

# Jesus and Bezelbub

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[ 0 : 00 ] As they used to say in the churches I was a part of, it is preaching time. It is preaching time.

So thank you all so much for being here. I recognize that it is a cold, rainy, snowy day, and that sometimes can feel like a hard time to really show up and to be fully present.

But thank you so much for being here. Thank you. So I wanted to start off today just by saying Happy New Year.

I'm excited to be standing here in this space and at the same time missing all of you. I'm excited to be here on another Lord's Day, on another day where our ancestors, the first Christians, would gather to remember the resurrection, the feast of the new creation that is always happening right under our feet.

And yet, even as I start with a Happy New Year, even as I've been hearing folks say those words to me, this year feels different.

[ 1 : 20 ] It feels complicated. It is definitely this time of new beginning. It's a season in which our cultural way of keeping time invites us to a threshold of change.

One of my favorite poets, John O'Donohue, writes that, to change is the dream of every human heart. To change the limitations, the sameness, the banality, the pain.

We want to change and we often seek to do that in ways that are superficially satisfying. It's hard for us to admit that change is often this thing that arrives out of nowhere without our effort.

It's often disturbingly an act of grace. There is nothing wrong with evaluating our lives and pushing toward a way of living that is more healthy and more joyful as long as we resist the illusion of perfectibility.

As long as we both admit that there is so much that we can't control. And as long as we keep asking hard questions.

[ 2 : 38 ] So Happy New Year. And again, it's complicated. We're gathered here to remember, here and in our homes, to remember resurrection and new creation.

While some of us love the freedom of virtual meetings, some of us love having adjustments to our routine, most of us don't love when it's forced on us.

It's hard to look for newness, to scheme toward newness, to wait for the grace of newness amid disruption and uncertainty.

And it's been helpful for me to remember that all over the world today, churches are observing Baptism of the Lord Sunday. I've mentioned before that I didn't grow up in a tradition that followed the lectionary that wasn't highly liturgical.

But on this Sunday, on Baptism of the Lord Sunday, at the beginning of the new year, it's the time for us to get together and to recall together that Jesus was baptized by John.

[ 3 : 44 ] And when that happened, God split the sky to say one thing. You are my beloved. With you, I am well pleased.

And I want us to receive those words today. Those are words that I've needed to hear today. And I want you to hear those words today, if nothing else. It's complicated.

But you are God's beloved. You are God's desire. So before I say anything about our mission, and I am going to say something, but before I go there, just remember that the Spirit longs to embrace you in gentleness, to comfort you, and to help you believe.

So today, we're moving back into the book of Mark. And in a minute, we're going to read together Mark 3, 20 through 30.

You can pull out your scripture if you want to do that. I know for lots of people that's helpful. I think it'll probably also be accessible in the platform. But as you pull it up, I want to note that even this

text that we're about to talk about today is preceded by Jesus calling his followers to him.

[ 5 : 05 ] It's preceded by Jesus making this community of disciples, just like God made the world in Genesis, but God made this new creation.

He makes them. And they are made to be with him. Again, friends, receive the comfort of that in the midst of what is so complicated.

All right, so let's get into this text. I've said a lot. Mark 3, 19 through 30, well, 20 through 30.

Read it with me, if you will. Then he went home, and the crowd came together again, so they could not even eat.

When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for the people were saying he has gone out of his mind. And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, he has Beelzebub, and by the ruler of the demons, he casts out demons.

[ 6 : 08 ] And he called them to him, and he spoke to them in parables. How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand.

And if a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand. And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come.

But no one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man. And indeed, the house can be plundered. Truly, I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter.

But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin. I'm going to talk about that. But they said, for they had said, he has an unclean spirit.

The story starts with Jesus going home. After being baptized by John, being tempted in the wilderness by Satan, after calling disciples together, after casting out demons and proclaiming the kingdom of God and healing from disease, after eating with tax collectors and sinners and challenging the traditions to a traditional understanding of Sabbath, Jesus goes home.

[ 7 : 40 ] His going home frames the story. Supposed to be this kind of, it feels almost like a family reunion, except there are some problems with this reunion.

Our story starts with Jesus going home. He enters a house and the crowds overwhelm even that deeply private space. Jesus, then his family comes to restrain him.

They come to take him away. The Greek indicates that they come to do to Jesus the exact same thing that was done to John the Baptist. They come to detain him.

Some people are beginning to believe that Jesus is out of his mind and his family comes, maybe with the intent to protect him. But they come to take him away.

And no matter why they do what they do, the writer of Mark connects their actions to the actions of the religious authorities. So there's something here about how Jesus relates to traditional kinship structures.

[ 8 : 48 ] And cliffhanger, in two weeks, Meg is going to get into that a bit more as it comes up again in this section of scripture.

But after the family tries to detain Jesus, the religious leaders show up on the scene, fresh from Jerusalem, fresh from the political and religious center of power. They accuse Jesus of being possessed and using the power of Satan to cast out Satan.

