

How Does Jesus Drive Out the Kingdom of Darkness?

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. Good morning.

I'm Julie Brown. And I am part of the El Cerrito Kensington Group and, when I can, Women Reading Women. Today's scripture reading is from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 11, verses 11 to 26, as printed in your liturgy.

A reading from the Gospel according to Luke. Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead?

Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in Heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?

[1 : 13] Jesus was driving out a demon that was mute. When the demon left, the man who had been mute spoke, and the crowd was amazed.

But some of them said, by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, he is driving out demons. Others tested him by asking for a sign from heaven.

Jesus knew their thoughts and said to them, any kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and a house divided against itself will fall.

If Satan is divided against himself, how can his kingdom stand? I say this because you claim that I drive out demons by Beelzebul. Now, if I drive out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your followers drive them out?

So then, they will be your judges. But if I drive out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own house, his possessions are safe.

[2 : 20] But when someone stronger attacks and overpowers him, he takes away the armor in which the man trusted and divides up his plunder. Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.

When an impure spirit comes out of a person, it goes through arid places seeking rest and does not find it. Then it says, I will return to the house I left.

When it arrives, it finds the house swept clean and put in order. Then it goes and takes seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there, and the final condition of that person is worse than the first.

This is the gospel of the Lord. Praise to you, O Christ. Good morning, Christ Church. It's very good to be back here with my Christ Church family.

I missed you while I was traveling the last two Sundays visiting family and friends, and really glad to have come back to begin the season of Lent with you all here on Ash Wednesday the other night, and especially to also launch our Alpha course on Thursday night.

[3 : 38] We had about 30-plus people, 30-plus guests who were there to just be in a season of spiritual seeking, of exploring the Christian faith, people who are new Christians looking to build their life on a foundation of faith.

So we're so glad to be in this season of Lent, this season of our Alpha course. And, you know, each year from Christmas to Easter, we preach through one of the four gospels in the New Testament, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

And inevitably, when we do that, we run up against some of the hard sayings of Jesus that we struggle to understand. And a lot of ink has been spilled trying to make sense about these most strange and enigmatic and perplexing things that Jesus ever said.

And what you just heard read is certainly one of those sayings. It's hard to get. But I liken the hard sayings of Jesus to hard candy.

You know, you don't want to, like, immediately bite on it. But you just kind of want to put it in your mouth and start working it around and let it slowly kind of melt a little bit.

[4 : 55] So that's what we're going to try to do in this sermon today. But notice how our passage begins in verse 14. It says, Jesus was driving out a demon that was mute.

And when the demon left, the man who had been mute spoke, and the crowd was amazed. So here's this dark power, and it's dehumanizing this human being.

And how is it dehumanizing this man? It's diminishing the image of God in this man by stealing and killing and destroying his unique ability.

The unique ability that we human beings have been given by God to speak. Right? This amazing gift that we have to use language to relate to one another and to communicate with each other, to articulate things that are good and true and beautiful.

That gift has been diminished. It's been taken away. And Jesus is restoring that to this man. And yet his critics say in verse 15, it says, And Jesus both agrees and disagrees with that statement because he says in verse 18, If Satan is divided against himself, how can his kingdom stand?

[6 : 17] I say this because you claim that I drive out demons by Beelzebul. And Jesus is assuming that there are dark powers in this world, that those dark powers form a kind of hierarchy, an imperial hierarchy, that they're organized as a kingdom against the kingdom of God and against the image of God, and that Satan is the prince that's ruling over the top of that hierarchy that's oppressing human beings.

And Jesus says this in verse 20. He says, But if I drive out demons by the finger of God, by the spirit of God, by the power and authority of God, then the kingdom of God has come among you.

It's an amazing statement of Jesus' life and his mission, that he's stepped out of eternity and into time, that he's come down from heaven to earth and taken on human flesh in order to do just this, in order to expel this dark kingdom from the world, and to bring in the gracious rule and the liberating reign of the kingdom of God.

So I want to just kind of slowly work on this hard saying, this hard candy of Jesus under three headings this morning. I want to talk about the reality of dark powers and the presence of a stronger power, and then thirdly, the indwelling of a holy power.

So the reality of dark powers, the presence of a stronger power, and the indwelling of a holy power. When we think about the reality of dark powers, some of you say, Well, wait a minute.

