

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B
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St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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In my 20s, I was obsessed, and truthfully continue to be obsessed, with a show called Buffy the Vampire Slayer. I appreciate that it was not to everyone's taste.

For those of you who don't know, Buffy the Vampire Slayer aired on television in the late 90s/early 2000s and centered around a High School girl who was mystically chosen to fight the forces of evil: monsters, vampires, and demons. For seven wonderful seasons, Buffy and her friends fought dark, supernatural forces in sunny, southern California while simultaneously trying to survive high school, romance, and coming of age. It's a silly premise in some ways, but the show struck me with its sharp writing and deep characters.

One episode in particular has stayed with me. In this episode, a dozen dreadful monsters come into town intent on killing innocent people, as monsters are wont to do. The monsters are said to be invincible save for one weakness. Legend has it that the monsters cannot survive the sound of a scream. The catch? They've cast a spell to steal the voices of everyone in the town. Buffy has to figure out a way to get her voices back so that she can scream and banish the monsters forever. Buffy almost never loses. She finds her voice, screams, the monsters die, and Buffy saves the day. Again.

I'm fascinated by the idea of a monster who can only be killed with a scream. Not a sword or a gun or a tank: a scream. What happens to us when monsters conspire to steal our voices? And, more importantly, what is possible when our voices are returned to us?

The prophet Isaiah paints a picture of what the world will look like when every person is returned to a correct relationship with God. Isaiah dreams of a time when:

*Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
then the lame shall leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.*

The prophet is suggesting that our senses are blocked when we are out of proper relationship with God. And that our senses will be fully restored on the day when our relationship with God is restored. I suppose that a person could read this prophecy as a boon for people afflicted with ailments of the ears or eyes or tongues—but it seems richer to me to think of Isaiah's promise coming to all of us for those times when we cannot see what needs to be seen or cannot hear what needs to be heard or cannot speak what needs to be spoken.

The Gospel writer today picks up on the theme from Isaiah. In Mark's Gospel, Jesus has come to restore this world into right relationship with God, and, just as Isaiah prophesied, ears that were deaf can hear and tongues that were afflicted are free to speak. Jesus spoke to the afflicted man, "And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly."

Just as in Isaiah, I don't believe that we are supposed to look that those being healed as completely separate from us. There's nothing wrong with celebrating the physical healing that we see in the Gospels, but to focus only on the physical limits the power of the miracle. We all have blocks to our hearing, to our moving, to our speaking. Who among us hasn't been crippled by fear? Struck dumb by doubt, blinded by greed, or silenced by cowardice? I know I certainly have been all of these things, and perhaps you have too.

Monsters are real. They want to take your voice. Empires are not interested in the voices of Christians who are speaking words of peace, words of justice and access. The omnipresent advertising entities are not interested in your words when you say, "I have enough" "I am enough" "Christ is sufficient for me." It is dangerous to the powers of the world when Christians have a voice to speak.

I've probably watched that Buffy episode 15 times. I've watched her scream and slay the monsters in five houses in two different states while holding four different jobs. And that's appropriate somehow. The losing and gaining of one's voice is not just a one-time occurrence in my experience. There will be many times over the course of your life where you don't feel like you can speak what needs to be spoken. There will be many times over your life when monsters steal your voice, and you feel like you weren't able to speak your faith into the world.

But for every time you are silenced, there is a God available for healing. There is a God available for your restoration. And when the grace of that voice is presented to you, the monsters of the world had better watch out, because there is nothing more powerful than a Christian who has been healed and sent out by God. Mary Magdalene used her voice to tell the disciples that the tomb was empty and Christ had arisen. St. Peter gave one sermon, and three thousand people were baptized in response to his words. Martin Luther King, Jr. stood on the steps of the Capitol and gave a speech that school children still memorize today because it was a catalyst for the burgeoning civil rights movement in this country. Each of those Gospel heroes faced forces that sought to keep their tongues silenced, but God is in the business of healing us and sending us out to speak grace, and peace, and power.

I had the privilege of attending a press conference a week ago. At it, two African American pastors stood front of the press corps and told their story of being racially profiled by police in Waukesha County. The sheriff had performed an internal investigation and found that his deputy had done nothing wrong. The two pastors knew that the sheriff's versions of events was false. And so they spoke. And the world listened. Imagine my surprise when that press conference was picked up by the Washington Post. One of our church members noticed the story while she was on vacation in Germany, and I got a text from my aunt in Kansas City asking me what was going on at the police station in Waukesha County. All these men did was speak. They just leaned into the microphone and used their God-given voices. And the monsters trembled.

God has given you back your voice. Use it to scream and defeat the monsters that kill and destroy the creatures of God. You are all heroes of God, and your weapons are your words. Amen