

*A Woman born Deaf*

“We’re on a crowded train, and I’m trying to build a mental picture of the other riders. I smell a strong, sweet perfume. My fellow passengers probably haven’t noticed it—they’ll be busy chatting on their cell phones or reading the paper. But to me, it’s a clue. Does the lovely scent belong to a girl on her way to meet her boyfriend? Or perhaps she has a first date? I can smell coffee too. I tell myself to be careful in case there’s a hot drink nearby. This is my life as a deaf-blind woman: trapped in a world that is getting darker by the day, a silent world interrupted only by the blurry low-level white noise my hearing aids give me.

But in a month, I’ll have cochlear implants. The surgeons tell me that at the age of 39, I might be able to hear for the first time the voices of those I love: my family, my friends, and the colleagues I work alongside of as a mentoring coordinator. It’s an incredible prospect, but it comes with serious risks. If the auditory nerve is damaged, I’ll be stripped of even the fuzzy noise I’ve come to rely on, a sound that’s a bit like what you hear when you’re underwater. I’m overwhelmed by fear. My mother is worried too. “You’re OK as you are, Joanne,” she says. “What if it goes wrong?”

But what if it doesn’t? What if there’s a chance that I’ll take out my hearing aids and never put them back in again? I know that one day soon, I will lose what remains of my eyesight—I have retinitis pigmentosa, another symptom of Usher syndrome, the rare and cruel genetic condition that robbed me of my hearing at birth. Since I began going blind, in my late 20s, I have had no peripheral vision—just a narrow tunnel of sight in front of my face that lets me lip-read. But is there really a chance that the doctors are going to give me back my ears in exchange?

Then a face appears in my tunnel vision. It’s Mom.

“Did they do the operation?” I croak. “Is it over?” Mom laughs. Two days after the operation, I’m home in Gateshead, England. The specialists think it has gone well, but I have to wait a month before the implants can be switched on. Only then will we know whether it has been a success. Suddenly, I have become helpless. I can’t wear my hearing aids anymore, and without them, the white noise that guided me through each day has disappeared. The total and utter silence is a depressing companion. What scares me most is the thought of staying like this forever.

A month later, I’m back at the hospital. Mom and I are sitting in the waiting room. A large-screen TV posts each patient’s name and the waiting time. I’m looking down at the floor when I see a pair of black shoes appear beside me. I look up, see a friendly face appear in my tunnel, and feel the vibrations of Mom getting up next to me. I take a seat opposite the audiologist, Louise, in her office. Before she switches on the implants, she needs to align 22 electrodes in each ear with a computer. It’s a drawn-out process as she attaches wires from my new hearing aids to her computer. When she puts them behind my ears for the first time, they feel cold and hard. After the same laborious process is repeated over and over for each electrode, Louise puts down her pen and smiles at me.

“Caaaaaan ... yoooooou ... heeeear ... meeeeeeeee?”

The first words I’ve ever heard. Every letter and syllable bounces off the walls, the ceiling, the doors, ringing out around the room, in my ears, and rattling round my brain as it desperately tries to filter every new sound that has pirouetted out of Louise’s mouth and hit my ears, exploding like a firework. Is this what sound is like? This isn’t a white noise or a gentle hum. This is what it feels like not to be deaf. This is hearing. “I’ll go through the days of the week,” Louise tells me slowly. She sounds how I’ve imagined a robot might. Her voice is high, squeaky, and electronic: “Monday ... Tuesday ... Wednesday ...” The emotions come fizzing out of my body like a shaken can of soda. Tears spill into my lap as I try to take it all in. “Thursday ... Friday ... Saturday ... Sunday ...” Words I’ve known my entire life but ones I’m hearing for the first time. So ordinary, and yet to me they are the most beautiful words imaginable. Mom is standing to my right, filming this moment. I try to speak, and I have this strange sensation from within. A voice in my head. My own voice. “It sounds very high,” I say. “It will sound high-pitched at first,” says Louise. “Your brain will readjust it, so it won’t always sound that way.” I put my head into my lap and sob.

“Smile,” says Mom, as she stands with the video camera. She has been my mouthpiece, my ears, my eyes, my entire life, and I’ve never even heard how she sounds until now. My brain tries to compute the difference between her and Louise and instantly spots it: Mom’s Northern English accent. So that’s how we sound. The operation has worked. I can hear. If you could bottle joy at its happiest, that’s how I’m feeling. In all those years in my silent world, words were lost on me, strangers that I could only hope to befriend. And yes, there’s an obvious question: How do I know what these spoken words mean, never having heard them before? All those years of lip-reading had taught my brain the shape and feel of spoken words even before I’d heard them. And now, suddenly, sound and meaning are coming together. I leave Louise’s office a hearing woman.

As we leave the hospital and step out into the March day, the wind whips around the ground, picking up leaves and swirling them round and round. And I realize then that the wind makes a noise, a rushing whoosh of a noise. We stop at a restaurant, and I’m astonished by just how noisy the world is: the clattering of the kitchen, knives and forks tapping on plates, the hum of conversations across the room. And then I notice something else: the sound of my own cutlery scraping against my plate. “I’m a very noisy eater,” I laugh to Mom. Everything is wondrous to me: the fact that I answer the waitress when she asks if I want Parmesan for my pasta, even though I’m looking away; the noise my glass makes when I put it down too hard on the table; the ice that clanks around between the lemon slices in my drink. I thought drinks were silent. I thought glasses didn’t make a noise. I thought you could communicate with people only when you were looking at them. These are all secrets that the hearing world is now letting me in on. I can hear—for the first time!

*They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, “Ephphatha,” that is, “Be opened.” And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one;”*

Be opened. Be not unbelieving but believe. Do not close your ears to my Truth. Open your heart to the word I speak and the Commandments my Father has given and you will be set free. No longer unable to hear or speak readily. The power of Jesus Christ alone is what gives us hope. For when we open our hearts to what God says and what God asks us to do then we hear truly. It is one thing to be deaf or hearing impaired. It is quite another to close ourselves off to the word Jesus speaks because we don’t like what we are hearing. Or we don’t feel like listening. Christ wants only the best for us and for our families, our spouses and children and parents.

So I am doing this little exercise about identifying in my own head some very common and familiar ways I think about things but which might actually be counterproductive and holding back my spiritual progress. It’s called thinking which is toxic. Toxic thinking or having toxic thoughts. So with the help of the Holy Spirit I came to realize that I often think and often say that I have a divided heart, that my heart is sometimes good and sometimes bad. Well, maybe it is. But maybe that isn’t true at all. I have to believe that Jesus is the vine and I am one of the branches and his life courses in me. So his goodness flows in and through me. Nothing bad. So why am I holding on to this way of thinking? And it shows itself in other negative ways. I can hide behind the “I am bad” part of me. I start to believe that because part of me is bad that I can’t do certain things. I can hide there from my real progress as a person. What I begin to believe is that I can’t. I begin to doubt and the doubt slow plays into my life in an understated way because that is the way I move through life—in an understated way. And it expands. There are then a number of things that I cannot do. I lose the very ability even to hear the Lord call to me. I am only listening to my own voice and I fail to realize my deafness to Him and to His Word.

Today’s gospel states very simply. The Lord wants us to hear his truth and will help us to but we have to want to hear—more than anything. And not be afraid of what we might hear. His word gives life. Do not be afraid to listen. To listen to Him and to listen for His voice. The word you hear will lift your spirits, give you hope and restore your ability to be who he wants you to be.