

The Rev. Dr. David K. McIntosh
September 5, 2021- 15th Sunday After Epiphany, 18B
Given at St. Mark's Church, Bridgewater, CT

Isaiah 35: 4-7; Psalm 146; James 2: 1-10; 14-17; Mark 7: 24-37

“Say to those who are of a fearful heart, ‘Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God, He will come with a vengeance.’” †

This week at our Tuesday night *lectio divina* many of us prayed about and discussed these passages from Isaiah and Mark. ‘Be strong, do not fear...’ These words are a powerful reminder that God’s power is among us. Often, it’s hard to see and feel God amid powerful natural disturbances/ disasters, such as we and the people of the Gulf coast and NJ/NY have experienced with Ida this week.

Before the storm, when I pondered over the prophet’s words, the images they produced for me were of a dry deserted land being made cool and life giving, good and pleasant changes that bring life. I did not expect a literal reading “for waters shall break forth... sand shall become a pool.” And yet both interpretations are about God among us. And yes, sometimes it just doesn’t seem fair!

In the Gospel today, we have the stories of two very different healings of people suffering from infirmities that isolate them for society; they are outcasts. And I am shocked by the initial actions of the Jesus who insultingly refuses the Syrophenician woman’s plea for his help. There is no escaping (in the Greek or translated texts) the ethnic slur “dog” Jesus uses. It makes me consider that Jesus was human, and as such part of a world, a society that suffers from deep insecurity. Society creates rules and stereotypes that give value to some people, while degrading others. This was the case of 1st Century Jewish Palestine, where the poor, the infirmed, the orphaned, and women were felt to be inferior. Indeed, to a Jewish man, an alien (gentile), especially a gentile woman, was to be avoided and deemed unimportant. And yet, this same Jesus is the one who crossed into the region of Tyre. He crossed the border/ the boundary, to mingle with these untouchable aliens. And throughout his ministry, he highlighted the importance of reaching out to the marginalized, the sick and mentally ill, the homeless, the weak, the forgotten.

When I combine the words from the prophet Isaiah and those words from the Syrophenician woman, I get a sense that this woman was one of those rare few who *recognized God’s presence* before her, and who humbly (bowed down) begs for those promises to come true about the one who “will come to save you.” She longs for the day, as we all do, when “the ear of the deaf will unstopped; the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongues of the speechless sing for joy.” And in her faith, her wish is granted, and her daughter is healed.

These scriptures give us a promise of and a glimpse of God’s mercy, love, and awesome power. They are an invitation to realize that our God does come to those who least expect him and does unusual things. And this Tuesday, several of us noted how easy it can be to feel discouraged. Sure, God is great and powerful and able to heal our infirmities, but when? When is this ever going to happen for me? When is

my chance? Two things come to mind as a response: Be mindful that our God is present among us always— in good times and in bad, during happy moments and devastating ones, always loving us and sharing our joy as well as our pain. And, God's ways our not our ways, God's time is not our time! "Be strong and do not fear... here is your God."

I can't end without pointing out that when Jesus does engage with us and provide healing, sometimes the response is beyond what even he intended. That man who was deaf and dumb, who couldn't hear or speak, once healed, couldn't help but proclaim the glory and the presence of God to others. In defiance of a 'gag order' from the one who removed a speech impediment, he just wouldn't stop talking! In a similar way, I invite you to take the opportunity this week to recognize God's presence around you, and to point that presence out to others. Most of us are not great evangelists, we are reluctant to share our faith with others, whether we're afraid to be laughed at, or afraid of embarrassing someone. Today, I offer you each this small flashlight keychain— on it is our parish name/ phone number, and the words "for the Light of the World." May it be an aid to you. Take one for a friend and use it to point them to Jesus. For all of us—even those without faith, especially those who feel marginalized and abandoned, and all who yearn to recognize God's presence— *all of us* want to be healed as the prophet Isaiah has promised. With faithful hearts, I pray you will be strong and share your knowledge of God, in Christ, to those you meet! †