

If you can imagine what it would be like to be deaf and unable to speak, then you might understand why Jesus said “**Ephphatha**,” which means “**be opened**” in our Gospel reading. Deafness and muteness close a person in on himself. It is difficult to take in the thoughts of others because you cannot hear them speaking. It is difficult to communicate one’s own thoughts because the speaking is not clear.

Hearing well and speaking well can easily be taken for granted. We don’t know a good thing until it’s gone. Restoring losses like blindness, deafness, lameness, or muteness dramatically improves people’s lives.

Our Old Testament reading from Isaiah 35 talks about changing lives for the better. Isaiah lived more than 700 years before Christ, but he talks about things that Jesus did: “**The eyes of the blind will be opened, the ears of the deaf unstopped; the lame man shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute will sing for joy.**” Jesus did many miracles having to do with precisely these ailments. Think of how their lives were changed for the better.

There are several videos on the Internet that show something similar. Perhaps you’ve seen them. The videos show little kids getting glasses for the first time, or hearing aids or implants for the first time. These kids already know mom and dad, but they had never seen them clearly or heard them clearly. The first time they can see or hear they are filled with awe. Joy comes over their faces. Sometimes there are tears. The world opens up for them. That’s life and liveliness. It is as Jesus said, “**I came so that you may have life, and have it more abundantly.**”

Jesus’s bringing of abundant life is, again, fulfilling what Isaiah wrote. All of Isaiah 35 is about the restoration of life that the Christ brings about. Dry, dead, and barren places like the desert will come to life and bloom. Fraud, violence, and death will be no more. The redeemed will enter into Zion with singing. Everlasting joy shall be upon their heads.

What features most prominently in Isaiah 35, however, is life with God. It says, “**They shall see the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God.**” We heard at the beginning of our Old Testament reading these words, “**Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who have an anxious heart, ‘Be strong, fear not! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you.’**” Those are bracing words if you have the guts to believe them. “You will see God,” and “God is coming for you.”

If you think about it, isn’t it the case that we need to be “opened up,” so to speak, to this reality of God—that we should see him, that he’s coming for us? Blind people need to be opened up to the reality of seeing. Deaf people need to be opened up to the reality of hearing. It’s not like sights and sounds don’t exist when someone is blind or deaf, it’s just that they cannot perceive what’s actually there. So it is with God. Our inability or unwillingness to acknowledge him doesn’t mean that he doesn’t exist. To no longer be severely hampered—to no longer be blind, deaf, lame, and mute when it comes to God—requires a miracle along the lines of the man whom Jesus helped in our Gospel reading. We need to be opened up, otherwise we won’t even know what we are missing.

So it can be also for those who are physically blind, deaf, lame, or mute. Those conditions can be lived with. They are not fatal. It's just that large swaths of reality and joy are withheld. We can be that way with God too. In fact, that is our natural predisposition. We by nature are closed off from God, and we think that's just normal.

Consider your daily routine. It's so easy to go through an entire day without hardly giving a single thought towards God. We just follow our routine: Get up, make coffee, take a shower, go to work or school, come home, watch Netflix, go to bed. God is there the whole time, but we have nothing to do with him. It's as though we were blind, deaf, lame, and mute towards him without even knowing it.

I could almost see Jesus groaning over us like he did with the man in our Gospel reading. "Wake up you sleepy head!" I could see Jesus saying to us, "**Be opened.**" Life is more than food and drink. Life is more than work and vacation. Life is more than amusing ourselves to death. We can be as unthinking and uncaring as livestock, consuming what's given to us, oblivious to the coming slaughter. That's not how we are to be. We are much greater than the other animals. We have been made in the image of God. That makes us capable of high and divine things that we should take in, consider, and interact with. We can know things like truth, justice, mercy, peace, sacrifice, hope. On top of all these things we can even know God.

Now, I can hear some critics saying that all that stuff about truth, mercy, and so on is a waste of time and money. There are a lot of people—the most powerful people in our society—who think that jobs, money, business, technology, and so on are the only things that matter. All that other stuff is too high-falutin'. These people usually pride themselves for their practicality and for living in the real world.

They're wrong! They don't live in the real world. They've made for themselves a world that doesn't have a Creator in it who daily and richly provides me with all that I need. The real world has God in it. The real world has God's commands and curses, his promises and blessings. Just because a person is unable or unwilling to acknowledge that, doesn't make it so.

Imagine if there were a blind man who didn't believe that such a thing as sight exists. He's utterly convinced of that because he's never experienced it. Thus this arrogant man would like to impose his lack and his poverty on everyone else. So it is with those who scoff at God's Word, who scoff at Jesus's sacraments, who scoff at truth, love, beauty, and so on. Why? Because it's work that's important. Or amusements are important. Or it's simply a matter of being anesthetized and vegging out to pass the time.

I know a lot of people like this. I know myself. I know that I can very easily pass my days without much thought regarding God. I know, as another example, that I do not love God with all my heart, with all my soul, with all my strength, and with all my mind. A spiritually blind person might respond, "Well, no one can do that, so who cares?" But what if we really are supposed to? What if we really can? What if Jesus was sent to cure our blindness? What if Jesus is meant to open up in us a closed-off-ness that we just thought was normal?

Jesus says, “I came that you may have life, and have it more abundantly.” Jesus turns back the curses that hamper life. He heals physical blindness, deafness, and so on. Everyone can see the goodness of that. What is not realized as frequently is that Jesus opens us up spiritually to things we wouldn’t otherwise know. We wouldn’t otherwise know these things, because these things are only learned from the prophets, from Jesus, and from the apostles. Just as the blind man doesn’t know what it means to see until sight is given, so also we do not know what it is like to know God until Jesus opens us up to that.

We can know God by his Word. We can learn how to live with him in his creation from the Psalms. We can learn about our future from prophecies like Isaiah 35. We can begin to love God by the power of the Holy Spirit. We can think about God more often than never or twice a day. We can call upon him in prayer. We can restrain ourselves when we know that going further down the path of temptation would bring us into sin. We can begin to live a new life. What some can’t see or hear we can begin to see and hear.

But, as the apostle says, “Now we see in a mirror dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now we know in part, then we shall know fully, even as we have been fully known.” Paul is talking about how we only get an inkling in this life. I suspect an experience awaits us that is something like those videos that I mentioned at the beginning of this sermon. Those little kids never knew that they could see so well until the first time those glasses were put on their faces. They didn’t know how beautiful Mom’s voice was until they heard it. So it will be also for us.

What will it be like to see God? What will it be like to look Jesus in the face? Jesus opens us up to this hope with his Gospel. No one has seen God except Jesus who came from God. And yet, because of Jesus, we will see God in his holiness and splendor. I suspect that just a moment of that will contain more living in it than our entire life here below.

Therefore, do not be deceived. Don’t be tricked out of this healing. Jesus warns us against following those who are blind: “If the blind lead the blind, they will both fall into the pit.” Do not be blind to God. Do not be blind to truth, love, righteousness, sin, justice, redemption, and many other spiritual things. Our world is full of people who say that none of that matters. They are blind. They are closed in on themselves. “Ephphatha!” Be opened to God and to one another. He who has ears to hear, let him hear!