

“Open Up”
Rev. Andrew Harris · September 5, 2021

Isaiah 35:4-7a

⁴ 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.”
⁵ Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
 and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
⁶ 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;
⁷ the burning sand shall become a pool,
 and the thirsty ground springs of water.

Mark 7:24-37

²⁴ Jesus left that place and went into the region of Tyre. He didn't want anyone to know that he had entered a house, but he couldn't hide. ²⁵ In fact, a woman whose young daughter was possessed by an unclean spirit heard about him right away. She came and fell at his feet. ²⁶ The woman was Greek, Syrophenician by birth. She begged Jesus to throw the demon out of her daughter. ²⁷ He responded, “The children have to be fed first. It isn't right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs.”
²⁸ But she answered, “Lord, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.”
²⁹ “Good answer!” he said. “Go on home. The demon has already left your daughter.” ³⁰ When she returned to her house, she found the child lying on the bed and the demon gone.
³¹ After leaving the region of Tyre, Jesus went through Sidon toward the Galilee Sea through the region of the Ten Cities. ³² Some people brought to him a man who was deaf and could hardly speak, and they begged him to place his hand on the man for healing. ³³ Jesus took him away from the crowd by himself and put his fingers in the man's ears. Then he spit and touched the man's tongue. ³⁴ Looking into heaven, Jesus sighed deeply and said, “*Ephphatha*,” which means, “Open up.” ³⁵ At once, his ears opened, his twisted tongue was released, and he began to speak clearly.
³⁶ Jesus gave the people strict orders not to tell anyone. But the more he tried to silence them, the more eagerly they shared the news. ³⁷ People were overcome with wonder, saying, “He does everything well! He even makes the deaf to hear and gives speech to those who can't speak.”

This morning's Gospel reading features two stories. In the first, Jesus enters the region of Tyre and encounters a Gentile woman who begs him to heal her daughter. At first, Jesus rejects her saying, "it isn't right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs," which at the time was a popular pejorative among Jews to use for Gentiles. But the woman pushes back, delivering a retort that impresses Jesus, "Lord, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." "Good answer!" Jesus says. From afar, the woman's daughter is miraculously healed.

In the second story, Jesus leaves the region of Tyre and goes through Sidon toward the Sea of Galilee. There, some people bring a man to him who is deaf and barely able to speak, and they beg him to heal the man. So, Jesus takes him away from the crowd and he puts his fingers into the man's ears, he spits and touches his tongue, then he looks to heaven, sighs deeply, and says the word "Ephphatha," which means "Open up," and immediately the man can hear and speak clearly.

Now, I've spent the past week puzzling as to why these two stories are presented together in this morning's lectionary reading. Obviously, they happen back-to-back in Mark's gospel, but aside from their apparent chronology what ties them together?

Each story is more or less, self-contained. Each story contains its own points of emphasis. Each story seems to relay its own message.

In the story of the Syrophenician woman, we are invited to witness the opening up of the Kingdom. Here we see that the Gentiles are not dogs unfit to eat the bread of life that Jesus has come to bring to God's children, his people, the Jews. This Gentile woman's faith, her persistence, moves Jesus to the point that he changes his mind. He seems to realize, in this moment, through her wise and witty retort, that while his message is primarily for the Jews, all people who come to Jesus faithfully can receive the bread of life. Even the so-called dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.

This story invites us to consider themes of belonging in the Kingdom of God, insiders vs. outsiders, persistence in faith, and even divine mutability - the question as to whether God can

change. It's a deep, complex, rewarding story that warrants many re-readings. It is well deserving of the many sermons, papers, and Bible studies devoted to its exploration and explication. Surely, it could, and it does, stand on its own. So, why the second story?

The second story, while also featuring a miraculous healing, covers different territory than the first. In the story of the so-called "deaf-mute," the condition of the man is accentuated with symbolic importance. Not only does Jesus heal a disabled person, but "he makes the deaf to hear and gives speech to those who can't speak." We know Jesus can work miracles and cure people, but this story invites us to wonder in what ways Jesus opens up our ears to a message we previously could not hear, and in what ways Jesus allows us to speak when our tongues were formerly twisted.

Furthermore, the nature of the healings in these two stories could not be more different. To heal the deaf-mute Jesus must put his fingers in his ears and spit and touch his tongue and utter a pronouncement, Ephphatha, and then, after all of this, the man is healed. Afterwards, the people who witnessed this are overcome with wonder, and despite Jesus's strict orders to the contrary, they go around pronouncing the miracle.