[7 : 52] You really want me to believe this? When we look at the gospel and we find Jesus as a prophet who's speaking truth to power, we say, I like that Jesus.

Or when we find Jesus acting like a social revolutionary, and he's empowering women, and he's including the outcasts, and he's lifting up the poor, we say, Yes, that's a Jesus I can really get down with.

But then we find Jesus talking about Satan, and working as an exorcist, and driving out demons. This is just bizarre. It's absolutely shocking. And some of you say, Well, I'm not sure I can accept this, because I'm educated.

You know, I went to university. I have an undergraduate degree. I have a graduate degree. I read the New York Times. I read the Wall Street Journal. I have a computer in my pocket with access to the internet.

I have chat GPT on my phone as a co-intelligence. When you think about the last 150 years of human history, all the progress we've made in education, all the advances we've made in economics, all the breakthroughs we've made in science and technology and medicine, do you really expect me to buy into all this demon stuff?

[9 : 06] Right? Do you realize how primitive and how backward this first century talk about evil spirits and dark powers sounds? And I want to say, Yes, I do realize how strange it sounds, which is why I'm taking the time to talk about it.

For many, many complex reasons, late modern, secular age, post-Christian people in the Western world with their enlightened, materialistic vision of reality struggle to believe in malevolent spiritual beings.

And if that is your paradigm today, I would like to ask you to consider this, that the policy of the devil is to persuade you that there is no devil.

Or to put it a different way, the devil's most clever deception is to convince you that he's not there. And Andrew and I, at least once a year, we trot out this quote.

You know what I'm about to quote? Delbanco, right? Okay, Andrew Delbanco. He's a professor at Columbia University. He's a secular Jewish professor in humanities.

[10 : 17] And he wrote a book in 1995 called The Death of Satan, How Americans Have Lost the Sense of Evil. And this is so relevant to us. This is why we quote it at least once a year.

Here it is. A gulf, he says, a gulf has opened in our culture between the visibility of evil and the intellectual resources to cope with it.

We have jettisoned in the West the idea of cosmic evil or transcendent evil or supernatural evil. We don't believe in it. In fact, we even, we don't even like to use the word evil because it implies moral absolutes and value judgments.

So we use medical terms. We talk about dysfunction. We talk about pathology. We don't use moral terminology. But, Delbanco says, he says, as the 20th century has gone on, it's gotten harder and harder to say that holocausts and ethnic cleansings and serial killings are just bad psychological and sociological adjustments.

What we said 150 years ago that all evil has natural causes, has scientific causes, is wearing thin. I find this is a fascinating thesis.

[11 : 31] He goes on. He says, the repertoire of evil has never been richer, yet never have our responses been so weak. We have no language for connecting our inner lives with the horrors that pass before our eyes in the outer world.

And he concludes the book. Delbanco says this at the end of the book. He says, my driving motive in writing this book has been the conviction that if evil, with all its insidious complexity, escapes the reach of our imagination, it will have established dominion over us.

If we no longer have an imagination for evil, it will have established dominion over us. What he's saying is that if you've been educated and socialized into a particular plausibility structure, into a particular paradigm that denies dark powers in this world, then you are particularly vulnerable because you don't have the intellectual resources and the imagination and the language to deal with the world that we actually live in.

When I was traveling this last week, going from California to Georgia to New York and back here, I took as my companion the Lord of the Rings.

I haven't read this book in like 20 years, so I decided to start rereading it. And I was reminded of Tolkien's brilliance, because he's got this chapter, chapter two of the book, it's the critical chapter in the whole thing, it's called The Shadow, The Shadow of the Past.

[13 : 06] And in chapter one, he depicts the easy, comfortable lives of the hobbits in the Shire. But then in chapter two, he reveals that actually all the hobbits in the Shire are completely oblivious to what's really going on.

They're oblivious to the whispers of this enemy on this eastern land of Mordor. And the mood in the Shire is one of just complacent ignorance as these great evils grow and become like this ominous sort of disquieting shadow.

And it's only the most far-seeing, it's only the most wise people in Middle-earth, like Gandalf, the wizard, who are able to discern the true contours of the danger that they face.

And so Gandalf, what does he do? He comes to the Shire to counsel Frodo, to warn Frodo, and to kind of wake him up to this malignant shadow in this metastasizing darkness.

