

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

September 5, 2021, The 15th Sunday After Pentecost/The 22nd Sunday of Ordinary Time

Psalm 125, Mark 7: 31-37

HEARING

He had spent his life in silence. As a very young child it seemed normal; it was all he knew. But as he got a bit older, two, three, four years old, he watched the mouths of his mama and papa moving, the mouths of his brothers and sisters opening and closing. Clearly when they did that, the other person reacted, as though something was transferred by the opening of their mouth.

He'd watch mouths move, and the plate of bread would be passed from one to another at the dinner table,

He'd watch their mouths move, and then others would laugh, slapping each other on the back.

Or someone would come into their home, into their yard, fear or sadness on their faces and then running feet, tears, gathered supplies, shouted words, and then the dust would settle around him and he would wonder what had happened and where they were going, and what had been lost, or broken or killed.

Sometimes he had a sense of what it must be like to know those sounds. When he sat on his papa's lap as he talked with the men in the village, someone would speak, the men's eyes would crinkle and they would throw their heads back in laughter.

And he could feel it!

He could feel a rumbling from somewhere near his papa's tummy, and the rumble would shake up through his papa's chest and out his mouth.

And *he* knew what laughter was. He laughed when his big brother tickled him. He laughed when the chickens chased his little sister. He laughed when his granny hugged him tight and fed him sweets. But he never heard his own laughter, he only felt it; rumbling up from his tummy, just like his papa's.

And he knew about sound. He could feel it. How could any child growing up in the town of Sidon, beside the Mediterranean Sea, not know about sound? Even a child like him knew about sound. Standing by the ocean as the storms came in off the sea, he could feel the waves hitting the shore.

His feet in the wet sand felt the shudder of the land, as it was attacked by the angry waves.

His face felt the sting of salty water,
and the wind pushed at him, nearly as blinding as the sea.

Living in a busy Roman seaport he didn't need to hear, to know that he was encircled by sound. The fishing fleets docking after being out on the sea each day made the docks shudder. The large trade ships came and went with all kinds of marvels from around the Mediterranean. Along with the seaport of Tyre, to the south, his was an important Roman seaport that sent expensive purple cloth around the Mediterranean world.

Sidon and Tyre were towns where the purple dyes were taken from the fluid in the murex mollusk shells that filled their sea. That deep purple-red cloth would never be found in his house, it was too expensive, and they were too poor. Only royalty, the Caesars, and the rich wore purple.

It took so many snails to make a tiny bit of dye, so he could tell you what the sound felt like as those empty mollusk shells were dumped by the basket-full, tumbling to the ground.

He and his friends ran through mountains of shells emptied and stinking in the hot Mediterranean sun.

In fact, Tyre and Sidon were known as much for their purple cloth, as they were known for the smell of the mountains of rotting mollusk shells, emptied of their snails.

He knew about sounds. When the men gathered to worship in the various temples of the Phoenician, Greek, and Roman gods of his seaport town, he could feel their chanting and singing all around him. He could feel it through his sandals on the stone floor. He could feel it like the beat of his heart as the music pulsed against him.

And when his papa lifted him up so he could see the sights and sounds of worship, he could feel the music moving up from his papa's chest and out his mouth into the air.

And he would shape his mouth like his papa's and try to push out the feelings, the sounds, the worship from his own tummy, up through his chest and out his mouth.

And he knew that he was making sounds by the looks on their faces.

He never heard his own singing, he only felt it.

He knew about sounds. His mother would look into his face with such love and longing. She'd take his hands and place them on her throat as she spoke, and he could feel the sounds, the words coming up from deep inside her.

When he would open his mouth he could make sounds, they would rumble up from within him, like his papa's laugh, like the men's singing, like his mother's weeping.

But they never knew what his sounds meant.

The best times were at the weddings and the festivals of his town, when the circles of men and the circles of women would dance. As he followed their patterns, he could feel the rhythms moving up through his legs. Dancing seemed one of the few times he fit in with them all. He knew that looking at him, no one would know that he didn't have the words for what they were doing.

At the best gatherings the musicians would come. And they brought another language he could feel. He would sit beside the drums and feel their beats against his hands. He'd place his ear against the hides and the cords that held them there, and they would pulse against his fingers, like the breath from his mother's mouth.

The women would hand him their timbrels or tambourines and let him play with them sometimes. He would shake them, and tap on them, the way the women did in their circles, and hold them up beside his head. It felt like the timbrels were trying to shake sounds into his ears. He'd sometimes be given two of them and he's crash them together in front of his eyes and feel them sending out pulses of sound up his arms and into his face.

