

“Me and My Shadow”

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*This sermon is dedicated to Jungian analyst Dr. Rick L. Overman
for walking with me while I walk with my shadow.*

Better the devil you know, than the devil you don't know. Most of us are probably familiar with that saying. And we probably think this “devil” is located somewhere else, in someone else. And so that we don't get taken advantage of, it's better to know what darkness lurks about. That way, we don't get blindsided or overwhelmed by the darker side of life or others.

Hold that thought.

Do you know that we all have a shadow? Not the kind that the sun produces—although it is because of light that we know what is dark.

The shadow I'm talking about is made up of the parts of ourselves that we repress or deny. While we might think of these things as bad, what is crucial to know about our shadow is its hiddenness and ability to show itself when it wants. That's because the thing about shadow material is it will find a way out. It is relentless. Sometimes leaving us thinking, “The devil made me do it.”

Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung came up with the term “shadow self” to describe the hidden aspects of ourselves. Our shadows are full of things about ourselves that we dislike, loath, or are ashamed of—things like jealousy, greed, hate, revenge, spitefulness. Understandably, we want those parts out of sight. Often we'll know we're being tapped on the shoulder by our shadow, because we will have a strong emotional reaction against something we see or feel in another or in ourselves. That strong emotional reaction is your shadow.

Strangely enough, our shadows contain parts of ourselves that are wonderful as well—only we withhold those parts, because somewhere along the way we got the message that no one would be interested or that goodness of ours wasn't somehow good. Those might be things like ambition, assertiveness, spontaneity, generosity, sexuality. But no matter how hard you try to repress or deny parts of yourself, those parts will visit you again and again.

And nobody knew that better than Jesus.

Today marks the first Sunday in Lent. For forty days and forty nights, the Christian tradition encourages us to set this time aside to remember what Jesus' supremacy or divinity gives us: It gives us the love of God that is poured out through Christ. “Christ” essentially means chosen by God.

So Jesus becomes Jesus Christ, or Jesus the Chosen One — the One who, through his death and resurrection events, gives us forgiveness of our sins (or separation from God) *and* reminds us of the promise of eternal life.

The point of Lent is to prepare ourselves spiritually, as we remember Jesus' teachings and sacrifice while we wait for the celebration of our highest Holy Day: Easter. This spiritual preparation is lived out through personal sacrifices that symbolically focus on the sacrifices Jesus made in teaching us about the things of God—including our shadows.

Our lesson of Jesus' testing in the wilderness is a traditional Lenten reading. With all the interior work I've been doing, I have a newfound love for this temptation story, because I think it invites us to engage with our shadow selves—our devilish side, if you will. It's much more difficult to be tricked or controlled by our shadows if we bring them to light and learn about how they operate within us.

Likely others have written about this shadow awareness in this testing story; I didn't review the literature. But I believe that Jesus was fully tempted by his shadow in the story, and I also believe this shadow engagement story is an intentional placement prior to Jesus offering his teachings, miracles, and healing in order that his own personal shadow *did not interfere* with the work he was to complete here on earth.

For example, how Jesus never became hangry is beyond me. You probably don't want to be around me after I've not eaten for four days and nights—let alone forty. If I had the power to turn stones into rocks, sorry God, but we'd be looking at a pile of buttered toast so that I could sooth and feed my ravenous self.

Jesus could have done that, but he confronted that side of himself. He knew that there was a part of him that could take advantage of what God gave him. So he deals with it, and even reminds that shadow aspect that there are other ways to be fed.

And what about Jesus' shadow self that could want the whole world? He was a pretty charismatic guy. Smart, too. He knew how to stir people's deepest selves. He could have anyone and anything he wanted in exchange. "Go ahead!" hisses his shadow, "I will give you this whole domain and the glory of all these kingdoms. It's been entrusted to me and I can give it to anyone I want. Therefore, if you will worship me, it will all be yours."

But in confronting this greedy and power-hungry aspect of himself, Jesus reminds himself of his covenant to God as written in the Torah, replying to his shadow, "It's written, You will worship the Lord your God and serve only him."

Jesus' shadow continues to receive some Holy schooling as Jesus brings these hidden parts of himself to light in these full-on confrontations.

But shadows are tough.

They're resilient, too, knowing where and how to get us. So Jesus' shadow pulls out his ace. Bringing Jesus to the highest point of the temple, the shadow tempts the side of Jesus that could be insecure and unfaithful: "Since you are God's Son, throw yourself down from here; for it's written: He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you and they will take you up in their hands so that you won't hit your foot on a stone."

Man, this shadow is *tough*.

But again, in remembering his Oneness with God and the necessity of his faithfulness to that connection, Jesus stands his shadow down, saying, "It's been said, Don't test the Lord your God."

Through the lesson, we are being shown again and again, our shadow self will come up and tempt us to act on it again and again. If we aren't aware that this is our shadow, we end up doing things that we don't necessarily mean to do. And that by the way, is how we get separated from God—or how we sin.

However, when we do what is called "shadow work," when we look at the parts of ourselves that we repress or deny—parts of our deep selves that are very human and very real—that shadow work tends to cast light in those dark places, taking some of the power out of those more challenging aspects of ourselves. Showing the fullness of who we really are. No hiding.

For example, my personal shadow work has been tackling deep insecurities. I used to have a reaction of disgust when I saw insecurity in another. I'd think, "What a wimp!" Yes, your pastor is atrocious sometimes—it's part of my shadow. But what I was really disgusted at were my own insecurities, my own fears and doubts around my own inabilities. I'd built up hard defenses.

Now when I see insecurity in another person, I think of how much courage it takes to try to speak up or how painful it can be to feel like you can't. I now have much more compassion for myself and others when it comes to insecurities, because God's Spirit—as in part manifested in my analyst—helped me shine a great big ol' light on that aspect of myself.

You'll notice that the devil—or Jesus' shadow—while relentless, did move to another tactic once the light or Jesus' awareness was made present. That's because there's an endless pit of shadow material within each of us. Like all true shadows, we never fully resolve them. They never truly go away. The end of the story confirms this for us, reading: "The devil departed from him until the next opportunity."

Shadow work is an ongoing process and lifelong work.

This year, I invite you to give up denying and repressing parts of yourself for Lent. Engage with your shadow. Cast a light on your own darkness as you sit with a part of you that you repress or deny in two ways:

First, confront a part of yourself that you consider somehow repulsive or destructive, something you've stuffed far away. Reflect on where it rears its ugly head. How might shining a light on that part of you help you deal with it?

And second, confront a part of yourself that you repress or deny that is actually needed and useful, only you don't let that part out either because its gifts were somehow distorted. How might shining a light on that part of you help you set it free?

Beloveds, trust me—or better yet, trust Jesus' example and teaching. It is in and through engagement with the whole of ourselves that we truly move toward God or the Divine. This is because in the process of confronting our shadows, we can be more clear and intentional in living out our lives. And that same clarity and intentionality has a way of moving us closer to the things of God.

For sure, our work in encountering the hidden parts of ourselves is uncomfortable, and it is never done. But just as the Spirit was with Jesus, so is that same Spirit with us in the same confrontations.

As our Lenten journeys unfold, my prayer is that you engage with the wilderness within, trusting that the One who made you will shine a light for you and help see you through. For sure, it'll leave you a little ravenous in your own ways, but you'll also understand yourself better. So go ahead, move into the dark to find the light.

Amen.