

Willow River Parish: Clear Lake, Deer Park, and Faith Family

Title: Ephphatha

Lesson: Mark 7:24-37

24 Jesus left that place and went to the vicinity of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know it; yet he could not keep his presence secret. 25 In fact, as soon as she heard about him, a woman whose little daughter was possessed by an impure spirit came and fell at his feet. 26 The woman was a Greek, born in Syrian Phoenicia. She begged Jesus to drive the demon out of her daughter. 27 "First let the children eat all they want," he told her, "for it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs." 28 "Lord," she replied, "even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." 29 Then he told her, "For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter." 30 She went home and found her child lying on the bed, and the demon gone. 31 Then Jesus left the vicinity of Tyre and went through Sidon, down to the Sea of Galilee and into the region of the Decapolis. 32 There some people brought to him a man who was deaf and could hardly talk, and they begged Jesus to place his hand on him. 33 After he took him aside, away from the crowd, Jesus put his fingers into the man's ears. Then he spit and touched the man's tongue. 34 He looked up to heaven and with a deep sigh said to him, "Ephphatha!" (which means "Be opened!"). 35 At this, the man's ears were opened, his tongue was loosened and he began to speak plainly. 36 Jesus commanded them not to tell anyone. But the more he did so, the more they kept talking about it. 37 People were overwhelmed with amazement. "He has done everything well," they said. "He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak."

This past week, the biggest topic of conversation in our family has definitely been Evan's school life. For those of you who've sent children to school, this might not seem like a big deal. But for us, Evan is our only son, and sending him to school for the first time was an entirely new experience for all of us. Naturally, we were a bit nervous and worried.

The week before he started school, we were excited. We were looking forward to Evan making new friends and having new experiences, and we were also anticipating having some time to focus on other things while he was in school. Perhaps we had been waiting for this moment for a long time. However, the night before his first day, and especially on the morning of his first day, I found myself unusually anxious. Suddenly, fears and worries began to overwhelm me, and I had thoughts like, "Will he be able to adjust to school well?" and "What if he struggles with communication in English and gets hurt emotionally?"

So, I rushed to the church sanctuary that morning to pray. Of course, I could have prayed anywhere, but I prefer to pour out my heart to God in the quiet of the sanctuary without any distractions or interruptions. When I started to pray, my mind was racing, and I didn't know where to begin. So, I opened a hymnbook and sang a few hymns, which helped calm me down. Then I prayed, "Lord, thank you for watching over and protecting our son,

Evan, until now. Because of your care, he has grown up healthy without any major illnesses. He's now four years old, and today he's going to school for the first time. Up until now, we've always been by his side, but while he's at school, we can't be with him. Please be with him, help him make good friends, follow his teacher's guidance, and adjust well to school life."

After that, it was time to take him to school. Before he got out of the car, we took turns praying for him. As we walked him to his classroom, despite my concerns, I saw him happily playing with toys alongside his new friends, and we quietly left the room. Returning home without Evan felt a bit strange to my wife and me. We spent the day cleaning the house, hoping that his first experience at school would go smoothly.

(Slide 1) When it was time to pick him up, I was eager to hear how his day went. His teacher brought him to the school entrance, and when he saw us, he ran into our arms with a big smile, telling us how much fun he had at school. We were relieved and proud of him for taking his first step into school life so well. We asked him all about his day, and as usual, Evan, who loves to talk, spent the rest of the evening telling us everything until he went to bed.

Of course, school is still a new and unfamiliar place for him, and we could tell he felt some stress and tension from all the new experiences. So, the next morning, he even asked if he could skip school. We explained to him that adjusting to new things is difficult for everyone, and we encouraged him, telling him he was doing well, sending him off once again. After seeing how well he had done on his first day, we felt much more at ease on the second. This time, we decided to walk to the school to pick him up early. Once again, he came out smiling and told us he had made a new friend.

