

Sep 1, 2024

Sermon Title: Shadows of Change

Scripture: James 1:17-27

Theme: Seeking the healing shadows of diversity and beauty.

“Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow (*tropé.aposkiasma*)” (1:17)

[1] The shadow metaphor has multiple meanings within the Christian tradition posing an enigma for us when we consider today’s text. On the one hand, the ritual of Tenebrae on Good Friday uses the shadow metaphor in a rather negative fashion: (e.g. the shadow of irresponsibility, the shadow of betrayal, the shadow of denial, etc., each of these sections of the service ending with the extinguishing of a candle.) On the other hand, the Transfiguration presents us with an overshadowing metaphor that protects us from too much direct sunlight, the shadow offering a nurturing presence that heals us. Peter describes this experience of the Majestic Glory (Holy Spirit) as the “shadow” of a cloud overcast upon him.(Mk.9:1-8; Mt. 17:1-13; Lk 9:28-36, 2 Pet. 1:17). The Penumbra of God! The Shekinah! The feminine shadow of God, the comforting, summoning Presence of God!

The Psalmist declares:

“Show the wonders of your unfailing love, O God; keep me as the apple of your eye and hide me in the shadow of your wings!” (Ps. 17:8; 36:7; 57:1). “I will think of you through the watches of the night, for you are my help, I will sing for joy in the shadow of your wings.” (Ps. 63:7)

[2] On the one hand, one of the seven deadly sins of medieval vintage, is known as *Acedia*, or the sin of noonday, when the sun is directly overhead giving no relief from the heat, when there are no shadows. This is the sin of hubris, or excessive pride, occurring when we are at the very peak of our ability to succeed, but when we are also the most vulnerable, least guarded, when we feel apathy, or fail to care because we are overwhelmed by the evil of our world. On the other hand, there is the vision of Isaiah 49 that inspires Jesus to his calling: “Prisoners, Come out! Those in darkness, Show Yourselves!” (49:9) Isaiah’s vision: “It is too light a thing that you should be my servant [for the tribes of Judah and survivors of Israel]; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.” (49:1-2, 6)

[3] In more recent years, there is a strange and popular fascination with total eclipse. Now that our computers can predict exactly where one can experience the full extent of an eclipse, thousands upon thousands of people drive long distances to intersect personally with the experience. It is, in some ways, an otherworldly experience of a lifetime, something of the order of “the day the sun (or moon) stood still,” as recorded in the totally mysterious “Book of Jashar,” according to Joshua 10:12-13. Or perhaps, the 1951 movie, and its recent remake in 2008, “the Day the Earth Stood Still?” The eclipse experience seems to dwarf us absolutely, yet give us a strange power from surviving it; it is a reminder that we are a tiny speck watching helplessly at the edge of the galaxy, and an awareness that we have more mystery about our world than we

have knowledge.

Isaiah's call is similar to Jeremiah's, "Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, and before you were born, I consecrated you and appointed you a prophet to the nations." (Jer. 1:5). In this word from the Lord, Isaiah hears the larger call of God to heal the world. Today, Judaism identifies this call as 'tikkun olam,' the call of God to repair the world. Through this call, people bear responsibility to effectively address the issues of society beyond their own world. The essence of "tikkun olam" is that God's light has become scattered through the world, trapped inside the world, attached to broken shards; the goal is to gather the broken pieces of light together and return their light to its source in God. In Galatians 1:15, Paul uses the same language of Isaiah and Jeremiah, "God ... set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, ... to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles." Just like Isaiah and Jeremiah before him, Paul views his mission as a calling to proclaim the gospel to the nations, to the Gentiles. The traditional mission to the Judah and Israel was "too light a thing;" Paul, Jeremiah, Isaiah were called to a special mission beyond their own borders. They were called to go to the end of the earth with the word of God. And, we like all of them, are called to go and witness to the ends of the earth, to gather the broken pieces of light into the one light of Christ, to repair and heal the world, and to find "the place where our deep gladness meets the world's deep need (Frederick Buechner)."

