

“The Shadow Side”
Psalm 91; Luke 4:1-13
First Sunday in Lent

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In many writings and pieces of literature,
if you want to characterize something as DANGEROUS,
DEMONIC, or DESTRUCTIVE—
it’s customary *to use the image of a*
SHADOW...

Do any of you recall Madeleine L’Engle’s book *A Wrinkle in Time*?
There was a movie made of the book last year.

It’s a story about an almost teenaged girl named Meg,
and her younger brother Charles,
and they get taken on a journey through time and
space to a distant planet to rescue their father.

Before they begin their travels, a mysterious lady named Mrs. Whatsit shows
them what they’re up against, what it is that has captured their father:

something more powerful than the light of stars;
something that “would chill [Meg] with a fear that was beyond
shuddering...”

something that was the very embodiment of evil in the
universe—

and yet, L’Engle writes, **“It was a shadow, nothing but a shadow.”**¹

T.S. Eliot knew about it.

When he described the inconsistency in people—
the gap that gets created between one’s intentions,
what we want and plan to do,
and one’s actions, what we end up doing—

¹ Madeleine L’Engle, *A Wrinkle in Time*, New York: Dell Publishing, 1962.

Eliot wrote:

“Between the idea/And the reality/
Between the motion/And the act/
Falls the Shadow...”²

The shadow—it’s dark. It’s mysterious. It’s scary.

Even the Psalmist knew about the shadow.
Psalm 23, King James Version:

“...yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death...”

Now our Psalm for today, Psalm 91, is NOT as well-known as Psalm 23. But it too is a Psalm that offers comfort, a Psalm that celebrates the protecting hand of God:

*“For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler
and from deadly pestilence...”*

*You will not fear the terror of the night,
or the arrow that flies by day,
or the pestilence that stalks in darkness,
or the destruction that wastes at noonday.”*

Hold on a minute.
The destruction that wastes at noonday?

What is noon, high noon, symbolic of?
It’s a symbol of the time when there is NO SHADOW.
The height of the day. No darkness. Just pure sunshine.

The New International Version writes it like this:
“...the plague that destroys at midday.”

² From “The Hollow Men,” by T.S. Eliot.

The Jerusalem Bible translates the line like this:

“...the scourge that wreaks havoc in broad daylight.”

But perhaps the easiest translation I once heard was this:

“...the demon who comes at noon.”³

The demon who comes at noon??!

Demons are supposed to hide in the darkness!

A demon who shows up in broad daylight, with the sun at its peak?

What kind of demon is dumb enough to arrive at noon?

A 4th century monk named Evagrius is one of the first people on record to have noticed this demon.

He was high up in the church pecking order in Constantinople, and he gave it up—no more promotions, no more striving for the top—he went into the desert, and wrote about SIN.

You know what sin he said was the worst?

Not greed.

Not lust.

Not wrath.

Acedia. The demon who comes at noon.

And what it means is....I...don't....care.

Acedia is apathy.

In the 7 deadly sins, it's known as sloth.

So Evagrius wrote, “The demon of acedia—
also called the noonday demon—
is the one that causes the most serious trouble of all.”⁴

³ I heard this translation during a sermon preached by Dr. Fred Craddock at the Festival of Homiletics preaching conference, May, 2004, Washington, D.C. I am indebted to that sermon for some of the exegesis of this text.

⁴ “Fighting the Noonday Devil,” by R.R. Reno, in *The Best American Spiritual Writing, 2004*, edited by Philip Zaleski, New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2004. The article is taken from the publication *First Things*, August/September, 2003.

Evagrius wrote about it, because all the desert monks knew about it.

When it's noon in the desert, and there is no shade, and there are no shadows, and you've been fasting all night, and you face the heat of the day, and the body is weak, and the mind is lethargic...

It became hard for the monks to focus on their prayers.
It became impossible for the monks to keep reading Scripture.

The heat, the empty stomach...I just...don't...care.

But Evagrius wasn't simply talking about being too hungry to focus.
He was talking about a spiritual condition.

