

Feb 4 2023

Let us pray.

O God of Love, O God of Truth;

Let us say strong things gently and gentle things strongly.

Let us speak the truth in love to all  
and love the truth that lives in each.

Let us hear the truth as we each need it and live that truth.

O God, we heed it through Jesus; Your Word & our Lord.

Amen.

### Seeing Shadows

*Psalm 23:4*

*“Ye though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for Thou art with me. Thy rod and thy staff, them comfort me...”*

*Hosea 14:7*

*“They shall thrive again beneath my shadow.*

*They shall flourish as a garden.*

*They shall blossom like the vine...”*

*John 3:1-7*

*“Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus...who came to see Jesus by night. ‘Rabbi, we know you are a teach of God, because no one can do signs like you being apart from God.’ But Jesus replied, ‘Truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.’ Nicodemus retorted, ‘How can anyone be born again who is old? Can anyone re-enter their mother’s womb?’ But Jesus continued, ‘No one can grasp God’s kingdom without being born of water and Spirit...Do not be surprised I say, ‘You must be born from above.’”*

News flash: “Punxsuatawney Phil”, - famous ground hog,  
DID NOT see his shadow.

So there will be 6 more weeks of whatever this season is  
masquerading as winter.

I actually DID see my shadow - for about 5 minutes!

But actually, Ground Hog Day has a long history.

Feb. 2<sup>nd</sup> falls exactly in the middle

between the winter & spring solstices.

On that day the Celts had a religious festival  
called, “Imbolc” to celebrate the beginning of spring.

Later, as Christianity piggy-backed on pagan holidays  
the ancient Catholic Church celebrated, “Candle-mas”  
a feast-day commemorating the naming of Jesus.

What that has to do with springtime I’m not sure.

But seeing shadows HAS MUCH to do with our faith.

Our faith relationship with God is DEFINED BY  
shadows.

*Hosea 14:7*

*“They shall thrive again beneath my shadow.*

*They shall flourish as a garden.*

*They shall blossom like the vine...”*

Shadows are the bible’s metaphor  
for God’s protection & care.

The story of Jonah ends like this:

*“And God appointed a bush and made it grow above Jonah,  
to provide shade to save him from discomfort.”*

Psalm 91 says,

*“They who dwell in the shelter of the Most High  
will abide in the shadow of the Almighty.”*

Psalm 36 says,

*“How precious is your loving-kindness, O God!  
May your children take refuge in the shadow of Thy wings.”*

And Psalm 121, the one I like to call,

“The Psalm of Vermont”, says,

*“I lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence my help comes.  
The Lord is My keeper. My Shade upon Thy right hand.”*

I could go on and on.

And all these bible passages make sense  
given the predominant weather in the Middle East -  
of mostly sunny days, hot & dangerous.

To NOT provide shelter

is to NOT be faithful to the God of the bible.

But shadows are celebrated for more than shelter.

They also describe boundaries of faithfulness.

As the Israelites wandered around the wilderness  
their house of worship was a tent - “the Tabernacle”.

And surrounding it,

God created an overshadowing cloud.

Modern theologians call it the “Cloud of the Un-knowing”, because human beings WEREN’T ALLOWED to know too much about God.

We aren’t allowed to be too clear about holy things.  
As Isaiah declared,

*“My thoughts are not you thoughts, saith the Lord.*

*Neither are my ways your ways.*

*As the heavens are higher than the earth,*

*my ways are higher than your ways...” (55:8)*

When Jesus climbed the Mountaintop of Transfiguration, with his buddies, Peter, James and John,

Peter wanted to make a shelter to celebrate Jesus.

But God sent an overshadowing cloud to obscure Jesus and Jesus told Peter “No”

He wanted God’s sheltering shadow

instead of anything clear-cut and man-made.

What does this say about The Church?

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At any rate, dear friends, the spiritual imperative is this: we don’t necessarily need to SEE any shadows.

We need to FEEL them. We need to RESPECT them.

We need to BELIEVE GOD IS IN THEM!

Unfortunately, many people don’t like shadows.

Actual shadows get people down - make them depressed.

And nearly all of us don't like shadow times of life.

You know what I mean:

- those times when we've lost people we loved,  
people whom we counted on.
- those times when we've lost our jobs  
and our financial futures are suddenly foggy.
- those times when we've lost our health  
and our bodies begin to betray us.
- those times, and there are plenty of them right now -  
when the politics of our world looks so dark  
& ominous we are tempted to give up hope.

Have you felt those kinds of shadow times?

Retirement is a shadow season.

Replacement of a minister is a shadow season.

Death is the **ULTIMATE** shadow season.

And, when shadows creep into our lives,  
our faith is greatly challenge.