Acts 5:15 tells us that the people lined up in the streets, carrying their sick with them on cots and mats, just so that Peter's shadow might fall upon them as he came by. Prime positions were those opposite the side of the street where the sun was shining. Peter would be on his way to teach at Solomon's Porch (the Portico) near the Temple in Jerusalem where Jesus before him had also taught; it was known as the only area near the Temple where the Gentiles were permitted to hear the word of God and to pray. The people lining the way to Solomon's Porch were the overflow crowd, unable to fit into the small area where the Gentiles were allowed. If only they or their loved ones could fall under Peter's shadow, all would be well again! And the prophet Malachi also affirms that "the Sun of Righteousness shall arise with healing in its wings!" (Mal. 4:2) Or we might say, in the shadow of those wings.

And, of course, we know that shadows move around during the day. Shadows do not stay in any one place too long. We know that clouds moving across the sky can produce shadows as well. How do we know which shadow can connect us to Peter, to the Spirit of Jesus. Remember that Peter never takes credit. Jesus is the one doing the healing, or dare we say, the healing comes about by the faith of those who come and who bring others. We might imagine them saying, "let's find the place where we might intersect with Peter's shadow sometime during the day," sometime during the time he is here at Solomon's Porch. "At the time of the year, the sun should come over us at such and such an angle, the sun should produce shadows approximately here in this spot. So, if we are smart and hedge our bets, this spot is the best guess and where Peter's shadow should be cast. Peter does not have to go out of his way. Just let the shadow touch us and we shall be healed." Yet, as readers, we know the rest of the story. The healing is not limited to those who fall under Peter's shadow.

[4] One of my favorite books is entitled *The Shadow of the Galilean*; published in 1987, its author is Gerd Theissen. In this novel, people chase around the countryside looking for Jesus. The rumor is that Jesus is always on the move, not staying long in any one place, but moving on as immediately as he came. Immediacy is the hallmark of Mark's gospel; the people follow just to gain a healing glimpse of him in passing. Theissen writes: "He [Jesus] expected a miraculous change, the poor the children, the meek, the foreigners would come into their own through this change. ... it is not purely spiritual, people can eat and drink in it, people stream into it from all sides. There is a new temple in it. His aim was political, but it was not to come about with politics. God would realize it, but you and I cannot achieve it by treating others with hate. It must be brought about by and through love. This new temple is a shadow of the heavenly temple (Heb. 8:5).

[5] Howard Thurman, a mentor to Martin Luther King, Jr., once wrote: "Twilight is a time of pause when nature changes her guard. All living things would fade and die from too much light or too much dark, if twilight were not." On April 5, 1959, Martin Luther King, Jr. preached a sermon entitled "Shattered Dreams" at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church. Some of those who were there thought he might be preaching to himself.

"Our ability to deal creatively with shattered dreams and blasted hopes will be determined by the extent of our faith in God. A genuine faith will imbue us with the conviction that there is a God beyond time and a Life beyond life. Thus we know that we are not alone in any circumstance, however dismal and catastrophic it may be. God dwells with us in life's confining and oppressive cells. And even if we die there having not received the earthly promise, [God] will walk with us down that mysterious road called death, and lead us at last to that indescribable city that God has prepared for us. Let us never feel that God's creative power is exhausted by this earthly life, and his majestic love is locked within the limited walls of time and space."

"With this faith," King preached, "we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair, a stone of hope." One Martin Luther King scholar, Randal Maurice Jelks, who teaches at the University of Kansas in Lawrence, has written that our traumas arise out of our sense of defeat, but our healing arises out of our sense of hope.

[6] Your faith has made you well! A woman sneaks up behind Jesus to touch his cloak. Not just any woman, but a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. Acts tells us that she "had endured much under many physicians and had spent all that she had" (Mark 5:25-26). The medical system of the time had taken her money and failed her. She was "no better," and in point of fact, her condition was "growing worse." She was desperate for anyone who could offer a long-shot treatment, or even suggest a treatment that might work. She would even consider a treatment that was controversial by the standards of the time; her pain must have been excruciating. It surely prevented her from having a normal life; it had swallowed her hopes and dreams. It had broken her spirit. It had spent her patience thin, driven her into despair, and sent her into the dark corner to hide. Then, she heard a voice from out of the crowd, perhaps the voice of a fellow sufferer who knew her pain. "There is a prophet from Galilee who is known for his healing touch and voice. There is one who might be able to cure your disease and give

