

**Isaiah 35:4-7 (NET)**

<sup>35:4</sup> Tell those who panic,  
“Be strong! Do not fear!  
Look, your God comes to avenge!  
With divine retribution he comes to deliver you.”  
<sup>35:5</sup> Then blind eyes will open,  
deaf ears will hear.  
<sup>35:6</sup> Then the lame will leap like a deer,  
the mute tongue will shout for joy;  
for water will flow in the desert,  
streams in the wilderness.  
<sup>35:7</sup> The dry soil will become a pool of water,  
the parched ground springs of water.  
Where jackals once lived and sprawled out,  
grass, reeds, and papyrus will grow.

**Mark 7:31-37 (NET)***Healing a Deaf Mute*

<sup>7:31</sup> Then Jesus went out again from the region of Tyre and came through Sidon to the Sea of Galilee in the region of the Decapolis. <sup>7:32</sup> They brought to him a deaf man who had difficulty speaking, and they asked him to place his hands on him. <sup>7:33</sup> After Jesus took him aside privately, away from the crowd, he put his fingers in the man’s ears, and after spitting, he touched his tongue. <sup>7:34</sup> Then he looked up to heaven and said with a sigh, “*Ephphatha*” (that is, “Be opened”). <sup>7:35</sup> And immediately the man’s ears were opened, his tongue loosened, and he spoke plainly. <sup>7:36</sup> Jesus ordered them not to tell anything. But as much as he ordered them not to do this, they proclaimed it all the more. <sup>7:37</sup> People were completely astounded and said, “He has done everything well. He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak.”

## Beast Among the Beauty

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union United Church of Christ, Cambridge, Massachusetts

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Texts: *Isaiah 35:4-7; Mark 7:31-37*

Jesus is the kind of guy your mother wants you to bring home. He's honest. He's decent. Well, true, he doesn't have a very good job. But he has these powers. Jesus can cure blindness and deafness and other afflictions. He's pretty special. But here's what your mother likes. Jesus has all this power, but he's humble. He doesn't have a swelled head. He doesn't brag. Most of the time he doesn't even want people to know just how good he is.

Look at this morning's story. They bring him a man who was deaf. He also had difficulty speaking. There's a big crowd around. It's like the crowd waiting for Tiger Woods to smack a 330-yard drive right down the middle. Huge. Eyes fixed. Waiting to see the impossible. The crowd wants to know what Jesus is made of. They want to see his stuff. And Jesus can do it. He can heal the man. We know that he does heal the man. But Jesus shuns the spotlight. Jesus takes the man aside, away from the crowd. He heals the man in private. And then, then, as if that isn't enough humility, Jesus tells those who do witness his work, "Don't tell anyone what you saw." This is the kind of guy you only wish you could find in the personal ads. A great man without an overblown ego.

There's more than a little truth to this characterization of Jesus. He may have said, "I am the truth, the light and the way," but even when he was saying that, it wasn't to build himself up. It was to help people understand how to find their way to God. Despite what many Christians today would say, Jesus, I think, would agree that his ministry and message was not all about him. It was about the people he healed, and it was about the way that he tried to show to all of us a different way to live with one another. And in the end, what's at stake is far more than acting morally. The sermon on the mount is more than a bunch of commandments about how we ought act. It meant to reshape the world.

\*\*\* Walter Wink, the Biblical scholar, reminds us of our love affair with another kind of story. It's repeated over and over again in everything from cartoons to feature movies to foreign policy to religious rhetoric. He recalls the comic strip and cartoon, Popeye the Sailor Man. At least a few of us are old enough to remember. Quoting Wink.

Few cartoon shows have run longer or been more influential than Popeye and Bluto. In a typical segment, Bluto abducts a screaming and kicking Olive Oyl, Popeye's girlfriend. When Popeye attempts to rescue her, the massive Bluto beats his diminutive opponent to a pulp, while Olive Oyl helplessly wrings her hands. At the last moment, as our hero oozes to the floor, and Bluto is trying, in effect, to rape Olive Oyl, a can of spinach pops from Popeye's pocket and spills into his mouth. Transformed by this gracious infusion of power, he easily demolishes the villain and rescues his beloved. The format never varies. Neither party ever gains any insight or learns from these encounters. Violence does not teach Bluto to honor Olive Oyl's humanity, and repeated pummelings do not teach Popeye to

swallow his spinach before the fight. ...

This structure cannot be altered. Bluto does not simply lose more often—he must always lose. Otherwise this entire view of reality would collapse. The good guys must always win. In order to suppress the fear of erupting chaos the same mythic pattern must be endlessly repeated in a myriad of variations that *never in any way alter the basic structure*.<sup>1</sup>

Incredible. A simple child's story infuses the very fabric of how we imagine the world. Bluto can be replaced by any number of villains from Darth Vader to Muslim terrorists to imperialistic Americans. The good guys understand themselves to be in grave danger, maybe even at the verge of defeat. The bad guys are evil, 100% evil. Because of the danger, because of the evil, the good guys say that any power, any means, any violence is sanctioned to demolish the evil, not just sanctioned but celebrated.