In the story of the Syrophenician woman, Jesus doesn't *do* anything at all. He says, "Go home, the demon *has already* left your daughter." Afterwards, in a rarity in Mark's gospel, there is no amazement from the crowd, no astonished proclamations, just a woman, back at home, sitting quietly with her daughter.

These two stories go together like a salmon and banana sandwich, held together only because the editors of our lectionary decided to squeeze them between two pieces of bread. What is the preacher to do? Focus in on one and neglect the other? Or try to find the secret ingredient that unites these stories into one coherent word? You already know where I'm going.

Like the persistent Syrophenician woman we're going to parse through the crumbs under the table to find the bread of life that holds these disparate stories together; the secret ingredient that turn this seemingly incongruous sandwich into a sublime and harmonious new creation, like

nothing you've ever tasted before; a unifying element that elevates the whole to something greater than the sum of its parts and sends us forth amazed singing songs of praise the purveyor of this divine delicatessen, saying "He does everything well!"

As it happens, our trail of breadcrumbs leads us the bookends of this passage. It's here that we find the secret ingredient — the unifying element that elevates the whole to something greater than the sum of its parts and sends us forth amazed singing songs of praise to the purveyor of this divine delicatessen, saying "He does everything well!" The secret ingredient is, well, it's a secret.

The first verse of this passage tells us that Jesus didn't want anyone to know that he had entered a house, but he couldn't hide. The penultimate verse of this passage tells us that Jesus gave the people strict orders not to tell anyone about the miracle he just performed, but the more he tried to silence them, the more eagerly they shared the news. Jesus tries to keep his divine identity a secret. He doesn't want people to know where he is. He doesn't want people to talk about what he's done. He wants to keep it secret, but despite his best efforts, it gets out. Try as he might, he cannot hide and the more he tries to keep the secret hidden the more it gets out.

The message of this passage is that the Word, unlike the contents of a sandwich, cannot be contained. Jesus himself is unable to stop it or even slow it. Despite his original intentions, the Syrophoenician woman learns the secret. Despite being unable to hear, the deaf man learns the secret. Despite being taken far from the crowd and being unable to speak, he brings the secret back with him. Despite Jesus's instructions to the contrary, the secret is spread far and wide. The secret cannot be contained and there are no barriers. The deaf can hear it, the blind can see it, and even the dogs can share in it.

This passage isn't a salmon and banana sandwich. Try as we might to squeeze these two disparate stories together between the bread of editorial convenience, the two halves of this passage come apart to reveal more than the sum of their parts. The secret ingredient doesn't bring these stories closer together. The secret is to open them up.

The secret is out for all with open ears, open minds, and open hearts. No matter who you are or where you're from, the Word gets through. If you plug up your ears and shut up your mouth, the Word gets through. If you try to hide away in a house, the Word will find you. If you try to go off out of sight, the Word will find its way back. The ubiquity and transcendence of the Word seems to surprise even Jesus, and I imagine that he too was just as amazed at the power and the glory of his Father in heaven.

The Word breaks these stories open and reveals the truth hidden within. Ephphatha, Jesus says. Open up. Open up and allow the Word into your heart. Open up and allow the Word to pour forth from your lips. Open your mind to the possibility that an outsider can reveal a secret of truth unknown even to the Son of God. Most importantly, open up and allow your faith to inspire the most preposterous and extravagant dreams you can imagine.

"Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped, the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless shall sing for joy. Waters shall break forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert, the burning sand shall become a pool and the thirsty ground springs of water." Open up and say to those who are of a fearful heart, perhaps even yourself, "Be strong, do not fear!"

There's a famous saying that goes, "Fear knocked at the door. Faith answered. There was no one there." When fear knocks, open up and allow your faith to reveal the emptiness of your fears. Open up and let your faith lead you to the feet of the savior, despite all your fears, apprehensions, and anxieties. Open up and let your faith persevere when you've been rejected and insulted. Open up and let your faith declare audaciously before God that there is more than enough grace and love and mercy in God for me and for you and for all people and I will not go away empty because the secret is out and it cannot be contained and the Spirit of God is alive and it is calling out to you and to me from the ends of the earth and the message is this: "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come and save you." Ephphatha. Open up. Amen.