Essentially, in a move that is classic, they try to dismiss their opponents, Jesus, by accusing him of witchcraft.

This has happened in our own history on this soil, right? They attempt to associate Jesus with the thing that is most despised within the kind of narrative world of their society.

And it reminds me of the number of times that may have happened to some of us. I've been, in my life, called a few different times a communist by people who did not know me, who had no sense of my political philosophy, but just as a way of dismissing me or dismissing the conversation I was inviting people to have.

[ 10 : 05 ] And maybe some of you have had that experience. It reminds me of the number of women that I know who had people call them angry or who had people tell them they're too emotional as a way, again, of distancing themselves, of dismissing those people from the real problem at hand.

And again, maybe some of you know about that too. The religious leaders are also claiming that Jesus is causing what he is claiming to cure.

And that reminds me of when people of color start to talk about race. And all of a sudden, they're the ones causing the race problems.

And if you have seen *Encanto*, you know I had to mention it because we don't talk about Bruno, no, no, no. But if you've seen that movie, clearly I think you definitely should see it.

It reminds me of Mirabelle attempting to... I'm not going to give any spoilers away, okay? It reminds me of Mirabelle attempting to address generational trauma that was threatening a household only to be villainized as causing the cracks in the household.

[11:18] To address the accusations of the religious leaders for the first time in Mark's Gospel, Jesus tells these two parables. They don't, to me, feel super approachable, but he's trying to invite the listeners of his world into the subversive kind of seeing.

He's using these everyday common imageries to create analogies that would resonate with his hearers. He's saying, essentially, that Satan's rule has come to an end.

He's saying that he is more powerful than Satan and that he has taken Satan's property. And he associates these religious leaders with the kingdom of Satan.

And let me be clear when I say that, that this is not an attack by Jesus on Judaism itself. This is not about that. I want to be really careful because so much terrible anti-Semitism has come from Christianity.

But he's attacking the way these religious leaders hold power. And then finally, we get this little bit at the end about the eternal sin. These verses, I think, have caused lots of people a ton of hand-wringing.

[12:29] I was one of those people. I was the little seven-year-old. Like, did I commit the eternal sin? That was me. All right? That was totally me. And it's really important to keep this verse in context.

That Jesus is saying something about the weight of making a specific kind of judgment, of calling something that is good evil, of calling healing something that's of death, of saying that the way of the spirit of Jesus is the way to hell.

There's a particular weight to that kind of accusation. And when we talk about forgiveness, why, we've got to use a lot, or generally, we have to use a lot of other kinds of scriptures to talk about it.

So I've said all that as a little bit of summary, because I think this text really needs some summary. And even though it's a little, the text is pretty interesting, I do think it's actually really, really timely for us to talk about today for a couple of reasons.

So first, as we begin a new year, I think this story challenges us to consider how our practical activities, how our day-to-day life and routine proclaim the reign of God.

[13:40] In the story, it's Jesus' work as an exorcist that seems to draw the attention. He could have theoretically been punished for doing the supernatural work that people considered witchcraft.

Yet, there are other people in Mark's gospel that are doing this kind of thing, but they don't get accused in the same way. It's also true that in this part of the gospel, Jesus hasn't really unraveled who he is.

So he's probably not being accused because of his, like, claims to be the Messiah. People don't really get that yet. But, so Jesus is accused here not because he's of another world, not because he's doing something that is supernatural.

He's accused because of his practical, everyday activities that go along with that supernatural work.

He's accused because he eats with sinners. He's accused because he redefines the Sabbath.

He's accused because he talks back to the status quo and he backs up that lifestyle, that with a lifestyle that talks back to the status quo. There are these practical activities that Jesus does with intention here.

[14:53] They're what cause a confrontation. For Jesus, the practical is the subversive. And I want us to hear that as we go into the new year, that the practical is the subversive.

This is a time where we reevaluate our lives. We want to be more productive. We start to think about our work goals at the beginning of the year. We want to lose weight. We want to become these improved people.

We have all these goals. But what part of those goals is about following Jesus into the practical and subversive ways?

What part of it is about transgressing boundaries in painful ways? And what part of that work does your own soul need to have?

As Emily Towns likes to phrase, that's her phrase. What do you need? What do you need this year of the subversive as you follow Jesus? And then along with challenging us to consider how our practical activities proclaim the reign of God, I think the story calls us to cultivate eyes to see where our concrete liberation is taking place in our world.

[16:04] So these last verses I've named, they're disturbing, but they associate the religious leaders with the household of Satan. But they also beg the question of where the crowd stand.

These people that have been bustling to get in to eat with Jesus, like where do they stand? Can they recognize the liberating work of God? And I think that we are invited, we are called, we are asked to cultivate such an ability to discern.

When healing takes place in unexpected places, in unexpected ways, are we open to that?

Opening up, I think for many of us, is a main part of our spiritual vocation.

I remember the first time I went to Q Christian Fellowship, which is this national organization that does work for queer inclusion. They met in Alexandria.