On the way home, he surprised us by saying, "I don't want to go home. Home is too boring. I want to live at school." Hearing that, I felt so grateful, knowing that he was adjusting well. He even sang and danced for us, showing us the new songs and moves he had learned at school, and he practiced some English phrases he had picked up. We had taught him to say "Don't do that" or "Stop" if someone did something he didn't like. He told us that while playing with a toy truck on the playground, another child threw sand at him—maybe as a joke or by accident. He wanted to say, "Don't do that," but instead, what came out was, "It's my turn."

Still, I'm thankful that he's handling school life well. Looking back, all the anxiety and worry I had before school started now feels like wasted energy.

As I went through this week feeling worry, stress, relief, joy, and gratitude, reading Mark 7 felt like reading my own story. That's why I wanted to share it with you.

In Mark 7, people bring to Jesus a man who is deaf and can hardly talk, asking Him to place His hand on him. Because the man couldn't hear, he couldn't speak properly either. In other words, he couldn't communicate with others, nor could he communicate with God. He was trapped, isolated, and closed off.

Moved by compassion, Jesus took him aside, put His fingers in the man's ears, and touched his tongue. Jesus looked up to heaven, sighed, and said to him, "Ephphatha!"

(Slide 2) Friends, do you know what "Ephphatha" means? 1. Peace, 2. Open, 3. Hello Lord, 4. Close, 5. Be Opened. What do you think? Yes, it means "Be Opened." But notice, it's not just "open," it's "be opened." This is in the passive voice, meaning the opening happens by someone else—by God.

While it's powerful to understand this as a simple healing of a deaf and mute man, there's a deeper meaning here. The man was trapped, unable to communicate not only with others but with God. When Jesus said "Ephphatha," he was freed from his closed-off state, able to connect with others and with God.

I think that in many ways, we are like that deaf and mute man. When we're consumed with fear, worry, or stress, we become closed off. We get trapped in our own thoughts, unable to see or hear God. We focus on our own questions: "What should I do?" "Why is this happening to me?" "What if things don't get better?" We become inwardly focused, forgetting to look to God.

I was trapped in my own worries before sending Evan to school. I kept trying to find solutions on my own. But no matter what I did, I couldn't always be with him or predict everything that might happen. Only when I finally surrendered all my thoughts and plans to God did I experience peace. I was no longer trapped by fear and worry.

In this way, the story from Mark 7 is my story.

(Slide 3) Throughout the Bible, we see God opening the eyes and ears of people who were trapped in fear and worry. Abraham and Sarah had no children for many years. Despite their strong faith, their hearts were filled with worry as they prayed for a child. But God appeared to Abraham and told him to look up at the stars, promising him descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky. It was only then that they were able to move beyond their worry and trust in God.

Before God gave them a child, Abraham and Sarah tried to solve their problem in their own way by having a child with Hagar, their servant. Most of us think highly of Abraham and Sarah, but for Hagar and her son Ishmael, their experience was much different. Out of jealousy, Sarah drove Hagar and Ishmael into the wilderness with a small amount of food and water. In her fear and worry, Hagar cried out to God, and God opened her eyes to see a well, providing for their needs.

(Slide 4) Psalm 77, written by Asaph, also shows a journey from being closed off in worry to being opened to God. Let's see Psalm 77:

1 I cried out to God for help; I cried out to God to hear me.
2 When I was in distress, I sought the Lord; at night I stretched out untiring hands, and I would not be comforted.

At the start of the psalm, Asaph is consumed with his own distress. But from verse 10 onward, we see a shift as God opens Asaph's eyes and ears, helping him reconnect with God.

10 Then I thought, "To this I will appeal: the years when the Most High stretched out his right hand." 11 I will remember the deeds of the Lord; yes, I will remember your miracles of long ago. 12 I will consider all your works and meditate on all your mighty deeds.".....19 Your path led through the sea, your way through the mighty waters, though your footprints were not seen. 20 You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron.

Through God's opening, Asaph remembers God's faithfulness and is no longer trapped by his distress.

Ephphatha! Ephphatha! Ephphatha! May our eyes, ears, and hearts be opened by God so that we can stay connected to Him throughout our lives. Amen.