**Be Opened**

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St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Bedford MA

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There are just a few times in the Gospels, when the writers retain Jesus’ use of an original untranslated Aramaic word. Among them, you may recall, are: Talitha cum (which means little girl, get up). Hosanna (which means, Lord, save us). Rabouni (which means teacher), Eloi Eloi, lema sabacthani (My God, my God, why have you forsaken me), and today’s word “Ephphatha” which means be opened.

The word is the climax of Jesus’ encounter with a deaf and mute person who desires to hear and speak. On the surface, it is just another healing story, one among many in his travels through the Galilee. They kind of all blend together after awhile. But the use here of the transliterated Aramaic word, in addition to suggesting perhaps greater historical authenticity, also invites us to seek deeper layers of meaning in this short episode. Why leave this strange word untranslated even in the Greek, unless the writers of Gospel intended their hearers to linger upon it?

In a way, this verse from Mark’s Gospel, and especially this word Ephphatha, serves as a metaphor for Jesus’ entire earthly ministry. Jesus came so that we all might “be opened”. Opened more to each other. Opened more to the world around us. And most of all, so that our hearts might be more opened towards God. Whether by his own healing touch, or prophetic word, or surprising action, or faithful protest, or natural miracle, or even just by his presence, Jesus’ whole ministry was meant to open humanity to the Divine way. The way of self-giving and generosity towards others. The way of compassion and togetherness. The way of belonging and inclusion. The way of love. This is the precious, hard, beautiful reality to which Jesus’s hopes somehow his presence will open us.

In the Gospel passage this all happens quite literally. When the man is open to Jesus, three things happen. First, his ability to perceive expands. He can now hear. Second, his obtains the ability to communicate his new perceptions. He can now speak. Third, the transformation in his own life begins to inspire in others an openness towards the goodness of God. The crowd is astounded beyond measure.

We can see these same effects in our own lives, even if, most of the time, it’s not quite so literal; even if, most of the time, we’re not fully certain that it’s Jesus at work. When are opened by something in some moment to the Divine way, the way of self-giving and generous love, the same three things happen to us. First, our ability to perceive reality expands. We become aware of deeper (or maybe wider) truths about what matters most in life: not just individual success and security and happiness, but shared compassion, authentic community and ecological integrity. Second, we become empowered to communicate these new perceptions to others. This is often hard – especially at first. We don’t know how to speak to others about the opening for God that has emerged within us. But there it is, some kind of new and life-giving awareness within us that wants to be shared somehow. And third, how we live our lives begins to inspire in others an openness towards the divine way, the way of self-giving love. It’s not intentional. It’s not coercive. It’s simply attractive. And it’s attractive because what it offers isn’t the false veneer of a perfect life. It’s attractive because the Divine way is honest about the joys and sorrows of living a life open to God – and the deeper kind of meaning and purpose it brings.

For the deaf and mute man in the Gospel, it was Jesus’ own touch that opened him to God. But what about you? What opens *you* to God? What expands your perception of reality to the point where you find yourself encountering the deeper truths about life? What experiences of some power larger than yourself are strong enough that you feel compelled to share them with others?

For many of us, one thing that opens our hearts to God is some kind of experience of the natural world around us. Last week and this week and next week, we are observing a “mini-season” here at church, called Creationtide. This season is an invitation to attend to the ways our relationship with Creation informs our spirituality.

I imagine we each have a special place in nature that awakens in us a spiritual impulse towards prayer or understanding or wholeness. Perhaps you visited yours at some point this summer? I did. The leaflet cover is a not so great picture of one of those places for me. It’s a tree on a hiking trail in the bay area. But yours might be a beach or a lake or a deep forest or a high mountain. It was a pond not far from here for Thoreau. It’s apparently anywhere there are birds for Mary Oliver. And it was Yosemite Valley for John Muir.

When I think about the capacity of nature to open us towards the mystical truths about the universe, I think of John Muir. The reason why I love John Muir isn’t just because of his conversation efforts which protected Yosemite Valley and paved the way for the whole National Parks system. It’s much deeper than that. It’s because of the way his experiences of the natural world opened him to a much more liberated, compassionate, and generous experience of God. And how this experience of being opened by nature compelled him to share his wider perceptions about God, and to live a life that attracted the curiosity and admiration of many others from peasants to Presidents.

John Muir grew up in Scotland, in a very religious household. They were such strict Calvinists that when Muir was a just a lad, his father decided their church wasn’t strict enough or Calvinist enough, so they were moving to Wisconsin to start the true church. The only book Muir was allowed to read as a child was the Bible. But he chaffed at this and many other of the spiritual disciplines of his family’s church. So he left. By the time he was a young adult, Muir had begun taking extended walks out in the Midwest that lasted half a year. After some time at the University of Wisconsin, he moved west. The walks continued and grew longer. Up the coast all the way to Alaska at one point. And, of course, around Yosemite.

During all this time, he was a prolific journal keeper and letter writing. There are thousands of pages of his original writing. They tell of all manner of flowers and sunsets and meadows, but also of grizzly bears and wide ice crevasses and fantastical lightning storms. Among these descriptions of his walks are sprinkled numerous theological revelations and insights. As a whole, they reveal how it was his experience of the wilderness that over time opened him to a much more expansive and liberating Christian faith than the oppressive, and exclusive, dogma of his youth. A passage from one of his private letters gives a good sense of this. He writes,

“We all flow from one fountain Soul. All are expressions of one Love. God does not appear, and flow out, only from narrow chinks and round bored wells here and there in favored races and places, but He flows in grand undivided currents, shoreless and boundless over creeds and forms and all kinds of civilizations and peoples and beasts, saturating all and fountainizing all.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

The deaf and mute man was opened to the Divine way of love in an instant by Jesus’ touch.

John Muir was opened to the Divine way of love over a lifetime of seeing God’s hand at work in the wilderness.

How open are you to the divine way of love in your life? What might open you to it a bit more? The powerful beauty of a summer thunderstorm? The suffering of an aging parent or spouse? The feel of the bread and wine in your mouth? The joyful innocence of a child’s first day of school? It almost doesn’t matter what it is. God just wants an opening into your daily life, even if you never seem to notice God there. Just an opening, wide enough for the light of Christ to shine through the shadows of your life and nourish more and more the seeds of faith that are already within you. Amen.

1. June 9, 1872 letter to Miss Catharine Merrill, from New Sentinel Hotel, Yosemite Valley, in Badè's [*Life and Letters of John Muir*](https://vault.sierraclub.org/john_muir_exhibit/life/life_and_letters/chapter_9.aspx). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)