I was scared to go because I was like, those are queer people. I can't go over there. This was years ago. And my brother made me go because he knew it would be good for me. And I thought the people were a little, I was scared.

[17:14] I was scared. I was like, these people know they have to be doing something that is opposed to God. I remember one woman asked me to go hang out in downtown D.C. to get a bite to eat because she'd never been to D.C.

And I was so afraid. I grabbed a random person beside me and said, you are coming with me, okay, because I'm so afraid. And yet, that moment was a moment of opening. It was a moment where I could see that the work of God toward liberation in this unexpected place.

And I still feel that kind of discomfort sometimes when I encounter in that space different sexuality, you know, different sexual ethics or different theological perspectives.

And yet, the concrete liberation and liberative work of God is there. I felt that in spaces as well when I've been among black folk who are working on recovering themselves kind of pre-colonially, right? As colonized people who've received faith, they're trying to figure out, like, who were we? And they'll often, instead of saying amen as Christians, they'll say ashe. They are Christians, but they're trying to rediscover.

[18:21] They're trying to find who they have been. Makes me uncomfortable sometimes. And yet, I have seen how it is often a part of the liberative work of God.

So, how will you cultivate eyes to see where that kind of liberative work is happening? How will you open up to it? Opening up was, in this context, the exact opposite of what the religious leaders thought would save the nation.

How will you open up? How will you engage liberation? And then, how will you do that for yourself? One of my favorite quotes is by Albert Camus.

And he says, the only way to deal with an unfree world is to become so absolutely free that your very existence is an act of rebellion. So, where will you stand regarding the liberation that's happening all around you?

But also, how will you pursue the liberation that your own soul needs? And then, finally, I'm aware that maybe for the table and for Resurrection City, D.C., the most challenging parts of this passage are maybe are not about this invitation to consider the practical.

[19:43] Maybe the most challenging part is not about cultivating eyes to see liberation. I think that for us, the most challenging part of this passage may be its insistence that we need a spirituality that can discern the devil and the work of the devil.

Now, when I started writing this sermon, that is not where I thought that was going. But I got a name. This is where I think an area that we may need to talk some more about. So, I think it's one of the main reasons the story is hard to digest.

We don't live in the kind of enchanted world, this kind of world that the people who would have heard these stories, you know, existed in. A world where they believed that there was the supernatural.

There was magic. There were things that they couldn't explain. And those things were real. We, in contrast, live in a world that religious scholar Houston Smith calls fact fundamentalism.

If something can't be verified, if it's not repeatable and observable, if it doesn't exist inside our notions of time and space, it isn't real. It's not true.

[ 20 : 57 ] Both conservative Christians and progressive Christians are guilty of fact fundamentalism. And this is at the same time that both tend to hold with 1 John 3, 8, that Jesus came to destroy the work of the devil.

For progressive Christians, this devil is often considered a product of illusion, as if this is an episode of Scooby-Doo. In that cartoon, when the gang discovers something awry that seems spiritual, they always, in the end, discover that regular human beings are responsible for whatever the problem is. But the issue with this is that if all evil can be neatly attached just to human beings, then it's really easy to demonize other human beings.

We end up calling for their elimination. It's easy to do violence to them. And then we can't possibly follow Jesus' bedrock admonition to radically love them.

All this is said remarkably well by Richard Beck in his work, *Reviving Old Scratch*. It's really accessible. And here's what he writes. If the surveys are to be believed, many Christians tend to think of the devil as a symbol of evil rather than a literal fallen angel.

[ 22 : 20 ] However, there are a couple of problems with thinking about the devil as a symbol of evil. First, many might assume that symbol means pretend or make-believe, but symbols aren't pretend.

They're pointing to something real, something happening in the world. So that's the first thing we need to get clear about. Fallen angel or symbol, the devil is real.

And then a bit further in his work, he notes, when you lose track of the devil, you lose track of the kingdom of God. Now, I recognize at this point that I've already left you with one cliffhanger, with Meg preaching about Jesus and kinship structures in a couple of weeks.

And now I just have to leave you with another, which is essentially Anthony and I later in this month are going to preach from Mark 5, which is one of the most famous exorcisms in Mark's gospel, to talk more about some of these issues and to tie them as well to decolonization and where we're, one of the things we want to be talking about as a community.

But for now, I'll just say that I hope for the new year that we can be invited and accept the invitation into a spirituality that asks continually who or what is the devil.

[ 23 : 37 ] And that asks, I hope that we can ask the question without being content with answers limited to a disenchanting world that has made it peace with the demonization of others.

We need this language to follow God well. And I am so excited to talk more about this and how we need to think about these ideas as real, why we need this language.

So this is a new year to ask hard questions. It's a new year to take up practical activities that are subversive. It's a new year to recognize a new, the concrete work of liberation all around you.

And it's a new year to take up a spirituality, which allows us to discern the devil. It's also a complicated new year. So I pray that the ground of all that work that you do, under that ground will be a sense that you are loved by God and that you are made for them.

Amen.