

- Here is your God!
  - *The desert and the parched land will exult;  
the steppe will rejoice and bloom...with abundant flowers,  
and rejoice with joyful song...the splendor of our God...  
the eyes of the blind [will] be opened, the ears of the deaf...cleared;  
...the lame leap like a stag,...the tongue of the mute will sing.*
  - What a beautiful description Isaiah gives us of the transformation the Presence of God brings to the frightened
    - the dry land is not only fertile, but beautiful with flower and show God's glory in a way that even our landscape committee would envy;
    - the flowers so plentiful and beautiful they will 'sing.'
    - And that's not all: the blind will see, the deaf hear, the lame and the mute will be healed, transformed to such an extent they will leap like a stag, sing rather than speak.
  - God's presence is all about transformation, not just transformation of nature, not just the healing of all suffering. It's more than that: The presence of God allows us hope.
    - The presence of God calms fears, strengthens hands, stills knocking knees.
    - Isaiah points out with excitement that God knows they are frightened, that God will come, that God will be present, not only in a passive way in the beauty of nature but actively and alive to seek out those who are lost, to free those trapped, and to save all people, even from their own sinfulness.

- And what was for Isaiah only a hopeful prophecy written in the future tense, becomes reality in Jesus Christ:
  - *Jesus took the deaf man off by himself away from the crowd. He put his finger into the man's ears and, spitting, touched his tongue; then he looked up to heaven and groaned, and said to him...**"Be opened!"** - And immediately the man's ears were opened, his speech impediment was removed, and he spoke plainly.*
  - Jesus fulfills the prophecy Isaiah had laid out in a way that far exceeds expectations.
    - Even the location is important. Jesus is in the *district of the Decapolis* the region northwest of Jerusalem, on the other side of the Jordan, AND outside of the promised land. But Jesus is present here encountering the suffering man.
    - It's not only Israel that will be healed but any who struggle, all who are afraid. Jesus comes in our need, even if we're far, even when the distance is caused by our sinfulness. Jesus is present and seeks to be with us.
    - As great as this revelation is, it comes in the most ordinary and mundane way: Jesus sticks his finger in the man's ears and touches the man's tongue with his spit.
    - With the command: *Be opened!* Jesus heals the man from his inability to hear and his inability to speak.
    - Jesus uses the "ordinary" to do the extraordinary, to work His miracles, to heal those who are hurting, to reveal His presence, to speak to us, to strengthen us and guide us to speak to others.

- This is **HOW GOD COMES**, wherever we are, no matter how far, and using ordinary means, looks to share grace and blessings with us.
- More than that, this is **WHO GOD IS**: the God who watches out for us, to take care of us, to strengthen us, heal us, lift us up, draw us close.
- But the healing and transformative power of God's love and mercy is meant for more than our own comfort and consolation.
  - The healing of Jesus opens the man's ears and looses his tongue.
  - He has heard and experienced personally the love of Christ and now he can't help but share his story, telling everyone about the power and love of Jesus Christ.
- These times in our Church and our community can challenge us.
  - We can be frightened like the Israelites, looking for God even in the situation where we find ourselves.
  - We can be like the man in the Gospel, unable to hear God's call or to speak God's love.
  - But, also like them we can realize that no matter how frightened, no matter how unable to hear or to speak, we can also take comfort as they did in the God who comes to us bringing transformation, healing, strength, new life.

- That transformative power of God is alive and active in our community and I'm so very excited about the transformation that God seeks to bring to our community. Sure it's difficult for some right now as we adjust to loss and grieve. Yes there is some darkness but there is also much light, indeed hope that Christ can transform us no less than he did the man in the gospel.
  - I'm excited about our new faith formation program that focuses on building relationships with Christ, supporting parents and families, using even technology to help our young people know Christ and help Christ to meet them.
  - I'm excited about our renewed focus on liturgy, working to create a space where we can encounter Christ, offering especially our ministers not just the rubrics to serve but feeding them with Jesus Christ, how we respond to His call.
  - I'm excited on focusing to build leaders, to see they ways we can come together, each one using his or her gifts for the good of our whole community.
    - It's what I saw (this morning) yesterday at the Day of Service.
    - I was so proud to see so many of our people from both St. Francis St. Mary and from Holy Family, praying together with other Christians, and serving together to be the hands and feet of Jesus Christ to reach out in service to those in need.

- And I'm excited about a new adventure for us that we're calling Connect Groups.
  - Connect Groups are a pathway to intentional relationships that help us to grow our faith.
  - Connect Groups are small groups (10 – 15 people) with members helping each other to grow in faith, build relationships, support one another and grow our faith.
  - The heart of our mission is to become disciples who give the whole of our lives to God, not merely checking off boxes or going through the motions.
  - In our Connect Groups we challenge each other to pray, be authentic and to be committed to grow in our faith.
  - This is just a bible study, although that may be part of it. It's not just a support group although that may be part of it.
  - Connect Groups are about coming together to learn from one another, to share with one another, to look out for one another, taking the message from the weekend and fitting it into the rest of my week, about recognizing the God who comes to me and seeing how, even in the mundane, in the ordinary, I can recognize God and share the transforming power of God's love we've heard about in our readings today.
  - Connect Groups are way to help me realize that I am not alone, that Christ is with me, that others are with me and we can laugh and cry and share the Good News of Jesus Christ.

- Jesus challenges each one of us, as He did the deaf man: **Be opened.** It's a call, especially in time of transition, to be open to God's Spirit active and alive in our world, bringing the transformative love of Jesus Christ into our world, it's about being open to change, to new ways, to **God's** ways.
- St. Francis- St. Mary Holy Family: *Be strong! Fear not! Here is your God!*
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the steppe will rejoice and bloom...with abundant flowers,  
and rejoice with joyful song...the splendor of our God...  
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