

Do You Want to be Saved?

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Whether billboard, pamphlet, aerial advertising, or an approaching street preacher, the question, “*do you want to be saved?*” Or its ready-made answer, *Salvation is only from Jesus* – often left me flat. I remember thinking, “not really.” What is salvation anyway? An army? Saved from what?

Now shake out the theology and doctrine to the root of the word, *salvus*, and it means alive, safe, well or unharmed. Now do I want to be fully alive, well, safe and unharmed? For sure, yes!

And that’s what God wants for us, for sure!

Isaiah in our first reading today gives us such a powerful vision of God’s dream of a people saved. A broken people marching through the desert who are blind, deaf, lame and mute. A people who will be saved, meaning they will be made alive again, safe, whole, no longer harmed by nature, infirmity or ailment. So much so that nature’s harsh surroundings will also be saved along the march with the sudden burst of streams, rivers, pools and springs of water from the burning sands.

That’s our common humanity and our common need for healing and wholeness. That humanity crosses all places on earth whether the deserts of the Middle East or the plains of our American soil.

But salvation from Jesus comes in the individual encounter. To be made alive again, to be made safe, to be made whole, and to be protected from harm is one-on-one in the individual’s story. This is true whether she or he is blind, deaf, lame or mute, physically, emotionally or spiritually, or most often, all or in some combination.

Jesus brings that healing to each person in his or her unique story and circumstances. It’s as if Jesus pulls out the individual from the march in the desert to look deeply into that one person’s soul. Most of the 47 healing stories in the gospels are one-on-one encounters with the person in his or her ailment. Today’s encounter is with just such a person, a deaf man with a speech impediment.

This is a unique healing story though. It is only found in Mark's gospel, it is done in private, it has a complicated 7-step healing process, and it must have been so memorable because of the rare preservation of an Aramaic word -*Ephphatha!* – that is, “Be opened!”

Jesus is so physical in this encounter. He puts his finger in his ear, he spits and he touches his tongue. He looks up to heaven, he groans and he yells his powerful command to open this man's ears.

This is the only time in the entire gospels that Jesus groans. Think of that. Why that memory of the Church in this story? What did that groan mean?

Scripture scholars suggest that this deep sigh is a physical manifestation of the great compassion that Jesus had for this man. The man is in the double bind of not hearing and not speaking. He is so alone, so isolated, so tightly sealed inside his own body, so broken. Jesus is so physically connected that he makes the physical sound from his own body.

This scripture story brings to mind the recent tragic story of the young airport worker in Seattle who stole a plane and was circling Puget Sound as air traffic control desperately tried to calm his troubled spirit and help him safely land the aircraft. In one, poignant heart-breaking interchange, he said, “I've got a lot of people that care about me. It's going to disappoint them to hear that I did this. I would like to apologize to each and every one of them. Just a broken guy, got a few screws loose, I guess. Never really knew it, until now.”

Just a broken guy. Got a few screws loose. A dawning recognition, a confession, a lament, perhaps for him in that moment the fiercest of a groaning in prayer.

What's so tragic is that he did not know that he is one of an entirely broken humanity marching back from exile in the desert. What's so tragic is that he did not see the others alongside him with their broken bodies, minds and spirit. What's so tragic was that he was so alone, so isolated in his double bind of not able to hear and to speak this suffering.

I think Jesus would groan, don't you? I think Jesus is groaning right now with compassion in his own body for this young man, and for all broken humanity in need of healing.

What's the lesson from the Word broken open today for us Christians who bear Jesus' name?

What's the mission for those of us sharing in the healing ministry of Jesus Christ?

What's the lesson and the mission of those of us who have been baptized into Jesus' own groaning on a Cross yielding a vision and promise of a resurrection where all are fully alive, well, safe and unharmed?

In our second reading, James tells us that God shows no partiality to anyone with faith in his glorious Son. In fact, he says those most poor will be rich in this coming kingdom.

Most poor like this young man from Seattle.

Most poor like those in the double bind of the deafening warning and horror of continued opioid addiction and mute in the social isolation from family and friends.

Most poor like millions of exiled refugees marching earth's deserts in search of a lasting home.

The lesson and the mission: let the community go out and find the broken man or woman and bring them to Jesus. This is what the community of the deaf and mute person did for him. He couldn't even bring himself to Jesus. He could neither hear nor speak.

The healing ministry is getting as physically close to the broken one as Jesus did.

The healing ministry is groaning in prayer each day.

The healing ministry is a compassion that only comes from recognition that I am also one of those broken ones, yes, with "screws loose," marching through the desert in my brokenness returning from an exile to a promised salvation.

Salvation? To be fully alive.

Salvation? To be well.

Salvation? To be safe.

Salvation? To be unharmed.



Homily – Sept. 9, 2018

I do want salvation. Do you? For me, for us, and for all our brothers and sisters in the march through the desert out of our exile.

Let Isaiah's picture of hope stay in front of us as we leave the assembly this day:

Streams will burst forth in the desert, and rivers in the steppe. The burning sands will become pools, and the thirsty ground, springs of water.

Fr. Joseph Driscoll, DMin