And I want to suggest that that's what Jesus is doing for us here. What Gandalf does for Frodo, Jesus is doing for us here. He's revealing to us that something dark and something deadly is at work in the world that we disbelieve or we take lightly at our own peril.

[14 : 26] So that when we read these words from Jesus in verse 20, if I drive out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. What do we do with that? Right?

Where does that fit in our vision of reality in the world? Do you trust yourself? Do you trust your plausibility structures, your cultural paradigms, your educational experience, your formative institutions, which have told you there is no such thing as demons?

There is no such thing as a battle or a struggle between the kingdom of Satan and the kingdom of God. Or, will you trust the Son of God who's speaking here, who made the world?

Right? The Son of God who took all the risk upon Himself to enter into this world. The Son of God who laid down His life and died for this world. The Son of God who rose again to authenticate His authority to interpret His world.

When you become a Christian, when you say, Jesus is my Savior and Jesus is my Lord, what happens is that you're baptized into Jesus' vision of the world.

[15 : 32] You're baptized into His interpretation of the world where He says, this is the fundamental conflict. This is the fundamental thing that's happening in your life and in the life of this world that I've come to engage.

The Apostle Paul says it this way in Ephesians chapter 6. He says, for our struggle is not against flesh and blood but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

And I think Jesus is trying to get us to take seriously the reality of the dark powers that are at work in the world. So that's point number one. Point number two is not just about the reality of the dark powers but secondly, the presence of a stronger power.

The presence of a stronger power. Jesus could not be more clear that Satan's not only real but that he's strong. And He says it explicitly in verse 21.

He says, when a strong man fully armed guards his own house, his possessions are safe. Jesus is saying there that Satan is strong.

[16:45] Right? He's mighty. He's powerful. Jesus calls him in other places the prince of this world, the ruler of this world. Right? He's fully armed with defensive armor, with offensive weapons.

And it says he has a house. That word house is a palace. It's a castle of this dark warlord, this heavily fortified military installation where Jesus is describing this evil and strong prince who takes possession of people and he puts them in his castle prison, his castle dungeon, and there his unholy spirits are holding people there in bondage.

Right? They're oppressed and they're dominated by the will of this strong man. And Jesus says He has people in His possession. And how do people come to be in His possession?

Well, Ephesians chapter 6, again, the Apostle Paul says this, he says, put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes.

Right? The devil has schemes by which he takes possession of people. And what are those schemes? Well, you can trace sort of a golden thread all the way back to the beginning of the Scriptures in Genesis chapter 3 where the scheming serpent comes into paradise, he comes into the garden of God questioning God's Word.

[18:15] Right? He's saying, did God really say? And he begins to twist and distort the truth. He begins to sow seeds of doubt and disbelief in the heart of human beings.

Is God really for you? Isn't God kind of holding out on you? And you can trace that thread of his schemes all the way into the New Testament where the Apostle Paul says in 2 Corinthians 11, he says, Satan disguises himself as an angel of light.

Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. In other words, his strategy is deception. And if you read the letters of the New Testament, it's very clear that this dark warlord is at work particularly among the people of God.

Right? Because he wants to distort the truth of the gospel. He wants to add to the gospel. He wants to take away from the gospel. He wants to lead God's people into this ditch of legalism over here, into this ditch of licentiousness over here.

He wants to lead us into conflict with one another or compromise with the world. Right? He wants to disrupt our relationship with God. He wants to disrupt our relationship with each other. He wants to discredit our life and our message.

[19:32] He's got schemes that need to be resisted. And the question is, do we take Jesus seriously when he talks about this strong man, that he actually is highly intelligent, that he's immensely powerful, that he's utterly unscrupulous, that he's a formidable adversary with deceptive schemes that we must take seriously?

How else do we explain the brokenness of this world, right, that's in bondage to forces of sin and disease and injustice and poverty and hunger and alienation?

How else do we describe the eruption of anger and fear and violence and death in this world unless we take Jesus' words about the strong man seriously? But what's amazing about this passage is that Jesus is not only telling us about the strong man, but he has the audacity to say, I'm stronger than the strong man.

Right, he says in verse 22, but when someone stronger attacks and overpowers him, he takes away the armor in which the man trusted and divides up his plunder.

You guys still awake? All right. I know we had one less hour of sleep last night, so I'm just making sure. Jesus says, my life and my mission is a full frontal assault on the strong man.