And even though he was never allowed to play with the lutes and lyres with their tightened strings, sometimes the musicians would let him come close, and he could feel the sounds moving down each string and joining with the others to rise up into the air around him.

As he got older, he learned to make himself understood. He knew that the shake of his head for "yes," meant yes he wanted more food, yes he wanted to go out on the Sea with his brothers, yes he wanted to sit by the drums.

The shake of his head for “no” told them that “no” he didn’t want to go to bed, “no” he didn’t want more fish stew, and “no” he didn’t want to leave the dancing.

And his mother and brothers and sisters helped him shape his mouth like theirs and push out air and he knew by their faces he was making sound. And in time, his sounds made sense to them for the basic things.

And he didn’t really need to hear, to learn the games the boys his age played in the village square and down by the sea.

He didn’t need to hear, to gather in places of religious festivals and feasts

And he didn’t need to hear, to learn to work beside his brothers and his father in the family business.

He didn’t need to hear, to sit at the village gates with the other men at the end of the day.

He didn’t to hear, to know when someone was frustrated with him, or glad to see him, or saddened by his empty sounds, or thought he was stupid in his silence.

He didn’t need to hear, to know his mother’s sadness when he’s catch her looking at him, thinking that he didn’t notice.

As his brothers and sisters began to marry, he’d see the worry on her face, the loss, the love, and he’d wish he could give her words to comfort her.

He didn’t need to hear all those things to know them.

But that didn’t mean he didn’t *want* to hear all those things he felt and saw.

And he didn’t need to speak to make himself understood by his family and friends. But that didn’t mean he wasn’t filled to overflowing with a lifetime of questions, thoughts, dreams and beliefs stored up behind his broken tongue.

As he’d look out over the expanse of the Mediterranean Sea, he sometimes felt like he held as many words inside himself as there were drops of water in the whole ocean

If all his words could clatter out of him, like mollusk shells emptied by the dyers and tossed aside, he too could form mountains.

Mountains of words;

mountains of words that told his family and his friends
who he was inside, in his silence.

And then a day came when his friends, and some of his family came to him. Excitement covered their faces and they pulled at him to follow. Together they joined the crowd that was gathering to hear a teacher.

He didn’t look like the philosophers of the Greek and Romans Temples of Sidon.

He wasn’t like the wealthy merchants in this Roman seaport; this teacher would never wear purple.

He looked tired and dusty, as though he had walked a long way.

But somehow people knew who he was, and for some reason his friends and family wanted him to be seen by this man he could not hear.

They pushed their way through the crowd, one of them always holding onto the sleeve of his robe, dragging him forward toward the teacher.

There was a look on their faces he didn’t understand.

It was as though hope, fear, sadness and joy had been combined into each of their expressions.

If he didn't know better, he would almost have said they looked savage,
as though nothing was going to stand in their way of taking him to see this man.

Then his family and friends surround the teacher, and they were begging for something. Their hands clasped together, they leaned toward him, tears on some of their faces, begging from their very souls for something that clearly meant the world to them.

Then the teacher turned toward him and looked him in the eye. He felt that he wasn't being seen by an itinerant teacher, but by someone who had known him since the moment of his birth. Even in the face of his mother he had never seen so much love and compassion. Even with his deafened ears and broken tongue he felt like he was being heard in a way that no one had ever understood him.

So, when this man beckoned him to follow him away from the crowd, he followed. He looked behind him once, and saw his family and friends waving at him to go after the teacher, but he couldn't understand those looks of hope, fear, sadness and joy that were mingled on their faces.

When the teacher stopped, he wanted to make him understand,
so, he pointed to his useless ears
and made the sounds that had always told others he couldn't hear them.
He pointed to his tongue to say he couldn't speak words
that the teacher would ever understand.

But the teacher just nodded, and reaching out put his fingers into his unhearing ears, holding them there for a moment. Then the teacher spit into his hand and touched his tongue. In some strange way both of these actions made sense to him, because the teacher was there because of his ears that couldn't hear, and his tongue that couldn't speak. (See Schweizer below)

Then the teacher looked up to heaven, and he watched him take a big breath and let it out with a sigh like a long wave coming up the beach,
like the men in the temples inhaling before the next note,
like the pause between one string on the lyre being plucked and then the next one.

And then the world was never the same again...

because he heard the words the teacher spoke: "Ephphatha," be opened.
At first, he wasn't even sure what it was: "Ephphatha," be opened.

