

Palisades Presbyterian Church
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Shadows on a Cave Wall
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We've talked a bit about shadows, during this Lenten Season. As the days get longer, we go from more darkness and fewer shadows, to more light – and shadows. The shadows are a sign; it would seem, to the light.

In some ways, the shadows seem to harmonize as part of the alternating symphonies of consciousness: seeking understanding from confusion, enlightenment and illumination from occlusion.

Yet, if it were not for the near-formlessness of the unseen – nothing could “emerge.” As all sounds stretches audibly from silence, so it is true that all light, always, is delivered from the dark that precedes it.

Some time ago, a professor of mine told our class that in the Bible – that light always follows darkness. I have yet to find instances where that is not true, and, in fact have come to the conclusion that such syncopation of darkness and light seems to be a primal reality in all of creation.

We see shadows first; light second. Or as Paul states in 1 Corinthians 13:12:

For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known. NRSV

Now and *then*. Actually, *then* and *now*, if we keep the parallel thought of emerging from...to where we are now.

In so many ways, this metronomic behavior of then and now, describes the way we move into understanding, light, and vision. It simultaneously also describes the way in which the Bible, including this morning's readings, were remembered and written. All writing is always about some past or future-imagined event, the perspective and accuracy influenced by the proximity to the event in the present or the distance of the expected outcome of the future.

It's the same sort of notion that validated a prophet *after* the event had transpired.

For example, some of us could accurately describe a conversation we had a few minutes ago or predict, with fair certainty, that later this morning there will be a coffee hour following worship. But the further into the past or the future we go, the less we are assured of really knowing if we are correct in our assumptions.

In biblical jargon, it's called the *ex post facto* influence. Looking at how things turned out and then writing the narrative in ways that harmonize, teach, instruct, and affirm what the author feels inspired to write. For example, when Israel (Jacob) laid his right hand on E'phraim the youngest son rather than the oldest (Manasseh) it signaled that E'phraim would be greater in stature than Manasseh. And, in fact, that turned out to be true. However, whether the hands were in fact laid on in this way – is unknown, but it explains how a younger brother could have been more successful than the oldest (a belief that went counter to the traditional beliefs of the times). So, it “must” have happened this way, otherwise, the tradition would have held, as it continues to hold.

Biblical commentary says it this way: “The chroniclers read history in the light of divine purpose which they believed was moving [them] there.”¹

In other words, the Bible, which is about how God moved through the times, was not restricted to well-known traditions if God chose not to follow them. So, when a first-born by some was surpassed by a younger sibling – it was not that the tradition was wrong, but that God had a purpose and did things differently.

Other instances: Cain was older than Abel, but Abel's sacrifice was preferred; Ishmael was Abraham's first-born son, but God said that it was in Isaac that Israel's seed would be born. Esau was the eldest of Isaac's two sons, but it was to Jacob that the promise was given.

The chroniclers of the Bible saw into the shadows of times past and emerged with a reality that satisfied their perception of what and how they arrived at where they were – at that time. It was about reality, in the light – but not quite all the way. It was also about closure, the human intellectual need for closure that stopped them at the fringe of the light – for to go too much further, produced more answers than questions.

It is this “light fringe” that triggered my memory about *The Allegory of the Cave* – also known as *Plato's Cave*, written somewhere around 400 BCE by the Greek philosopher.

In this allegory, Plato tells a tale through an interview between a person named Socrates (the actual Socrates was his teacher) and Glaucon (the name of Plato's older brother, and another of Socrates' affluent students).

Imaginee a cave in which people are chained in such a way that all they can see is the cave wall in front of them. Behind them is sort of a half-wall, a walkway. Behind that a huge fire. On the walkway are paraded different objects from the surface, outside the cave. All that the chained people can see are the shadows of

¹ Interpreter's Bible. P. 815d

the object projected onto the wall; all the sounds they can hear are the echoes of the sounds the objects make.

