

## **Sermon for September 5, 2021**

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On Thursday we attended the East High School Football game to watch my daughter cheer her first game. East had a phenomenal game winning with a score of 54 to 8. With every touch down the cheerleaders enthusiastically led the fans in cheering the school song; we saw it over 6 times. The cheerleaders led cheers to celebrate first downs, forward passes, interceptions and many more successes on the field that I don't know the terminology for. And while I enjoyed every minute of watching my daughter and her team cheer on the win, my attention was often drawn down the field to the Hibbing cheerleaders, standing in front of the bleacher section filled with a much smaller visiting crowd. For three straight quarters they cheered despite their empty scoreboard. Behind by a score of 54, they continued to urge their team forward in hope. As voices from the large East crowd shouted over "It's too easy" and "Start the buses," the Hibbing cheerleaders continued to be a voice of hope amidst a reality that seemed hopeless. Imagine being one of those cheerleaders - on foreign turf, a small faction amidst the looming local population of rivals, called to be a voice of encouragement and hope despite circumstances that seem ill fitted to the message.

This is the voice of Isaiah in our first lesson today. A prophet standing on foreign turf, speaking to a small faction of people exiled from their homeland, dwelling amidst the looming local population and age old enemies, called to be the voice of encouragement and hope despite circumstances that seem contrary to the message. The Word of God breaks through "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God."

The voice of hope says the eyes of the blind will be opened, the ears of the deaf unstopped, the lame shall leap, the speechless shall sing with joy, waters shall break forth in the desert, burning sand become pools and thirsty ground living springs. God will come and save. This word is spoken to those experiencing quite opposing realities in exile. This seems an unexpected place for hope. The word spoken is not yet visible to their eyes but the Word carries the hope of a coming reality; hang onto the promise and presence of God.

In our Gospel reading today Jesus has traveled to the area region of Tyre, a place that many in that time would have thought an unexpected location for the Word of God. This was Gentile territory, foreign and non-Jewish. And in this place an unexpected person approaches Jesus. First our gospel reading begins by telling us that Jesus did not want anyone to know he was there but that he could not escape notice. This person has noticed Jesus even as he has tried to go unnoticed – an unexpected encounter. This woman, a mother with a suffering daughter, comes to him. This too is unexpected because she is a woman. Women were not allowed to speak to Jewish males without mediators - someone to speak between them. She is a Gentile, a Greek, Syrophenician in origin. She is not a descendent of Israel, from the faith family line that has passed down the promises of God. It is unexpected that a Gentile would come seeking Jesus and an act from God, to hope for her daughter to be healed.

There is much debate within theological circles about the meaning behind the dialogue that then takes place between Jesus and the woman. Why does Jesus say what he says? There is little agreement among scholars. But what we do know is that this woman persists, believing that Jesus will do the unexpected and heal her child, despite her gender, race, ethnicity, and religious status that causes many to think this unlikely. "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." She believes that God will provide even for her, an outsider. She will anxiously receive even a crumb. And Jesus confirms her expectation – "For saying that, you may go – the demon has left your daughter." The woman will go home and find her daughter healed; an act of God breaks upon an unexpected woman and her child. Jesus' ministry to the Gentiles begins; God breaking in where the world does not expect, carrying hope of a new reality.

Isaiah is to proclaim "Here is your God." Here – amidst circumstances that seem contrary to that truth. The woman comes believing that God will act in care for her, despite worldly determinations that say otherwise. God breaks in with an unexpected word of hope, to an unexpected people.

Our Psalm today reads "Put **not** your trust in rulers, in mortals in whom there is no help... Happy are they whose hope is in the Lord their God." Today's scripture readings urge us to put our hope not in human circumstances or expectations but in the Lord our God, the Lord who provides hope beyond circumstances, the Lord who acts beyond mortal boundaries and expectations. Can we hear the Word of God breaking through the noise, "Be strong, do not fear, Here is your God?" Can we hear the hope of God despite worldly evidence of being exiled, trampled and scoreless? Do we continue to come to Jesus believing God will act, that God is for us, despite all that the world has falsely constructed that tells us otherwise?

The exiles must have looked at the world around them and strained to hear and believe the voice of hope. The Syrophoenician woman must have heard the voices around her doubting her place before Christ and wrestled for courage to believe God's truth for her. Do you find yourself straining to hear and believe the voice of hope, wrestling for the courage to believe the truth of God's love for you?

As I sat waiting in line at the bank the other day feeling particularly deflated by the circumstances around us, discouraged by voices of the world, a song by one of my favorite Christian artists began to play over the store speakers. Lauren Daigle sings:

You say I am loved when I can't feel a thing  
You say I am strong when I think I am weak  
And you say I am held when I am falling short  
When I don't belong, You say I am Yours  
And I believe What You say of me

Contrary to what you may feel, think, or be experiencing – the Word of God comes to you in hope and truth. Contrary to the circumstances that surround you, to the voices of the world that shape your expectations, the voice of hope breaks over you “Here is your God”.

One little Hibbing cheerleader, moments from a crushing loss, shouted out to her team “We love you Bluejackets.” Despite the circumstances, the voice of hope broke across the field “You are loved.” By worldly standards, they lost the game...by a lot. But there was a bigger truth to be known. In many ways it may appear we are losing these days, even getting trampled, but God’s voice breaks in, in unexpected places, to each of us unexpected receivers – “Here is your God – you are loved.” Happy are those whose hope is in the Lord our God.