

## **Seeds of Redemption**

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Come Thou redeemer of the earth, come manifest in us Thy birth. That people now oppressed, enslaved may know Thy freedom, sing Thy praise. Amen.

We have all seen them. We have all seen people who have been driven out of their minds by one force or another. Not just in the Palestine of Jesus' own day, but on the streets of our own cities, we see them, standing on street corners, talking to faces we cannot see, wandering out into traffic and on their better days, approaching us, asking for food or money, or just to be seen. Those with mental disturbance have frightened people all through the course of history. Most of us, no less so than the people of Jesus' own day. What is it? What is it that drives people out of their minds? In our time we tend to point to chemical imbalances in the brain. In Jesus' day they pointed to demonic forces. But there are other things besides chemical imbalances or demonic forces that can drive people to distraction. That can oppress to the point of enslavement. It's typical, among us, to point to forces like alcohol or drugs or sexual lust gone awry. And I wouldn't want to say that those cannot drive one to distraction or so pre-occupy one's own mind and heart that one might not be said to be out of one's mind. But there are other forces still. And these are forces that all of us know in one way or another that push us to the edge of things, where we might feel ourselves close to an edge of mental disturbance that is frightening or even terrifying. What about the brokenness of a heart that's lost its only love? What about someone raised in a household with no love? What about being a member of some group that is oppressed to the point where you feel occupied by the oppressive forces that say, "You're not really fully human, you know. You're less than the rest of us." Or perhaps, some terrible tragedy that comes, personally or to the society at large, that takes you into a whirlpool of depression so that some day or some days you think, "I can't even get out of bed."

All of us are terrified of these forces. Jesus, as is always the case with Him, does not feel that what terrifies us closes Him out. This man, the man we just heard about in the lesson from Luke's gospel, was a terrifying figure, make no mistake about that. Would you have wanted to approach a man, absolutely naked, who had not been able to be fettered or locked up effectively? Who shouted at the top of his lungs about demons and Son of the Most High God? I think I wouldn't have. I would have been glad that he was living among the tombs and not on my block. But Jesus went to him. Jesus went to him despite the fact that this man was unclean several times over in the Jewish way of thinking. He was a Gentile, unclean. He was naked, unclean. He was out of his mind, unclean. He was living among the tombs, unclean. Jesus stepped through all those barriers of oppression and approached him and He redeemed him back into his rightful mind, back into human society and, as we hear at the very end of the gospel lesson, into relationship with the God he had never known, the God of Israel.

Now all of this may feel distant to you. You may say, well that's all well and good. I'm glad that there are people in our day that deal with such people, psychiatrists and therapists. But what has this got to do with me? Let me try to bring this oppression that this man felt and under which he lived, closer to home. In fact, right to Beacon Hill. On the West side of Beacon Hill at 66 Phillips Street there is a house. In the mid-nineteenth century it was owned by Lewis Hayden and his wife Harriet. Free African-Americans. They were part of the large African-American community that resided on the west side of Beacon Hill in those years. If you go and stand in front of that house, and I hope someday you will, you'll see there a brass plaque. It recounts his accomplishments, Lewis Hayden's accomplishments. And right in the middle of his accomplishments is a stirring and singular phrase, Redeemer of Shadrach. Redeemer of Shadrach. This is how the story goes.

Lewis Hayden had himself been a slave and had escaped slavery in Kentucky and had come to Boston in the 1840's. He became one of the leading African-Americans in the abolitionist movement; a movement in which both African-Americans and white people worked together for the freeing of slaves. His house, a boarding house that he ran with his wife Harriet, became one of the safe houses and one of the stops on the Underground Railroad. In the year 1850 the United States, to our shame, passed an Act called the Fugitive Slave Act, which gave rights to anyone deputized by the American Government to go searching for escaped slaves without a writ. Any African-American, free or not, was suspect. One Shadrach Minkins had escaped from slavery in the late 1840's and had come to Boston and had become a waiter at a coffee house. One day in February of 1851 fugitive slave searchers found him, dragged him out of the coffee house and took him immediately to the Federal Courthouse to put him on trial and to send him back to slavery. Lewis Hayden, together with an African-American lawyer and two white lawyers, gathered a band of people who broke into the courthouse, interrupted the trial, redeemed Shadrach and sent him to freedom in Canada. Redeemer of Shadrach.

There are all sorts of forces in this world which oppress and can drive you crazy as individuals and as groups of people. Those forces have been at work since before the time of Jesus. They were at work in the time of Jesus. They were at work in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. They are at work in 21<sup>st</sup> century Boston. What forces enslave you? What nearly drives you crazy? Is it greed? Are you still holding a job that you hate because you cannot give up the monetary privileges that it brings to you? Is it the need to be successful, no matter what, even if you have to squash your spouse, your children, or every person that you come into argument and disagreement with? Does that enslave or oppress you? You know what blank needs to be filled in here because we are all oppressed and we are all enslaved by forces that we cannot fully control. You and I are compatriots of the Gerasene Demoniac, Shadrach Minkins, and every other human being who is oppressed and enslaved and needs freedom and redemption. Who have been the redeeming figures through whom Christ has worked in your life? Your spouse, that friend who lives a thousand miles away but you can call on the phone at any hour of any day or night and who will always listen? Is it the teacher who believed in you when no one else would? Who has Christ used as a redeeming arm in your life? Who has been your Lewis Hayden? Some of these people are famous people, these redeeming figures and they get plaques on

the front of their houses. Most of them are not. Does your AA sponsor have a plaque on the front of his house? Or your second grade teacher who believed in you or your friend who lives a thousand miles away? Of course they don't but they have planted seeds of redemption in your life that are still growing. And you know what happens when seeds grow up don't you? They give birth to more seeds. Into whose oppressed life are seeds of redemption falling from your hands? What will be your legacy if they were to put a plaque on the front of your house what would it say? No, it doesn't have to be a grandiose act, a glitzy move like Lewis Hayden's dramatic rescue of Shadrach. It could be something simple that plants a seed in another's life.

Do you know the story of Desmond Tutu's call? It's one such simple story. Desmond Tutu, the great Anglican priest and then Archbishop, the Nobel Prize winner for Peace, was a nine year old boy in South Africa. Walking along the street, the dusty street, in what they call townships, a code word for slum. He was walking along that street at age nine with his mother, when a white priest walked toward them, stopped, doffed his hat to Desmond's mother and went on. It was Trevor Huddleston, an Anglican priest, who eventually, himself, went on to be a bishop as well. Desmond Tutu says, "I wanted to be like that man." A simple seed, a doffing of a hat and redemption began to grow. You know how it grew through Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu and the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions.

What seeds is Christ asking you to plant? Seeds of redemption in 21<sup>st</sup> century Boston or wherever you live. What would a plaque on the outside of your house say about who you redeemed? The world awaits your answer and so does Christ and Christ stands ready at your side to plant the seeds with you; in memory of, in thanksgiving for, Christ's own redeeming act; in memory of, in thanksgiving for Lewis Hayden's redeeming act; in memory of, in thanksgiving for Trevor Huddleston, Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu's redeeming acts. Thanks be to Christ our Redeemer now and evermore, Amen.