Muslim extremists flew planes into the World Trade Center five years ago employing a version of this story. The wars that are fought this very day all utilize the same script. Hezbollah and other organizations valorize the obliteration of Israel because they see themselves as Popeye and Israel as Bluto. Israel sees it just the other way around. From the beginning of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq America has seen the enemy as evil, and that crushing them would be the victory of good. The president of Iran mouths a similar script, and we think he's a crazy man because he has characterized us as evil. For crying out loud, we know that we are the good guys, and the fact that he thinks he's a good guy and we're the bad guys shows just how dangerously deluded and evil he is.

Jesus was worried that whenever people focused on his power, that they would end up right here. He worried that they would say Jesus is good, I'm on his side, those who aren't on his side are evil. The evil ones should be obliterated. And so, we have that wonderful "Left Behind" series in which only the true Christian believers are saved at the rapture while everyone else perishes. We have war waged with the battle cry "God bless America" or "Allah Akbar," in which the clear and intended implication that God sees the evil we see, and God's power will help us wipe it out.

It is amazing how durable and persistent is this view of the world. One would be hard put to read the words of Jesus anything like objectively and conclude that he taught what so often is called Christianity today. Recently a Texas pastor and the director of the organization Christians United for Israel was quoted as saying, "We will not turn the other cheek." You can't make this stuff up. Where did he come up with that? Does he think the Bible says, "Turn the other cheek, except when you're dealing with your enemy"? Or, "Turn the other cheek, if you feel like it"? Or, "Turn the other cheek is fine for Sunday School, but it's not meant for the real world"?

Now Jesus had every reason to be worried about the use of his name for violence. In many ways such thinking was embedded deeply in the religion that Jesus inherited, and in much of the religion that existed and continues to exist throughout the world, Christian and otherwise. The prophet Isaiah offers some of the most beautiful musings of a good and peaceful world in all of literature – The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf

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<sup>1</sup>Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, Fortress Press, 1992, 18-19.

and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. And yet from this same prophet we hear this morning:

“Be strong! Do not fear!

Look, your God comes to avenge!

With divine retribution he comes to deliver you.”

The idea of divine retribution and vengeance runs deep in the ancient world and in our world today. It runs deep in religious thinking. And it is this beast, among the beauty that religion offers, it is this beast that more than anything else Jesus came to disabuse the world of. He was so afraid of this beast that he often performed his powerful acts in private in hopes that people would not focus on the power. For when they focused on his power, they moved without skipping a beat from the power to heal to the power of vengeance against those they hated.

There were at least three very central reasons why Jesus came to disabuse us of our reflexive and destructive notions of righteous vengeance. The first was, that righteous, divine vengeance and violence simply does not work. Like Popeye and Bluto, we keep playing the script, but it resolves nothing. We are afraid to give up the use of force, but we have no historical evidence that it secures what we think it does. Nonetheless, like Popeye and Bluto, we’re right there the next day doing the same old thing all over again.

Second, Jesus was especially concerned when violence and force are accompanied by hatred, which they almost always are. Hatred divides the world into good guys and bad guys, and it’s never that simple. When we make it that simple, or that simple-minded, really, then we can’t tolerate any shades of gray, any introspection into our own shadow side. Today, according to some, if you question American foreign policy or American intentions, you are a traitor, abetting the evil enemy terrorists. Can any of us really be so naive as to believe that the world divides so easily into good and evil? Can any of us truly believe that introspection and taking honest stock of what we are doing is the real danger in this world?

A third reason that Jesus wanted to overturn this system of retribution and purportedly redemptive violence was because he came to heal, to heal people like the man in this morning’s story, and in the larger sense to heal all of creation. Jesus’ loving care even for those most down in their luck cannot help but move us. Does not each of us yearn to be healed somewhere of some inner or outer afflictions this morning? Do we not resonate with those wonderful stories of Jesus’ care? Like the old song says, “I love to tell the story of Jesus and his love; I love to tell the story because I know it’s true.” And behind the truth of that wonderful story of love is another truth: the minute love is co-opted by hatred and legitimated obliteration, love and its power vanishes like a drifting smoke. If we sow love, we reap healing. If we sow hatred, or even righteous vengeance, we reap an epidemic of affliction.

It’s hard to miss. This he did in full public view. Jesus refused to hate those who hated him. Everyone believed his refusal to hate would lead to his defeat. In point of fact, that’s how he gained the victory. One day, one day, I believe, and I hope that day may not be long from now, we will fully comprehend this great and beautiful truth and leave behind the beastly lie that seduces us so often. Amen.