Over time, the shadows become the reality. They and their sounds are named. In fact, those chained create a game to see who can name the objects (the shadows) more quickly. Those that can do this more quickly are considered the more intelligent, powerful.

Then, one day, one of the group escapes. They turn for the first time, are momentarily stunned by the brightness of the fire, recover their vision and head for the opening, where the sun literally hurts their eyes.

After a while, the eyes accommodate to the sun, as well, and they see for the first time the origin of the shadows and much more.

With the incredible news, they eventually return to the cave to tell the others and lead them into the light. Upon re-entering the cave their eyes are lost in the darkness. The re-orientation takes longer. As the individual begins to tell his friends what he has seen, they do not believe him. They test him, challenging him to name the figures on the wall – the shadows.

Having been in the light, he stumbles, is unable to see things as he once did. His former friends ridicule him and his new information, writing him off as lost.

Aren't we so often in this same place? Having some new or helpful information that we just believe would help others, someone we love – get them well, on the right track, further ahead? And sometimes they listen. They take to heart what we offer. They enter into the painful, at first, light that reveals the truth. Sometimes, they just prefer what they know. While they talk desire, willingness to understand – they are not quite ready to take the actions. Do we stay in the cave with them, or leave into the truth and help prepare a way – if and when they decide to follow?

Jesus, obviously, was all about the invitations to follow, yet there is no record that he ever went out and physically dragged anyone to go with him. Some did, many eventually, and many did not. In this morning's readings, the sometimes confusing narrative is all about the following into the light – to see clearly what is obvious, to resist the arrogance of refusing to see what is true, in order to maintain the comfort of ill-formed perceptions.

In fairness, following Jesus, his teachings and his calls – is even more difficult than coming out of the cave. When the individual leaves the cave, he or she sees reality – which can be a pretty harsh awakening. They step into the light – but only to the fringe, really.

To truly enter the light, the kingdom of God that is at hand, means to enter into what you cannot see and believe. We really don't look directly into the sun. With the 4 milliwatts of sunlight such an action would produce, it would be painful and potentially damaging to the retina. So, in some ways, even in the brightest of sunlight, the source (the fire of Plato's cave) is still behind us.

When Jesus invites us to "see" – I think he is actually inviting us to use a different set of eyes. Entering into the light, really means to suspend all those notions we have about the past and the future and to be present in the light, in God – the best we are able.

It is something we avoid, I think, mostly because of mortality issues we all share. We don't too often talk about where we came from, where we were before we were here in this form, but we do think about (avoid and/or keep quiet about) what will be at the time we leave this form. Instead, we prefer, for the most part, to name the shadows, create tools based on such things to assess our performance and skills, somehow fending off the re-entry into the light as a future happening, perceiving it to be as far distant as we can.

Yet, this time of Lent and Easter – Resurrection, is a reflection of what Jesus calls us to do – what he did. Live in the day. Suspend thinking, at least a little, to just be present in the enormous light of the Eternal God – and be ok when we "see" nothing, for at best we can only now see the shadows.

Instead, celebrate with one another this moment and the life we have to share with others; others who have already emerged from the cave; or are newly finding their way. Enter the cave, as well, and then demonstrate the way to leave.

The spirit knows the light in a way we cannot understand. It is what moves us when others try to tell us that the world, the doctrine, the belief systems, and realities – are what we have come to recognize as shadows.

If you think of Calvary as being directly below the sun, as Jesus set his face on Jerusalem and moved in that direction, to the cross, the shadow he cast on the surface of the earth shortened, until it was no longer. He, and others we have loved and who have left this place, no longer have a need for shadows, for "they see clearly now."

We are people of the light, moving from the shadows to the Resurrection: that is: "another word for the impossibility of preventing God's creation from unfolding in the direction of abundant life [an light] for every last one of us." So says my friend Joe Gilmore.

So say we, as well. Let the shadows always be a sign unto the light and the embrace of God's unfolding creation we continue each day in the Shekinah.

Amen.