One church father described acedia as
“a sterility, dryness, barrenness of his soul
that makes the sweet honey of Psalm-singing seem tasteless...”⁵

Dante, on the fourth level of purgatory, said that “those afflicted by acedia are described as suffering...a slow love that cannot motivate and uplift, leaving the soul stagnant...”⁶

Acedia...the noonday demon.
I...don't...care.

Now that's all fine and good for the desert fathers of the 4th century.

But perhaps some of you are wondering what in the world all this has to do with us, here at Westminster, on the first Sunday in Lent?

Is our problem REALLY that we're plagued with acedia??
Surely not.
This is a busy church. An active church.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

Have you ever looked through the Harbinger?

It takes all sorts of formatting ingenuity just to squeeze in all the announcements about the various activities and ministries in which we are involved.

This is not the church of “I don’t care”...

Of course, maybe it depends on the thing that you’ve stopped caring about. Turn your attention, for a moment, to the Gospel text. Jesus, tempted by the devil in the wilderness.

Do you recall WHEN in Jesus’ life he faces these temptations? It’s right after his baptism! Immediately after God has told Jesus, “You are my Son, the Beloved...”

So what is it that Jesus is tempted to do in the wilderness? Turn stones to bread, yes. Rule the world, yes. Jump off the pinnacle of the temple...yes, yes. That’s what’s on the surface.

But what I think he’s really being tempted to do is **doubt the identity** that was given by God at his baptism.

Look at how the devil BEGINS the temptations. Not by saying, “Hey Jesus, I’ve got something really enticing for you to consider...”

The devil begins by saying, “If you are the Son of God...”
If you are...

Do you see what’s happening here? Jesus is being tempted to doubt what he’s already been given.

To say, “I don’t care that God has just told me who I am...I’ll be who I think I need to be.”

For example, to consider the scripture that says, “One does not live by bread alone,” and to say...ah, I don’t care. I know what’s best for the world. Let’s turn these stones to bread. Think of how many people I can feed!

That’s who I really need to be...

To consider the scripture that says, “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him,”—and to say, aw, heck. I don’t care. The people are expecting the Messiah to throw out the Romans...that’s what I’ll do. I’ll rule the world with political power! That’s who I really need to be...

The real temptation for Jesus in the wilderness is not pride or lust or greed or wrath...**it’s acedia.**

To look his God-given identity in the eye, to take the story that God has given him, and say...I...don’t...care.

Now this business of having a story, an identity—it’s not just Jesus that has received such a gift.

Our baptism gives us an identity too.

We enter this room every Sunday with a BAPTISMAL identity, right?
A story that has been given to us by God.
A story that says, “You are a beloved child of God.”

You are cherished by God, loved deeply by God...NOT because you’ve made yourself worthy of God’s love, but simply because God made you.

And God delights in you!

We are created by God, loved and adored and claimed by God.

That’s my story. That’s YOUR story.

But the temptation is to forget that story.

The temptation is to say, “I don’t care about that story.”

How do we do that?

We say to ourselves...I'm going to build a resume, and that resume will make me worthy.

“I'm going to forget the story that says my worth comes from God, and replace it with a story that says I'm worthy because I accomplish so much.

Or I'm worthy because I'm well-educated.

Or I'm worthy because I've invested my money well.

That's who I really am.

Or I'm worthy because of the car I drive.

Or the neighborhood I live in.

Or I'm worthy because I look after my aging parents while my siblings are nowhere to be found.

Or I'm worthy because I do all sorts of wonderful things for my church.

That's a story that's very tempting story to live by.

Have you ever done that?

Have you ever looked at the story you were given by God, and said,

“Eh, I don't care”???

The retired professor of preaching, Tom Long, once wrote about a high school play he was in. TWO THINGS stand out about the play in his memory.

One was the director.

She was new to the school, and she wanted to do a good job. But more than that, she wanted the students to really remember this experience. So she gave generously of herself to get things right:

She carefully coached the students,

living on fast food so she could work afternoons and nights,

staying late to help pitch in with the people designing the props...

She poured her heart and soul into making this a memorable moment in the students' lives.

The second thing he remembers is the opening night.

By opening night, the play was PERFECT.
The curtains opened, electricity was in the air,
and the first act went like a dream.