But the smile on the teacher's face confirmed what was happening.
His ears were opened and after hearing the teacher's word,
he heard the nearby crowd,
he heard the surf hitting the shore,
he heard the clatter of mollusk shells rolling against each other,
and he heard the sound of his own voice.

And they were there: sounds and words that he had only imagined, because he had only

known them through

the rumble of his papa's laughing belly,
 the vibrations in his mama's throat as she showed him the shapes of words,
 the pulsing of waves, and music, and stomping feet...
 they were there; coming out of his mouth...sound and speech.

His tongue was released, set free from silence, and he heard his *own voice*,

His own voice calling to his family, to his friends;

His own voice telling them what they already knew, this teacher Jesus was also a healer.

As his family and friends and the crowd gathered around them, they began to praise Jesus for this healing from God, and they made plans to tell everyone they knew.

But Jesus ordered them all to keep silence.

But no matter what Jesus said to them, none of them could keep this news to themselves.

When you have seen the most amazing thing in the world,

when you have seen a man with no words, speak,

when you have watched him hear and answer his family; how could you ever be silent?

And even if they kept silent,

the crowd was already spreading the news of this healing into Sidon, and on to the next town
 of Tyre,

spreading the news into the homes, and temples, and schools,

into the rooms filled with the sellers of purple cloth,

to the sailors on the merchant ships going out into the Mediterranean Sea,

and to the traders and caravans leaving on ancient routes for Egypt, Babylon and Spain.

Like sound waves echoing, the news was already spreading.

He had spent his life in silence.

As a young child it seemed normal; it was all he knew.

But now his silence had been broken open,

and he could never be silent again,

because Jesus the healer had come to give life, and words, and healing
 to us all.

NOTES:

The Biblical Cities of Tyre and Sidon, Bible Archaeology, Jan. 26, 2010

<http://www.biblearchaeology.org/post/2010/01/26/the-biblical-cities-of-tyre-and-sidon.aspx#Article>

While Tyre and Sidon were considered Canaanite during the second millennium BC, scholars call the Lebanese coast after the time of the Israelite Conquest of Canaan, Phoenicia. "Phoenicia" was the name given to the region by the Greeks, from their word for purple. The ancient world's purple dye industry developed from extracting a fluid from a Mediterranean mollusk, the murex. Not only did the people of the Phoenician coast develop this industry, they specialized in shipping this very valuable commodity all over the Mediterranean world.

The New Testament Period

By virtue of its submission to Alexander, Sidon under the Greeks enjoyed relative freedom and an advanced cultural life. In the early days of the Roman Empire, Sidon even had enough autonomy to have its own senate and mint its own coins. Unfortunately for archaeologists, the area of ancient Sidon remains occupied today and only minimal archaeological evidence for New Testament Sidon is available.

Meanwhile, Tyre also recovered from Alexander's devastation. In 126 BC, now a peninsula extending into the Mediterranean, Tyre became a Roman province and later the capital of Rome's Syria-Phoenician province.

The site of the ancient mainland city became a large and ornate Roman necropolis. Here also was built a typical Roman hippodrome, the best preserved in the world today. An east-west colonnaded street, a huge triple-bay triumphal arch and a water aqueduct also extended from this area toward the sea. On the island of Tyre, near the site of the ancient Egyptian (southern) port today sits impressive ruins from the Roman and Byzantine periods. These include a western extension of the colonnaded street from the mainland site, the agora (market place), an unusual arena, and a huge bathhouse. Thus, New Testament Tyre and Sidon were prosperous Roman port cities. Yet there was great spiritual hunger in the region. Early in Jesus' ministry, people from Sidon and Tyre heard about the things He did. They came to see Him (Mk 3:8) and be healed by Him (Lu 6:17).

See also

"Jesus in the Region of Tyre and Sidon"

<http://www.lifeandland.org/2009/02/jesus-in-the-region-of-tyre-and-sidon/>

Purple cloth: "Tyrian Purple," http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tyrian_purple

Schweizer, Eduard, *The Good News According to Mark*, Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1970, p.154: "The gestures are the only way in which Jesus can speak to the deaf-mute; consequently, even in this instance the fact is preserved that in his healing Jesus addresses the person."

Trade routes: see: http://www.bible-history.com/maps/maps/map_ancient_trade_routes_mesopotamia.html

Musical Instruments in Biblical Israel: <http://www.bibarch.com/music/Music%20and%20the%20Bible.htm>