14).*

In American Sign Language there is a popular sign for "I Love You." It is formed by extending the thumb, index finger, and little finger, with the two middle fingers folded down in front of the palm; the sign is displayed with the palm facing forward. It is an abbreviation of three letters of the manual alphabet: ILY.

God also has a Sign for "I Love You." It's the cross.
It was out of love for you
that Jesus allowed His hands and wrists to be pierced with nails.

It was out of love for you
that Jesus hung suspended halfway between heaven and hell on a rough wooden beam.

It was out of love for you
that Jesus said; "Father, forgive them..."

It was out of love for you
that the Father said to His Son's dark dank cold tomb, "BE OPENED!"

It was out of love for you
that Jesus said, "I go to prepare a place for you...
and I will come again and take you home with Me."*

It is that message of love for you that He seeks to communicate with you every time you open the Scriptures and read His love letter to you, as He communicates His good purpose and plan for us, just as He did with the deaf man.

Jesus said to the man, "Ephphatha!" (This means, "Open!") When Jesus did this, the man was able to hear...

"Ephphatha! Be opened!" When Jesus says it, He does it! To our hearts Jesus says, "Ephphatha! Be opened!" and by the power of His Word we hear ...

...the man was able to hear. The man was able to use his tongue and spoke clearly.

Now the physical healing of the man's auditory system is amazing enough. But the greater miracle was that the man instantly acquired the ancient Aramaic language, without having to spend years and years studying it. (Every pastor wishes he had received this kind of "healing" when they were studying Greek and Hebrew in the seminary!). Without ever having learned it, the formerly deaf understood and spoke a new language.

Again, Jesus does the same thing for us. He not only opens our hearts to hear God, but He opens our mouths to speak to others about our wonderful God.

The people were really amazed. The people said, "Jesus does everything in a good way. Jesus makes deaf people able to hear. And people who can't talk--Jesus makes them able to talk."

As our bodies age, we are all painfully aware that we tend to lose our physical hearing year-by-year. The same thing can happen to our spiritual hearing as well. Through laziness and neglect, through busy-ness we can tune out the Still Small Voice of God. To us again, Jesus says, "Ephphatha! Be Opened!"

Be Opened to take a moment alone with Him.
 Be Opened to pray for the concerns of His heart.
 Be Opened to hear Him instruct us, teach us, mature us through His Word, the Scriptures.
 Be Opened to see in His Word His message of love to us.
 Be Opened to open our mouths and speak that Word to others.
 Be Opened to introduce our friends to Jesus, so He may also say to them:

"Ephphatha! Be Opened!"

Note: Rev. Bob Case and Rev. Omahr Mørk have each given permission to share their stories.

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