

Epworth Chapel on the Green  
September 9, 2018  
Pentecost 16  
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Isaiah 35:1-7  
Psalm 146  
James 1:17-27  
Mark 7:31-37

The incident recorded in our Gospel lesson today is found only in Mark. This kind of thing is often suggestive for preaching, and there are a couple of conclusions we might draw from it.

First, as I've mentioned before, Mark develops his Gospel through a succession of stories and miracles that show how the disciples are very slow to "come to see" who Jesus is and what he is all about. They are often blind to the reality of Jesus' ministry, and they only gradually discern it.

The inclusion of this story -- and where it is placed in Mark -- seems to fit this theme of the disciples' incomprehension. In the next chapter Jesus will upbraid the disciples for having ears that do not hear and eyes that do not see (cf. 8:14-21). If we couple our story today of the healing of the deaf and dumb man with the healing of the blind man that comes in the next chapter (8:22-26), it might be that Mark is suggesting that there is hope for those like the disciples (and us!) who cannot or do not see, hear and understand.

*We* may often be slow to comprehend or understand what Jesus is doing in our lives. But *we too will be healed*. We too will speak, and glory will be given to the Name of Jesus Christ.

There is another interesting reason Mark includes this story. It occurs when the crowd says at the end: “He has done all things well.” In the Greek, this echoes the creation story in Genesis, recalling that God saw all things that He had made, and declared them “good.”

Finally, Mark borrows from the prophet Isaiah, whose words we have read this morning. Isaiah speaks about the coming of the Messiah in terms of how God will make the deaf hear and the mute speak.

Mark’s description of the man who is healed by Jesus is quite telling. He uses a Greek word for “speech impediment” that is found in only one other place in the Bible. Can you guess where? It’s found in the Greek translation of Isaiah, where the prophet describes the “dumb” singing for joy.

The crowd witnessing this healing, then, would recognize that *Jesus is doing what the prophet Isaiah foretold*. Isaiah speaks about an exodus of the people of God, traveling back home from exile along the “highway of holiness.” And Jesus, as he heals this man, is the One who is bringing the promised healing of the *New Exodus* as he liberates people (in this case Gentiles!) from bondage. The words from Isaiah, “Here is your God” find their fulfillment in Jesus.

Notice also how personal and physical the drama is here in the Gospel. Our focus is drawn to a hand, a finger, ears, a tongue, spitting. Not only does Mark want to show us that Isaiah's words are fulfilled, but he wants to show us that God has truly come in the flesh.

And what Jesus has done is to make all things new. He brings a new creation. As Isaiah promised, Jesus has made the living waters of baptism flow in the desert of the world. He has set captives free from their sins. He has come that the rich and poor might dine together in the Eucharistic feast.

And he has done for each of us what he did for that deaf man in Mark's story today. He has opened our ears to hear the Word of God, and loosed our tongues, that we might sing praises to him.

When Connie and I were in Toronto, the pastor of the congregation where we served encountered a man who lived the bulk of his life as an alcoholic. He neglected his wife and children, spending most of the money that was needed for their care on booze. He was largely absent from their lives.

Then, by a miracle of grace, God touched his life. He experienced a new birth. His profound faith led him to freedom and recovery from his dependence on alcohol. He became a devoted husband, and a loving father to his children.

One day, one of his old friends decided to make fun of the change in his friend's life. He said to him: "Do you mean to tell me you believe in all of this

Jesus stuff? Do really believe that Jesus healed lame and deaf people, that he turned water into wine and all of that foolishness?”

The recovering alcoholic responded softly: “I wasn’t there when Jesus healed all those people. And I wasn’t there when he turned water into wine. But I can tell you this much. In my house I have seen Jesus turn whiskey into furniture and groceries.”

As we come to the Lord’s Table, we come as those who are blessed to be part of what Isaiah foretold. We are those blessed to be a part of the New Exodus, traveling from our exile of sin and brokenness toward the Promised Land of God’s Kingdom. Jesus, the One who makes the blind to see and the deaf to hear, is our leader. He comes to save us. He comes to open our eyes, to loosen our tongues, to help us live to bring glory to God.

And in the presence of simple elements of bread and wine, we bow in faith and we hear these words: “Here is your God!”

Open our eyes, Lord, and loosen our tongues – that we might be rich in faith and bring glory to your Name.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.