[21 : 03] Right, when I touch, when you read the gospels and you see Jesus touching people's bodies with the power of God and you see people teaching people and regenerating their souls by the truth of God, Jesus is saying, look, I'm attacking and overpowering the strong man.

I'm dethroning Satan. I'm driving out his kingdom. I'm repossessing what God owns by right. I'm possessing them for the kingdom of God.

What is amazing is the apostle Paul says this in Colossians chapter 2 verse 14. He says, talking about Jesus' ministry and the climax of Jesus' ministry, he says, God has taken away our sin, our death, and our condemnation by nailing them to the cross.

And he says, in having disarmed the dark powers and the authorities, God made a spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross. What Paul is saying there is that Jesus' cross is the decisive moment of his attack on the strong man.

Right? On his cross, Jesus looks as if he's a helpless victim, but something actually much deeper is going on there, that on his cross, Jesus is attacking and overpowering and overcoming the strong man by sacrificial, self-giving love.

[22 : 23] Right? That on his cross, Jesus is actually disarming the dark powers. He's taking away the strong man's armor in which he trusted. And on his cross, Jesus is making a public spectacle of Satan and his dark kingdom.

On his cross, Jesus is conquering over that kingdom of darkness and winning a victory for the kingdom of God. And Jesus says that he's dividing up the strong man's spoils.

On his cross, Jesus is dividing up the strong man's plunder by reclaiming men and reclaiming women so that people can live in freedom again according to God's original design.

And through his resurrection, Jesus is continuing this work of plundering the strong man's spoils. Right? He continues this work until he comes again to fully drive out the evil one from this world until he fully and finally sets up the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven.

And so, what does this mean for us? What does it mean for you? It's a matter of utmost importance and urgency for you to know whether you're in the possession of the strong man or whether you belong to the stronger one who came to overtake and overpower and disarm and plunder the strong man.

[23 : 41] Right? The question for us is who do I belong to? Have I been transferred from one dominion into another dominion? From one possession into another possession?

From one safekeeping into another safekeeping? Again, the Apostle Paul says this in Colossians 1. He says, for he, God, has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son He loves.

Is that how we see the world? Is that how we understand our lives? Third point is not just the reality of dark powers and not just the presence of a stronger power, but finally is to talk about the indwelling of a holy power.

power. The indwelling of a holy power. And this is where I want to just look for a moment at the most particularly strange, at least for me, the most enigmatic and puzzling part of this text.

And you're like, we haven't talked about that already. But one thing we haven't really looked at is where Jesus says in verses 19 to 20, He says, other people are driving out demons.

[24 : 47] Other Jews, other followers of the Pharisees, they're also driving out demons. And then He says in verses 24 to 26, He says that a demon leaves the house and then He comes back and He finds it swept and put in order, but it's empty and so He comes and occupies it with seven other more wicked demons than Himself and the situation is far worse than it was before.

What in the world is going on there? Well, I think Jesus is suggesting that there are multiple ways to get symptom relief for our human misery.

but to not really deal with underlying root causes. Right? He says, you know, other people are dealing with troubles and miseries and demons are, you know, taking off.

But they're not really driving them out like I am by the finger of God and the Spirit of God and the power of God so that the kingdom of God is coming. They're giving symptom relief but they're not really bringing the kingdom of God, Jesus says.

And what does that mean? It means that there's actually many different ways that we can change. There are many ways that we can get the power to change but there's only one way to change thoroughly and to change permanently.

[26 : 04] Right? Many of us have changed because we've looked to therapy and we've looked to self-help for change and that was good. We needed that. Others of us have looked to science and drugs and medicine for change and that was good.

We needed that. Others of us have looked to education and knowledge for change and that was good. That helped. We needed that. All of these are good gifts of God's common grace in our lives.

But I think this text challenges us not to be overly simplistic and overly reductionistic in the way that we approach human problems.

Because obviously we're psychological and social beings. Obviously we're biological and physical beings. Obviously we're intellectual and rational beings. But what this text reminds us is that we are not only those things we are spiritual beings.

And if we only deal at the superficial level of doing symptom relief in our life we're not going deep enough to deal with underlying root spiritual causes.

[27 : 13] It's possible Jesus says to use other powers to change. And we might be massively helped by emotional catharsis. We might be significantly helped by willpower and just sheer self-determination and self-discipline.