When shadow times encroach,

many times we want to escape them

- escape them with drugs or alcohol,
- escape them with false messiahs in the form of  
politicians and pundits and leaders.
- escape them by craving quick & simple solutions.

And, in the midst of Life's unknown shadow times,  
instead of being more faithful  
we want MORE control, MORE precision,  
MORE clearly drawn divisions.

Religion - whose job it should be  
to RESPECT God's shadows, to ENCOURAGE faith -  
ironically, trespasses on shadows the most.  
I've heard many a preacher  
describe with absolute certainty about heaven.  
-who gets in and who does not.  
-where one waits and how to speed up that waiting.

I've heard preachers speak with absolute certainty  
about The End Times;  
-what will happen and when.  
-who will be saved and who will not.

I've heard preachers speak with absolute certainty  
on what the bible means.  
Who take things literally, especially from the O.T.  
when, in truth, the ancient language of the O.T.  
was written with no vowels, no capital letters,  
no commas, question marks or any other punctuation.

How can anyone know what the bible says FOR SURE?  
Interpreting scripture is at best a reverent guess

done with utter humility, honest confession,  
good study and filtered through a community of faith.

Shadows aren't black-and-white,  
like letters on a printed page;  
shadows are always gray!  
Shadows blur distinctions,  
they soften edges, they cloud precision.  
Shadows define the boundaries of our faithfulness.

That's why I like today's story  
of Jesus meeting with Nicodemus.  
It takes place at night, when faith-shadows loom.  
Poor Nicodemus, he is trapped in his Pharisee faith.  
The Pharisees liked to be noticed by the public.  
The Pharisees liked to show off their piety.  
The Pharisees were certain who was clean  
and who wasn't.  
Pharisees, like many modern Christians,  
prefer a midday sunshine faith.

But to Nicodemus, Jesus' gave night-time advice.  
"You must be born from above."  
(Not "born again" as so many Christians like to quote,  
but born FROM ABOVE.)

Nicodemus didn't get it. His literalism handicapped him.

His simplistic daylight faith simply wouldn't allow him to see the shadows of God's kingdom.

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In closing, in early April,  
nearly the entire state of Vermont will find itself  
in the path of an eclipse.

People from all over the world are already making  
reservations so they can see that looming shadow  
over everything.

Spiritually speaking, every single one of us  
will find ourselves covered by shadow times.  
And it is then that our FAITH needs to guide us best.

It takes me back to Barbara Brown Taylor's wonderful  
book, *Learning To Walk In The Dark*,  
She reminds us that it's only in the dark times of life  
that The Light of God is most appreciated.  
True "Enlightenment" only happens in the dark.

She urges all people of faith  
to trade in their love for a "solar faith"  
and instead, develop a "lunar faith".  
When one's spiritual eye-sight gets used to seeing  
in the dark, when light is dim and diffuse,  
and we cannot find ambient light.



Only then, do we realize,  
the Light of God must dwell WITHIN us.

Prayer of Pastoral Care Feb 04, 2024 Epiphany 5~Communion

The prophet Isaiah proclaims, *“Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.”* Isaiah 40:31

Let us pray for ourselves and the world, saying,

Loving God, **hear our prayer.**

God of the universe, Creator of the earth and of all that is, we pray for the oceans and mountains, inland water, and the air we breathe. Save and protect them, we pray. May each of us be partners in the stewardship and care of your creation.

Loving God, **hear our prayer.**

Since the beginning of our faith, we have looked to you to gather the outcasts, heal the brokenhearted, and bind up their wounds. We pray for the poor of the world, the sick and the lonely. And especially be with all who are refugees from their homes and native lands.

Loving God, **hear our prayer.**

O God, you would have us build up cities and communities as places of peace and safety. We pray for our country, for all countries of the world, and for our leaders. May we come to see that your purpose) is not served alone in the strength of military might, but in those who work and hope for peace in your steadfast love. We pray for the many current diplomatic efforts for a ceasefire in Gaza. Help your people of all faiths to be servants of your reconciliation amongst peoples and nations.

Loving God, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for all who are in pain and in need of care. Strengthen and encourage those who face suffering and loss.

Hear us, O God, as we lift before you those on this church's

immediate needs list. ...

O God, who heals the brokenhearted and binds up our wounds, guide us in your presence. In Jesus' name. Amen.

*THE HYMN is "On Eagle's Wings"*

*As the choir sings the verses, you are invited to join in the refrain, printed in the bulletin.*

OFFERING Let us give thanks to God as we give our tithes and offerings.

\*DOXOLOGY

\*PRAYER We sing to you, God, with thanksgiving, making melody to you with our praise. Use these gifts to spread and share your gospel to others in Jesus' name. Amen.

*OUR HYMN in preparation for COMMUNION is the first verse of Hymn #425 Let Us Break Bread Together*