The play was a comedy, and the audience was laughing at all the right parts, the timing of the actors was down pat.

In the second act, however, one of the students forgot a line.
You could see it on his face.
He knew it was his turn, but he'd forgotten the words.

The rest of the cast knew it, and the director knew it, but there was this pregnant moment where the audience did NOT YET realize what was happening.

The director tried to mouth the line to her student, but suddenly—the kid spoke.

What he said WAS NOT a line in the play...but it WAS incredibly funny!
And the audience roared with laughter, and everyone backstage sighed with relief.

Now they could get on with the play.

The problem was, the actor who made up the line heard the laughter of the audience...and he LIKED it. He liked it A LOT.

So he made up another line. This too was funny—not as funny as the first line, but the audience chuckled.

So he made up another line, then another, then another—
and before anyone knew what had happened,
the play had spun out of control.

It was literally lost, there was no retrieving it now.

The director stood in back, just sobbing and sobbing.⁷

Why was the play lost?

Not because one actor forgot one line.

The play was lost because someone decided to be someone they were never supposed to be...

To not care about the identity that they had been given...

See, I believe the demon of acedia is alive and well in capable, dependable, faithful Christians like us. Not because our lives are so lethargic. But because our energy is so HIGH!

When we do a lot, and accomplish a lot,
the temptation is to start to write a new story for ourselves.

A story that says, "We are what we accomplish."

A story that says, "We are defined by our failure or by our success."

This is, I think, the shadow side of all the drive and hard work in this room.

Because you and I both know that success is fleeting.
That even when we've played life's game the right way,
something can happen—
a divorce, an illness, a death—
and suddenly, the rug is out from under our feet.

And we feel DEFINED by what happened to pull the rug from under our feet.

That's why we need each other.

That's why we need the church.

⁷ Thomas G. Long, "Facing Up To Temptation," in *Whispering the Lyrics: Sermons for Lent and Easter*, Lima, Ohio: CSS Publishing Company, 1995.

To remind us of our deepest identity, our baptismal identity.
To tell one another, every time we gather, who and whose we are.

Three years ago this spring, a friend of our family died, a member of the first congregation I served.

Jim was a wonderful man—
helped raise a beautiful family,
was extraordinarily smart,
successful at his work,
and was always volunteering at the church,
serving on the Session, a regular greeter on Sunday mornings...

During the time that I was there at that church, there was another man named Brian. Brian would sometimes come to worship with us. I don't know where Brian lived, I don't know if he had a home.

I do know that Brian was plagued by mental illness. I don't know what it was, but you could sometimes see him out on the church lawn talking to himself, or to some other imaginary person.

Getting really mad, running back and forth on the church lawn.

It startled people. It scared some people.
Some people in the church were wary of him, stayed away from Brian.

But not Jim.
Jim made a point of befriending him.

In fact, the story was told at Jim's funeral of how on one occasion, Jim decided to take Brian out to a fancy Dallas restaurant for lunch. Later, Jim said that may have been a mistake, because while Brian wasn't always in his right mind, he knew enough at that lunch to order the five most expensive dishes on the menu that day...

Well, after I left that church, Brian died unexpectedly.

Not many people came to Brian's funeral.
No family. Just a couple clergy.

And Jim. Jim was there too.

Now why was Jim there?
 Because he was a nice guy? Yes.
 Because he was Brian's friend? Yes.

But I think it was more than that.

Jim knew his story.
 That he was a beloved child of God.

And he knew Brian's story...that Brian was ALSO a beloved child of God,

And even though Brian could be a difficult at times, those difficulties were not his DEEPEST identity. Welcomed by God, cherished by God, prized by God—that was Brian's first identity.

Of course, it's not just true for Jim and Brian.
 That's OUR story too.

As the Psalmist puts it today:
 "You who live in the shelter of the Most High,
 who abide in the shadow of the Almighty..."

To see your life that way,
 and to see everyone else that way—
 not as rich or poor or Republican or Democrat
 or good or bad—

But to see everyone as God's beloved child FIRST,
 living in God's glorious shadow FIRST...

It could affect how you spend the rest of your day.
 It could affect how you spend the rest of your life.

Amen.