

+In the Name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen+

On February 22, 1980 a group of young men, college aged, skated onto the ice rink at Lake Placid to play a game of hockey. They were, by college standards, a fairly skilled team, but against the competition to be faced that evening they were 40-1 underdogs. This was a final in the gold medal round of the Winter Olympics, and these young men faced the Soviet team which was comprised essentially of world class professional athletes. In fact the Soviets had defeated the National Hockey League's All-Star Team 6-0. No one had given them a serious challenge throughout the games. At one point the USSR lead 3-2, but with 10 minutes left in the game the US went ahead 4-3. For what seemed an eternity the score held. Lou Michaels, the famed sports announcer, called the final moments as the tension mounted. He later said that he had broadcast literally hundreds of events, but he would most likely be remembered for his comments with 5 seconds left in the contest; "Do You Believe In Miracles?!" In the face of what had happened he could not think of anything else to say. There was no way to prepare for this.

This morning I want to suggest something for your consideration. Think of it as a framework for our worship and meditation on the Gospel. It is this: The problem and challenges of being human are so great that nothing that is POSSIBLE can save us. Make sure you hear that correctly. Nothing that is possible or that we can engineer can save us—only that which seems

on the surface to be **improbable!** The Collect for today reminds us that God is far more willing to hear than we are to ask, and perhaps that is because we are not really sure if the asking will be received so we try to take care of it ourselves.

But sometimes it is in the unexpected, unplanned, and unanticipated events of life that we experience what the NT calls the “mighty or powerful” actions of God. Perhaps it is an encounter with a friend or family member, or a moment of quiet meditation when a sudden insight illumines us, or on the other hand a painful and life impacting event that alters how we can go about living that we come to realize God was present and active! The writer of the Gospel of St. Mark records such a story in the healing of the man who was deaf and whose ability to speak was terribly impaired. We do not know why his condition was present, but it is likely that it was a lifelong affliction which made normal human interaction at the very least impeded. (I might add parenthetically, St. Mark seems to have had a bit of a language problem as well—every single sentence in this story begins with the word, AND, almost as if he were stuttering) Seriously, there is a reason why this repetitive sequence is used. It suggests urgency and importance. In gathering up this “head of steam” St. Mark is telling us to pay attention to what this healing really means. It is a **sign** of something far-reaching both peering back, but also looking ahead.

Anyone watching this healing would have recalled Isaiah 35. “**Then** the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of deaf unstopped; **then** shall the lame leap like a hart, and the tongue of the dumb shall sing for joy.” What is this word, “then” mean? We are being told that in this healing moment God is fulfilling what He had promised, and that in Jesus the Kingdom was breaking into human life. But that is not all. That little

phrase, “He has done all things well” harkens back to Genesis 1 and God seeing the goodness of His creation, and His overcoming the muteness of chaos. Finally, it also projects us toward the future into our own time and living space. This strange word from Aramaic, Ephphatha, means literally to be loosed from bonds, or set free from exile. And once this man is freed from his state of bondage he now speaks and hears clearly. *The story holds forth the promise that in Christ God will re-create for us the same possibility of living in wholeness, just as He created the cosmos out of chaos.* The more open we are to hearing and receiving on His terms, the more we practice openness to God’s presence, the more likely we are to see His activity of making us whole. The man in the story did not try to tell Christ how to make him well, and the crowd is so astonished they can’t keep quiet. We can be surprised not by what we already know and expect, but by what had seemed impossible. The funny thing about faith is that often we exercise it and see God only when we look back at where we have been. We seem to notice the tracings of His presence and saving actions after the fact. And that is part of what St. Mark is saying here. Look back and see the promises of God’s care and love made in a time past, but in hope receive their filling life full of wholeness and healing in the NOW.

I wonder how many of us would say that we are perfectly content with the substance of our lives, the conduct of values, or the condition of our souls. How many of us would wish to be taken aside in private, as was this man, to face a true picture of ourselves; to see our blindness to God, our muteness of speaking a word of comfort to others who suffer, or our deafness to what we know full well God desires from us? It would be a harrowing and sobering exercise to stand in Christ’s presence and be transparent. Yet that is what we actually do here today. And though it may

be frightening to hit rock bottom in life this openness to Him can also bring us freedom, because then we come to depend on Him and not ourselves; we come to be open to Christ re-creating us. It isn't easy to step into that when we don't know the outcome in advance! That's why it's called faith/hope.

I have a friend who was a pastor in the Asheville area many years ago. He tells of an incident that occurred in the city, whose conclusion finally came to rest with a family in his parish. It is not easy to think about or to tell. A young girl came to live with a set of foster parents after having been shuttled from one set of homes to another for a period of years. One can only imagine the impact of such instability on the life of a child, and her capacity to trust in the future. She seemed well cared for and began to attend school in the area, but shortly she was missed from school. The house where she lived was quiet and appeared vacant, but Social Services soon discovered she was living there having been abandoned by the foster care givers. She was placed with a family in this parish, but seemed indifferent to their care, and rarely spoke or responded to overtures. One day she did not come home from school, and after a few hours it was obvious she was missing. Police and others began to search for her without any trace of her presence. The family drove throughout the area, when it occurred to the wife they might look at the house she had lived in previously. Completely dark from the outside, they decided to run thru it anyway, and found a light on upstairs. When they went into the room it was empty, but upon looking in the closet they found her resting there with an old toy. As difficult as it had been living in that setting, it was nevertheless something she knew and could predict. Freedom seemed like bondage. The family took her home again and after several years of challenging and sometimes heart-breaking encounters, she finally responded to their care and

patient strength. She was adopted as a young teenager, but just before finalizing that she asked them a question. “You just weren’t going to give up on me were you?” No, her new family replied. God doesn’t give up on His children, and we could do nothing less.

It isn’t the possible, the predictable, or even the safe actions in life that save us and make us whole. For this girl what happened was unimaginable-to be securely loved. It is rather that which we could not have imagined, or had the courage to do ourselves. But God does. That gracious gift is enough. Amen+