

## Demon on the Run

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the fourth Sunday after Epiphany, 31 January 1988. Scripture Lessons: Deuteronomy 18:15-20; Psalm 111; 1 Corinthians 8:1-13; Mark 1:21-28 (RSV).

**IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.**

When I was a little boy, every once in a while, an unclean spirit would get control of my tongue. Sometimes it was *at bedtime*. "Time for bed," mom would say. "Ah, mom, why can't I stay up? You're always treat me like a baby. I'm a big boy." "Be quiet and get to bed!" Then the unclean spirit would take possession of my tongue. "You don't really love me! Just because your older than me you think you can do whatever you want, watch whatever you want, go to bed whenever you want and I gotta do whatever you tell me! It's not fair!" Once in a while an unclean spirit would take possession of my tongue and *I'd say a dirty word*. "If you speak dirty I'm going to wash out your mouth with soap and water." She'd take me by the back of my shirt and march me over to the sink and make me take a bite out of the Ivory Soap along with a glass of water. The unclean spirit would leave quickly. To this day it's psychologically impossible for me to say dirty, four letter, Anglo-Saxon words. The worst I can say is, "Rats!"

So often Satan gets control of our tongues even when we grow up.<sup>Just last week...</sup> We may really trust Christ as our Lord and yet sometimes the devil takes possession of our tongues and we say terrible, disruptive things that hurt people <sup>we</sup> love.

One Sabbath morning Jesus came face to face with a man with an unclean spirit. Jesus was preaching in the local synagogue and there was a man in the congregation who became more and more angry as he listened. Then, in a fit of uncontrolled passion, he disrupted the worship service. Maybe he thought he was prompted by God's Spirit to silence Jesus. But, in

fact, the man lost control of himself. His tongue came under the control of an unclean spirit. He cried out, "What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?"

As Christians we know that Jesus came to destroy the works of the devil. The demons knew that, but I don't believe this possessed man meant that. I believe he simply didn't like what Jesus was saying. Jesus was propounding a new teaching. The man believed that this new teaching would eventually destroy his synagogue. The teaching of Jesus was like nothing he'd <sup>heard</sup> before. Other religious leaders preached the Bible but Jesus spoke as one who had authority in himself. He didn't have to quote the Bible. He claimed what he said was just as much the Word of God as the Bible. "That kind of preaching will destroy us", the man thought. Then the man went on to say, "I know who you are... the Holy One of God!" He knew better than anyone there who Jesus was but the devil had gotten control of his tongue. A person may be perfectly orthodox and believe the Bible, but if his or her tongue is controlled by the devil that person will end up disrupting the work of Christ rather than building it up.

This is what happens so often in our families. Christians lose control of their tongues. An unclean spirit takes control and we say things that hurt children, husbands and wives. Sometimes families are destroyed. It happens in churches too. Think of how churches are destroyed. Maybe a minister starts preaching something in the Bible that the congregation hasn't heard before. It's a new teaching to them. People get upset. What so often happens is that an unclean spirit gains possession of a person's tongue. They get violently angry, they make accusations, they call people heretics, they tear down the denomination, they spread rumors, and question the sincerity of others. Satan uses our tongues to destroy the

*Jenna - No man control his tongue*

very churches and families we love.

We need to get the devil out of our homes and churches. But how do we do it? The answer is found in the Word of Jesus. "Be quiet!" Jesus said. Stifle disruptive criticism. Stop those divisive rumors. Refuse to gossip. Be quiet! The word that St Mark uses for "Be silent!" is used elsewhere as the muzzling of an ox or the stilling of a storm. It's the image of putting a muzzle on our mouths and refusing to let Satan control our tongues. It's the image of calm after the raging of a storm. "Calm down", is what Jesus said.

But silence alone won't destroy the work of Satan in our lives. The unclean spirit needs to come out. And it comes out only as we listen to and obey what Christ says. I once heard John Savage, a Methodist minister, describe a strange visit he made to an inactive parishioner hospitalized with a serious illness. He walked into the man's room and introduced himself as the pastor. The sick man looked Savage straight in the eye and said, "Get the hell outta here!" A less experienced pastor would've left immediately but Savage stayed but didn't say anything. When Savage didn't leave the man went on to say why he was so angry. He'd been living in hell for years. His marriage was hell. His kids treated him like hell. His physical illness compounded his mental distress and he felt cut off from God. His mental, emotional, spiritual and physical suffering were hell, and he wanted the minister to get the hell out.

Savage listened until the man calmed down. Then after long moments Savage softly spoke words of Christ, words that in that circumstance seemed most appropriate to the man's condition. The man listened. And as he spoke the Word of Christ to this old curmudgeon, he got the hell out of there. The unclean spirit of rebellion, hostility and defiance was cast out

and the peace and calm of the Spirit of Christ entered and took possession.

Friends, we need to get the hell out of our families, town and churches. We don't get the hell out of our families by putting them down. We don't get the hell out of town by tearing it down. We don't get the hell out of the church by criticising it. We get the hell out by being quiet in the presence of Christ, by asking God's Spirit to "cast out our sin and enter in", by obeying what Jesus tells us to do.

We're not told whatever became of the man in our Gospel lesson. I'd like to believe that after Jesus cast out the unclean spirit, God's Spirit came in and took possession of him. I'd like to believe that man became a follower of Jesus. And I can imagine that in the years to come he spoke out for Jesus as boldly as he'd once spoken against Jesus. Like all of us, I can imagine there were times when that unclean spirit returned and took momentary possession of his tongue and he said things to wife, children and friends that hurt. But I'd like to believe that every time this happened he remembered the stern rebuke of Jesus, "Be silent, and come out of him!" and the unclean spirit would leave and the Spirit of God would return to heal and strengthened him in all his relationships. Amen.

Now to the One who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all we ask or think, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus, to all generations for ever and ever. Amen.