

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost September 5, 2021

Isaiah 35:4-7a; Mark 7:24-37

The reading from Isaiah paints a picture that we all recognize. It expresses the yearning of a community too long gripped by war and subject to violence. A people whose hearts are racing from all the adrenaline pumping into it. Breath quickened by the circumstances they are living in.

A yearning of a people living in a world where death and disease seem rampant, where things are not as they ought to be, a yearning for a different world. A world the writer of Isaiah talks about in terms of water springing from the arid wilderness in abundance, of making things whole- sight for those without it, hearing for the deaf, speech for those without voice. Life as it ought to be.

For us, it might look like rain without flooding and winds that rip the roofs off schools, homes, and businesses. It might look like political discourse without insults and threats of violence. Or a world not ravaged by disease. Free from conflict.

The promise of this passage is that with the presence of God new life will come to those places where only death had reigned supreme. And that promise is come true in Jesus. The visible sign that God is with us, of God's love for us and this world.

It can be hard to see that in our Gospel text today, especially in Jesus' encounter with the woman from Tyre. She certainly does not receive a warm greeting from Jesus. The response Jesus gives, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs!" is one that too many try and

downplay. At it's best, this is Jesus' humanity showing through. That even for him the unthinking and unquestioned bigotry of the Jews of that day towards Gentiles, particularly these Gentiles near Tyre, had rubbed off on him. This comparison of a Gentile woman and her daughter to dogs would fit with the general Jewish attitudes of the day and was deeply offensive, derogatory. You can (and theologians and commentators have tried) explain it all away. Yet, the words remain.

Even so, even in the face of insult and apparent rejection, the woman persists. The desperation of doing anything she can for her sick child overcoming any shame she might feel, any threat at this seemingly impenetrable wall of indifference she sees before her. Demanding from Jesus, her good news. Demanding her sign of God's love for her and her child. In my mind I saw the image of the Afghani woman handing her sick child up to US service members on the barbed wire topped concrete wall at the Kabul airport. A mother demanding attention for her child in the face of a seemingly insurmountable obstacle. Demanding good news.

And in the presence of this persistence, of this expectation of action, something moved in Jesus. Something opened for him. Perhaps it is the divine within him awakening, a memory of other people who have challenged God to be God. Abraham bargaining with God for the lives of those in Sodom and Gomorrah, Job calling out for an accounting, David in so many psalms demanding God to act. Perhaps it is the God who throughout scripture has listened to the pleas of God's beloved creation which stirs within Jesus and moves him to overcome those all too human prejudices and heal the woman's daughter.

This is the God whom we worship, who is open to being moved, who listens to the cries of those whom God loves. Which is all of God's creation.

And this is the God active in Jesus who goes next, yet again, to the Gentile region of the Decapolis. The last time he was there Jesus had an encounter with the demoniac out of the tombs. They chased Jesus off, afraid of his power. Now he shows that God will set the world right not just for Jews but for Gentiles. Making the blind and mute man able to see and speak again. A visible sign, the text from Isaiah says, of God setting things right in the world!

Doing so with a groan that is sometimes associated with childbirth and the phrase, "Be Opened"!

Be opened! To see and speak. Be opened to the fact that God is doing something new, here, among those who were most despised. Be opened, the very attitude of God in the face of the cries of God's beloved creation. Be opened! Even as Jesus has experienced it.

I wonder if the author of Mark included this in his gospel because that is what the assembly of his day needed to hear. That they, too, needed to be opened to the idea that God's salvation and circle of concern was not just for them. That it extended to everyone, yes... including those folks who don't believe what you do and in fact were giving you an economic thrashing.

What is the good news you need to hear today, my friends in Christ?

Maybe the good news is that even God is open to being moved. That God loves us and cares for us enough to listen. That God engages with us. Prayer is not a monologue but a conversation between us and God. One that maybe doesn't

always end as we would like, but the very fact that the conversation happened. That God takes the time to listen to us. Is open to us. That alone shows how God is different.

Maybe the good news is that in the midst of a world and a moment in time that seems to be nothing but a drumbeat of things as they ought not to be- wildfires raging, extreme storms and rain leading to deadly flooding, earthquakes, the pandemic still sickening and killing thousands, maybe the good news is that there is still hope. For the promise is that our God will come and save us. In fact, already has. We just need to look to Jesus, to follow him and we will find that life will be what it ought to be.

The challenge is, as the author of James and as Jesus himself pointed out last week, our faith too often stops at our lips and does not extend to our hearts. We talk a good talk, but don't walk the walk. Our eyes are closed so we don't see the truth, our ears stopped up by the gods of this world so we don't hear truth. Our tongues bound by fear, so we don't speak truth.

But here we are. Gathered together in this place around the Word of God, drawn by...something. Knowing that the world, that we are not... right. Are not whole. That things are not as they should be. Come like the Syrophenician woman to demand Good News. Come, brought by friends like the deaf man with an impediment in his speech. Come, so that something more might be birthed in us. That we might, even for a time, have our eyes opened, our ears unstopped, our tongue released. So that we might be opened, to the world, as God is. To see the world as God does.

A creation that is ours to steward, to be lived with, not used up and abused until it can no longer sustain us. An attitude that binds us to help neighbors wherever and whoever they are, regardless of belief or place of birth. Open to love as God does, in action as well as word. Open to the cries of our neighbors, responding to their needs. Not with pious words, but with concrete actions -- food, shelter, clothing, water.

We are an imperfect people, aren't we? Too often caught up by old and unquestioned beliefs we didn't even know we had. But God in Jesus Christ knows that already and loves us still. Loves us into openness.

And that is enough for today. Enough for this moment.

Maybe that is the good news. That in Jesus we have both the one who knows our imperfection, knows the challenge of just being human, and the one who enables us to be more than that.

Thanks be to God.