

**Sermon**  
**6 September 2015**  
**West Kirk of Calder & Polbeth Harwood**

**By: Rev Dr Jonanda Groenewald**

**Text: Isaiah 35:1-7 & Mark 7:31-37**

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On the 14<sup>th</sup> of August 2003, at about 4:30 pm, there was a huge blackout on the northeastern coast of the United States of America. All the major cities and all the small towns across 4 US states and 2 Canadian provinces were without electricity.

I don't think we always realise how very dependent we are on electricity, because all of a sudden everything in that area came to a complete standstill. The subway systems, street lights, air-conditioning, computers and tellies all just stopped working. So did the lifts. I don't know about you, but I can live without a street light being on. I can deal with trains not working. And although my boys might disagree, I know that it wouldn't bother me too much if I had to go through a day without watching tellie.

But one thing I don't think I'll cope with well is getting stuck in a pitch dark lift... Can you imagine that? Hanging suspended by a few cables, no telling how many floors from the ground, in a locked metal box with no way out and no way to tell anyone where you are? (Mobile phone towers were not working either!) I don't know if I would be able to stomach that...

This actually happened to a man in NYC that day. He got trapped between the 52nd and 53rd floors of the Empire State Building!! That's over 525 feet straight up in the air. Do you know how high 525 feet is? Very high!!

So this man was trapped *very* high up in the air, in a metal box with no lights, no mobile phone, and he was stuck there for 5 hours. Scary...

When CNN interviewed this man after his rescue, they asked him what it was like. He said: "I have never been so terrified or so alone in my life. Those 5 hours were a living hell. I was trapped and I couldn't get out. That's a horrible feeling, you know? I was trying to open the doors with my hands and they wouldn't budge, so I tried yelling but nobody could hear me. I couldn't see anything. It was like death in there. I knew I was never gonna get out...All I wanted was for that door to BE OPENED!"

Kristopher Morris links what happened on that day, to our New Testament reading of today, and I think he is so right.

Because there was another man similar to this guy in NYC who lived about 2000 years ago. Although they didn't have electricity and lifts in those days, this man was trapped too. He was shut in a place where he couldn't hear anybody. No one could perceive his cries for help. He was deaf, and his deafness led to an inability to speak. All he wanted was for his ears to BE OPENED.

I saw a satellite photo on the internet of the USA that night when the blackout struck. You can see lights from all over the rest of the USA, but where the power outage occurred there is nothing but a big black hole. It

looked as if the ocean had just swallowed up a chunk of the Eastern North American seaboard. Where there should be light there is darkness instead.

We very often suffer from a blackout in our lives too, a blackout caused by things that we do wrong, things that other people do wrong, wrong choices we make, wrong choices other people make that affect us. Or even sometimes just a blackout thrown at us by life – circumstances that we didn't ask for and don't deserve, but that still happen to us and make us feel as if we are covered by darkness, locked in a small metal box with no way out.

Have you ever been there? Are you maybe there at this very moment? Is someone you love maybe there and you feel worried and frustrated because you don't know how to get them out?

Well, don't despair, because we've got a rescue team better than any other. God sent his son Jesus to come do something about this blackout! He came to earth to OPEN the Kingdom of God for those who are trapped!

We see Him doing an opening in today's Gospel lesson. He takes the deaf and mute man off to the side. He pushes His fingers into the man's ears. He spits and places it on the man's tongue. He looks up into heaven and lets out a great sigh. Then He speaks the word *Ephphatha*, BE OPENED! And it is these words that set him free. Released from his prison by the words of Jesus, BE OPENED!

The reason why the word *Ephphatha* is not translated, is because in those days they believed that the actual words they used in a healing context had power in them. The word *Ephphatha* is Aramaic, the language Jesus spoke, and it is not even translated into Greek in the Greek New Testament, the oldest version of New Testament we have. In Biblical times people thought that illness and disabilities were the result of sin, rather than a physical condition that could be explained biologically. And they believed that if you could just get rid of the sin, you could become a fully functioning member of society again.

*Please just allow me a wee advertisement on the side here: If you want to find out more about the meaning of sickness and health in the Bible, come along to the Bible Bletcher on Thursday the 17<sup>th</sup> of September!*

Jesus took this man aside. Jesus wasn't supposed to touch him, because he would have been ritually unclean, but he puts his fingers in his ears, spits, and touches his tongue. They believed that spit protected you against evil. So Jesus touches this man who was not supposed to be touched and gives him physical evidence that he will now be protected against anything evil. Jesus forgives his sins, and makes him part of the community again.

And he did exactly the same thing for us. We people who are trapped by sin or darkness in the same way the deaf man or the man in the lift were trapped. Jesus came to *open* the doors of our self-made prison cells too, to *open* our eyes and our ears, so we can be part of God's kingdom.

Because, although most of us can hear and see very well, we don't always listen and look. I think very often when God talks to us it's similar

to when I talk to André when he is working on his computer. I'll say something and he'll respond appropriately, but then he *won't* go and do what I asked him! Because, although he listened while I was talking, he wasn't *really listening*, because he was concentrating on something else.

By his death on the cross Jesus came to set us free.

*Listen:* By his death on the cross Jesus came to set us free.

*Did you hear that?* He came to give us a meaningful life.

He knew that we couldn't possibly make it on our own, just like the man in the lift couldn't open the doors from the inside, however hard he tried.

Jesus willingly walked into a prison so we could get set free from one. Why? Because this was the only way for heaven to BE OPENED for us.

For us Jesus didn't use his fingers and spit, but his body and blood, to set us free. The very same body and blood offered here to us today in Holy Communion.

Three days after Jesus died on the cross we see the Grandest Opening of them all. The stone was rolled away, the tomb was empty. Christ was alive again! Jesus freed us from death itself!

So whatever it is that makes you feel trapped – Jesus came to set you free. Even if you don't "feel" it, believe it, because it is true!

The man in the lift in NYC said it best. When his rescuer came and let him out he said, "I have never felt freedom like that before, I felt alive again!"

We have new life in Christ too. Open your ears, open your eyes. Jesus is there with you in the dark. And feel that door, he has already unlocked it.

The satellite photo of our lives will never have a dark corner in it, because Jesus is the light for the world, and if he is in your life, it will never be completely dark, no matter what happens to you.

Amen