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Pentecost 15

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

*"A Life-changing Ephphatha"*

Text: Mark 7:31-37; James 2:1-10, 14-18; Isaiah 35:4-7a

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

He couldn't hear the song of the birds in the morning, or the voice of his mother at night. He couldn't hear the sound of rain hitting the ground, or the joy of a laughing child. He couldn't hear the sound of music, or bells ringing, or just the hustle and bustle of everyday life. But above all else and most importantly, *he couldn't hear the Word of God.*

Some of you know a little bit what that's like as your ages advances and your hearing starts to go and you can no longer hear those things you used to hear. But then you get a hearing aid and it's all back, all the sounds! It even seems like you can hear things you've never heard before. And you realize all that we take for granted and what a gift it is to be able to hear.

And so it was for this man we heard of today: a gift given. No greater than the gift of hearing you and I have been given, just given differently and at a different time. Jesus said to him **"ephphatha,"** and he was *ephphatha*-ed. Opened. Just like in the beginning with creation when God spoke and it was so. For the Word of God - in the beginning, in Jesus' day, and even now - is powerful and active and does what it says.

And when you see this happening, Isaiah told us - ***when you see the eyes of the blind opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped, when you see the lame man leap like a deer and the tongue of the mute sing for joy*** - it will be a sign that God has come with vengeance and pay-back; that God has come to save. And so not vengeance and pay-back against us for our sins (*as we sometimes think*), and not to save us from handicaps and disabilities (*as we sometimes hope*), but to have vengeance upon and rescue and save us from our real enemies: from sin, from death, and from the power of the devil.

For you see, handicaps and disabilities are signs too. Signs of creation under the corruption of sin, the decay of death, and the power of the devil. **Signs that the way things were meant to be are not the way things are.** Whether we want to admit it or not, sin has changed us, and not for the better. So while I understand and

sympathize with people don't want to be labeled as "handicapped" or "disabled" but "differently-abled," at the same we don't want to lose sight of the reality of sin in our world and so miss seeing the signs of our Saviour and the truth that He has come to set us free.

For what Isaiah is telling us is that when Jesus spoke His "*ephphatha*," it was only the beginning. There would be many more, all pointing to and building up to and culminating with the greatest *ephphatha* of all - when this Word of God - Be opened! - would be spoken to death and the grave. When the body of Jesus, which not only lost sight and hearing and speech but life itself, was raised whole and complete again. In His resurrection, the devastating effects of sin completely reversed and wiped out - no more corruption, no more captivity, but freedom. That in Jesus, **the way things were and were meant to be, are the way they are again.**

So this man who was healed was really just given a foretaste of the feast to come - a foretaste of the gifts and healing and life that Jesus had come to bring. For while yes, he had received his hearing and speech and it probably seemed to him like he had received the world, Jesus had come to do and give so much more than that. To give him not just the world and the things that belong to this life, but to give him an eternity of gifts, and an eternity with His Lord.

Which means Jesus' miracles are not simply signs of who He is - God in the flesh and so signs of His divinity and power - but even more importantly, they are signs of what He has come to do **for you**. Yes, *for you and me*, for how often are we like this deaf man and unable to hear? Unable to hear God's Word because our ears are clogged with the words of men. Unable to hear God's Word of love because our ears are filled with words of hate. Unable to hear God's Word of forgiveness because our hearts are hard with anger and resentment. Unable to hear God's Word of life and hope because we live in a world of death and destruction. And so unable to hear we are also unable to speak of these things.

But as Jesus came to that deaf man and laid His hands on him and touched his ears and tongue and *ephphatha*-ed him, so has Jesus done for you. For Jesus came to you and laid His hands on your head in Holy Baptism, He touches your ears with His Word of forgiveness, and He touches your tongue with the Body and Blood of His Supper, and in all these ways He *ephphathas* you. And eyes and ears and tongues and hearts and minds closed by sin are opened in forgiveness. And we hear of a love we've never heard of before, of a goodness we've never heard of before, of a life we've never heard of before and that is given to us. Given to us now as our *foretaste of the feast to come* . . . because the full reality is still coming.

Just as the man's healing was a sign of a greater work, so the gifts we receive here are leading us to a greater opening - when our graves will be opened with Jesus'

*ephphatha* and in the resurrection we will be set free, body and soul, finally and fully, forever.