you the relief of a lifetime. There is one who might be able to give your life back to you. The crowds surround him constantly, traveling with him and guarding him from harm. But, I have heard that even if you cannot get close enough to him to get his attention and talk to him, if you are able to touch his clothes or brush up against his tunic, you can still be healed. I have heard that there is a healing spirit around him which itself can heal. If you can but get close enough to breathe the same air that he breathes, you can be healed. We can imagine her saying, “You mean, that I might have a chance even approaching him from out of the shadows.” “I have no money left to pay him. Why would he stop long enough to listen to me, to heal me like he has all the others.” Well, we know the rest of the story. She did indeed gather the courage to work her way through the crowds and all the elbows and obstacles, timing her movement to intersect his path. She reaches out and grabs at his moving cloak. Jesus stops and looks around, gazing at all the people right and left, in front and behind, gazing at those who were elbowing him and gently shoving him back and forth. “Who touched me?” Who drained my spirit of love and care? Who stole some of my energy and power? Who did it? There were quite a few people who had touched him, but only one who was eager to steal a part of his healing. There was only one that was desperate and could not live without it. “I am the one,” Master. How did you know? There are so many here. How did you know? Her hands and body were shaking; she was terrified of being discovered. Someone was going to accuse her for not entering the front door with her request, of sneaking through the back door, of stealing love and wholeness without commitment. She might even be stoned to death. She was terrified. But, then the words: “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace and be healed of your disease. (Mark 5:34).” Mark’s story leaves us pondering. Did the touching of his garment heal her? Or was it the voice of Jesus that healed her after the fact of the touching. But, Jesus told her: “Daughter, your faith has made you well.” She could have been a thousand miles away. Jesus could have been totally silent, merely thinking about the person to be healed, but not saying a word. “Your faith has made you well.”

[7] “Great is Thy faithfulness,” O God, there is no shadow of turning with Thee.” [William M. Runyan, Baldwin City, Kansas; based on Lamentations 3:23, James 1:17]. And, remembering that the name of God is a verb, we might substitute the word “Love” for “God.” God/Love has no shifting shadow, no eclipse will ever cast a shadow on the earth to hide or contain God’s presence in the universe. God/Love is an absolute reference point in the multiverse, in the universe. The turning of the sun and moon will never hide God/Love below the horizon. God/Love has no shifting shadow, no variation of darkness or light caused by celestial or earthly change. God/Love is not random, fickle or capricious. God does not consider the outward appearance, the beauty or ugliness of anyone’s face (1 Sam 16:7). God is no respecter of persons or their faces, God is not partial in applying justice (Deut. 10:17, 2 Chron. 19:7, Rms. 2:11). We can trust God to be fair and equitable, not favoring Jew over Gentile, black over white, female over male, straight over gay, cisgender over trans, binary over non-binary, northern over southern or western over eastern. Let no one judge you by any of these criteria because all these differences are mere shadows cast by the One body of Christ (Col. 2:17).

Yet, there is another way of looking at these shadows, as precious differences. God loves you

for who you ARE, and NOT for who you are NOT. God's love IS not Color-Blind, but Living-Color-SPECIFIC! Job in his misunderstanding of God, at the beginning of the Book of Job, says: "The Lord gives and the Lord takes away!" (1:21), referring to the grievous loss of his daughters and sons, acting as if he does not even know their names, or how they are different. But, Job in his lived-understanding of God, spoken by the narrator of the story at the end of the Book of Job, declares how "beautiful" his children truly are, Knowing their names and their differences, and especially his daughters, giving them an inheritance of his fortune normally not heard of in the ancient world. Yes, Job changes his mind, his feelings, his relationships while under the shadows of pain, slowly moving into the shadows of grace.

Living in, and under, the shadow of Christ means respecting the diversity of all believers. God's Love can move heaven and earth, giant mountains or deep valleys, to save any soul with the faith of a tiny mustard-seed, or raise the smallest of sparks to a raging fire. Your faith has made you well! Not your tradition, not your ethnicity, not your works or level of charity, not your beauty, not your intelligence, not by the chance of your birth in any specific nation or territory, not the relative condition of your health, not the specific condition of your literacy. Your faith has made you well! Come out of the shadows of death into the shadows of grace! Worship in spirit and truth! Live under the reign of God with the faith of Christ sustaining your own faith. All Praise be to God on this joyous Sunday! Alleluia! Amen!