We might be helped by some kind of support group. And one demon might say oh my goodness he's getting serious about his life I think I'm going to take off and leave his house for a while. And your house lo and behold is swept clean it's put in order.

But if that's all you've done Jesus says if that's all you've done your house is swept clean and it's put in order but it's sitting vacant. It's sitting empty you're just inviting trouble.

You're eventually going to attract vandals and invaders and squatters who are going to come and make things worse. If you're a kid and you ever discovered an abandoned house you know and there's glass in the window don't you just want to pick up a rock and throw it through the window?

Was that just me? Jesus says an empty house is just asking for it. An empty house needs to be filled.

[28 : 20] An empty house needs a new and a holy power that keeps all those old and unholy spirits from coming back. I had a friend who I met in seminary and he became a pastor and he no longer is part of a church no longer identifies as a Christian and he posted on social media recently he said these last three years I've been in a state of barely contained panic.

Right? I've not been sleeping I've not been exercising I've been pounding ice cream late at night I've been bingeing TV to distract myself from my pain I've been on four different psychiatric drugs and I've often wanted to just go to sleep and not wake up.

And he says you know the good news is that my wife and my kids they rallied around me and I restarted exercising and I got on a clean diet and I stayed sober from alcohol and I weaned myself off this drug cocktail and he's reporting you know I felt stuck in despair but now I'm happy and I have hope again and I rejoice with him that is such good news his house has been swept clean his house has been put in order but Jesus would say the problem with that is that your house is still empty your house is vacant there's nobody in there vandals and invaders and squatters are just going to come and make things worse for you what does he need what does my friend need what do I need what do you need Jesus says we need a new and a holy and indwelling power that's stronger than all of those dark powers that can come and fill and occupy our house and our life right it's possible to have your life swept clean and put in order without the redeeming presence of Jesus and without the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit it's possible to engage in a thousand life hacks to optimize your life maximally but unless the expulsion and the removal of dark and dehumanizing powers is followed by the filling of your life with the power of the living God you've not deeply changed your change is only superficial and temporary you're just creating a vacuum inside of you that can be filled with more dark powers

Jesus says if you want to change thoroughly if you want to change completely if you want to change permanently you need to let me move into your house you need to let me take possession of all that you are and all that you have you need one stronger than the strong man to come and take up residence inside of you right you need the one who drives out demons by the finger of God and who brings the kingdom of God to come and set up his kingdom in your life what you need is the spirit of him who raised Christ from the dead to come and be that indwelling power and that indwelling presence inside of you enabling you to live the faithful and fruitful life that God created you to live there are other sources of power there are other means of help that can deal with this particular sin or that particular trouble or misery or demon but Jesus the son of God has conquered over sin itself and he's overcome

Satan himself and what he offers you and what he gives you is not deliverance from this sin or from that sin or from this demon or from that demon no what he gives you is complete deliverance what he's freeing you from is all sin what he's emancipating you from is entirely from the dominion of Satan what you need is not a house that's been swept clean and put in order what you need is a house that's occupied by the presence of the living God a house that's full of Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit you don't need a power that will make your house swept clean and put in order but leave you exactly as you were before where now you just have to fight and struggle to keep it clean where you grow tired and weary to keep it in good order and all those old troubles and all those miseries you have to fight to keep them away what you need is the power of the living God and your house increasingly filled by the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit so friends if you're not sure what the season of Lent these next 40 days is all about if you're not really sure what to pray

[33 : 09] I want to point you to this simple prayer in verse 13 and I'll close with this Jesus says if you then though you are evil know how to give good gifts to your children how much more will your Father in Heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him what I want to encourage you to do over the next 40 days is just to ask God to fill your house and to fill your life with the Holy Spirit to say Father you love to give good gifts to your children and I'm asking you for the best gift please give me the Holy Spirit please give me more and more of your Spirit please fill me from the top of my head to the tips of my toes body and soul with the Spirit of Jesus Christ Holy Spirit come rest on me Holy Spirit come enter into me Holy Spirit come live in me and dwell in me and reside in me and abide in me Holy Spirit come come fill my mind and my thoughts come fill my heart and my affections come fill my will and my desires

Lord enable me to be full of the Holy Spirit and to walk in the Holy Spirit to be led by the Holy Spirit friends who's dwelling in your house who's taking up residence in your life in your house let us make this our prayer over the next 40 days as we journey toward Easter together in the name of the Father Son and Holy Spirit Amen Amen