Now, that there is still suffering, difficulties, and pain in this world doesn't mean that Jesus' victory isn't complete - it simply means there are more people to set free, more people that need to hear those wonderful words. And the suffering, difficulties, and pain in your life isn't because Jesus' victory isn't complete for you - **it is!** Your Father in heaven now uses those things in mercy, to help us and teach us and keep you and I hungering and thirsting for righteousness - hungering and thirsting for the feast, that we not be satisfied with the foretaste, with the here and now, with the way things are. Though, I admit, on this side, the receiving side, those things often seem anything but merciful! But they are.

And the victory and life of Jesus, given to us in our baptism, is a *real* victory - but it's not the end of the story, it's not an end in itself, a ticket into heaven, a get-out-of-jail-free card . . . it is the *beginning* of a new reality, an ongoing reality, that made children of God there in those waters, in the faith received there we keep coming back to our Father's house to be with Him and hear His Word. We keep coming back and repenting of our sins to be washed again in His forgiveness. We keep coming back to be fed and strengthened by Him, with Him, with His life, with His Body and Blood. And we go out again, raised again by our Saviour, renewed by His Spirit, and re-gifted with His forgiveness and faith, to live that faith.

Ah, but what does that mean - *to live that faith*? James talks about it as doing good works and that these are signs of a living faith. True enough. But again, *what does that mean*? What does it mean to live a life of faith?

Well it means to live in the confidence that all that I need I have been given by my Saviour. It means that the life I live now is not all there is, but that this is a foretaste of the life to come. It means, therefore, not to hang onto the things of this world and life and be afraid that if I lose them - if I lose my health and wealth, my honor or position, or anything else in this world, to think that I have lost everything. No, it means as Luther once wrote: *And take they our life, goods, fame, child, and wife, let these all be gone, they yet have nothing won; the kingdom ours remaineth* (LSB #656 v. 4).

And so what James said: ***I will show you my faith by my works*** does not mean that I will show you *that* I believe by what I do - it means that I will show you what I believe by what I do. For everyone believes something. Even Atheists. They believe there is no God and that belief shows in what they do - or don't do. So too with secularism, humanism, environmentalism, whatever "-ism" you like. If you believe it, it shapes you, and if it shapes you it will show in your life. Because that's who you are.

So for Christians, for you and me, *what do we believe?* Some believe they can do whatever they want because Christ will just forgive them later, and they live like that. Some believe that Christ is a new Moses, a new lawgiver, and has come to give us a new set of rules and regulations, and they live like that. Some believe that Christ has come to make us healthy, wealthy, and wise, and they live like that.

But on the basis on this Gospel, and Isaiah, and what we've been thinking about today, what do we believe and so how do we live? If Jesus has spoken His *ephphatha* to you and set you free from sin, death, and the devil, what does that look like? What does it mean to be set free from idolatry, from selfishness, and from fear? It means the freedom to forgive because I am forgiven. It is the freedom to love because I am loved. It is the freedom to give because I receive. It means the freedom to serve because I am served. It is the freedom to provide for others because my Father provides for me. All these things and more because I cannot out-give my Father and Saviour. And as I believe, so I do. I will show you my faith - *what* I believe - by how I live, by my works.

And if you and I don't do these things, if you find yourself struggling to do these things, *you know what?* It's not a works problem! And so the answer isn't just to buckle down and try harder or for me to stand up here and either give you a pep talk or berate you. (*We got enough of that kind of thing at the political conventions these past two weeks!*) No, if we find ourselves not doing these things or struggling with them, it's a faith problem. Not that you don't have faith, but that our faith is sometimes weak and that faith is often hard. And so the answer is to be *ephphatha*-ed again, to be opened again, to receive again and again the love and forgiveness and healing of Jesus here for you. For that is what changes you. That is what raises you. That is what makes the difference.

As it did for that deaf man. He wasn't the same. He couldn't stop telling people of all that Jesus did for him - even though Jesus charged him to tell no one. Which He did because Jesus didn't want to be known just as a healer or miracle worker, or even as God come down to earth. **He wanted to be known as the God who came down to earth *in order* to lay down His life for the life of the world on the cross.** The signs were important, but first He had to fulfill that to which they pointed. He had to die for our sins and rise from our death, that we receive the healing of His forgiveness and the resurrection to life everlasting.

So having accomplished His work, now, NOW, He tells His disciples, go out into all the world. Now is the time to speak and not be silent. To live and love and not be idle. To take Jesus' *ephphatha* into all the world and open all closed *in* sin, closed *by* sin, and closed *with* sin. To speak to them a forgiveness they have never heard before, and show them a love they have never seen before. To be who you

are, who you have been made by Christ your Saviour. A child of God. Forgiven and free. An heir of heaven.

All these things. For Jesus ***has done all things well.*** Yes, He has done all things well *for you.*

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.