
Redemption, Even on the Side of the Road

**A sermon by the Rev. Canon Julia Mitchener
The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany – Year B**

One sultry South Mississippi evening when I was about 14 years old, I made the egregious mistake of telling my father to shut up. He was driving me home from church youth group, and I was in a terrible mood—exactly why, I can't recall. Maybe the boy named Joel who was the main reason I attended youth group in the first place—maybe Joel had just given me the brush off. Maybe instead of getting to play Uno or 4 Square we had had to listen to the pastor give a talk on original sin and the plan of salvation. Whatever the reason, I was completely out of sorts, and so when I climbed into the back seat of my dad's beloved but embarrassingly large and loud Eldorado and he reminded me that I still had math homework and piano practicing and a science fair project to complete before bed, something inside me just snapped. *Shut up*, I muttered softly—though not quite softly enough. At first, my father showed no reaction, and I thought I was going to get away with it. But then his big old boat of a car slowed down and began to veer ominously toward the side of the road. As the loose gravel on the narrow shoulder of Highway 49 crunched beneath the tires, I remember thinking to myself, "This is it, I'm going to die!" Once the car rolled to a stop, there was a moment of excruciating silence. When my dad finally spoke, he said just one thing: "You will never, ever, talk to me that way again." And, you know what, he was right—I didn't! I never talked to him that way again.

He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him. So exclaims the crowd in the synagogue at Capernaum in this morning's reading from the Gospel of Mark. *He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.* Mark's Jesus is a man who has authority in spades. When he talks, people listen, and they do what he says. So much so, that when an unclean spirit gets hold of somebody at synagogue one day and starts a ruckus during the sermon, Jesus tells the spirit, *Shut up!* And, guess what? It does. It does shut up. Not only that, it leaves the poor man whom it has been tormenting. Just like that.

He commands even the unclean spirits and they obey him.

It would be hard to overestimate the importance of this one sentence so near the beginning of Mark's gospel. You see, this story about Jesus teaching at the synagogue in Capernaum and getting the unclean spirit to be quiet and to leave the man he has been torturing—this is the very first story Mark tells after Jesus calls his disciples and launches his ministry. This is the very first thing Mark shows us about what Jesus' work is going to be: It is going to be a work of opposing whatever keeps people from the life God longs for us to have. It is going to be a work of opposing whatever keeps us from the joy and community and purpose for which we were made. It is going to be a work of rescuing us from all that threatens to undo us and our world. It is going to be a work of saving us from death and despair.

But that's not all. That's not all. There's something else here, too, that Mark desperately want us to know, and that is that no one—no one and no thing—is beyond the scope of Jesus' redemptive activity. No person, no situation, is too far gone to be saved. *Even the unclean spirits obey him.* Even the unclean spirits!

Which, of course, is incredibly great Good News. Because my guess is, pretty much all of us have places in our lives where we secretly suspect we are irredeemable. Places where we fear that love and mercy and forgiveness can never gain a foothold. Places where our best laid plans have gotten off track and we can feel ourselves veering off the road on a path to nowhere. Places where we can hear the loose gravel beneath us as the ground gives way under the overwhelming burden of our failures and our regrets, our fears and our sorrows. Places in our lives where we may indeed feel possessed, if not by an unclean spirit, then by other forces that rob us of the joy and hope and peace God intends for us. The relentless quest for perfection that

leaves us feeling like we are never enough. The addiction to drugs or alcohol, to achievement or to other people's approval. The fear of those who are different that keeps us boxed in our own narrow little world. The relentless career climbing that leaves no space and time for anything else. The determined holding of old grudges, the desire for revenge, the dependency on social media to get a dopamine rush, the insatiable need always to be acquiring more and more and more. The vise-like grip of anxiety and despair. The loss we know we will never get over. The sense that life is spinning further and further out of control and that no one can help us.

And yet this is the authoritative Good News of this morning's gospel: that Jesus can and will help us. Jesus can and will help us! He who commands even the unclean spirits can command our demons as well. He who quiets the storms at sea will quiet the storms within us, too. All that holds us captive: fear, cynicism, loneliness, greed, jealousy, idolatry, despair—none of this is any match for Jesus. None of it. Bondage is never going to have the final say about our lives or about our world. For as we'll sing in our closing hymn in just a little while, "Blessings abound wherever [Jesus] reigns/the prisoner leaps to lose his chains." *The prisoner leaps to lose his chains.* This is the truly remarkable thing about Jesus' authority—that he uses it to set people free! Unlike so many of the other would be leaders of our world, Jesus uses his power not to control or to dominate, but to liberate. His authority lies not in the ability to arouse fear but in the capacity to inspire hope. Hope that, in fact, we are not trapped but will be rescued again and again and again by an abiding and insatiable love. And so we can say, even in our darkest hours, along with the great Reformer Martin Luther: "The prince of darkness grim, we tremble not for him; his rage we can endure, for, lo! his doom is sure, one little word shall fell him." One little word. One little word from Him whom even the unclean spirits obey. *Shut up!* Or, to put it more biblically, *Be silent. Peace, be still. Why were you afraid, you of little faith? In the world you will have tribulation, but be of good cheer, for I have overcome the world. The child is not dead, but sleeping. Unbind him and let him go.* Unbind us, and let us go. Amen.