

“Showdown in the Shadowlands” // *Lent week 1: Show Us Your Shadow*
2020-03-01 // Joe Heikman // Wildwood Mennonite Church

Matthew 4:1-11 - adapted from *The Voice* translation

Narrator: The Spirit then led Jesus into the desert to be tempted by the Accuser, the devil. Jesus fasted for 40 days and 40 nights. After this fast, He was, as you can imagine, hungry. But He was also curiously stronger, when the Tempter showed up.

Devil: If You are the One sent from God, tell these stones to become bread.

Jesus: It is written, in the book of Deuteronomy, “Humanity does not live by bread alone. Rather, we live on every word that comes from the mouth of the Eternal One.”

Narrator: The point, of course, is not that Jesus couldn’t have turned these stones to bread. A little later in the story He can make food appear when He needs to. But Jesus doesn’t work miracles out of the blue, for his own benefit. He’s not in this world to manipulate things for his own comfort and fulfillment.

Next, the devil took Jesus to the holy city, Jerusalem, and had Jesus stand at the very highest point in the holy temple.

Devil: If You are the One sent from God, jump! And then we will see if You fulfill the Scripture that says, “YHWH will command the angels to watch over You, and they will break your fall in their hands, so that You will not crash, or fall, or even graze Your foot on a stone.”

Jesus: That is not the only thing Scripture says. It also says, “Do not put the Eternal One to the test.”

Narrator: Here again, Jesus resisted the temptation to use the power of God for his own benefit. If he had kicked off his ministry with a stunt like this, he would have been a viral sensation! Jesus Christ, Superstar! But that was not the kind of Messiah Jesus would be.

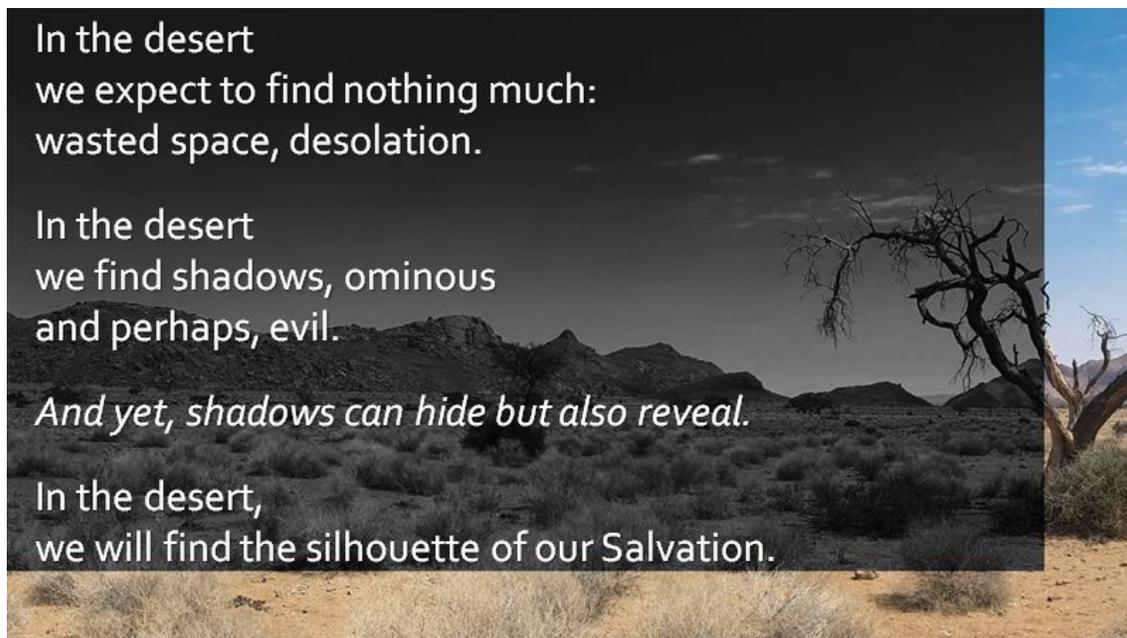
Undeterred, the devil subjected Jesus to a third test. They took Jesus to the top of a very high mountain, and showed Jesus all the kingdoms of the world in all their splendor and glory, their power and pomp.

Devil: If You bow down and worship me, I will give You all these kingdoms.

Jesus: Get away from me, you Satan, you anti-human! I will not serve you. I will instead follow Scripture, which tells us to “worship the Eternal One, our God, and serve God alone.”

Narrator: Once more, the Evil One revealed their agenda, the enticement of all humans to put themselves at the center of the story. But again, Jesus deflected, choosing not to be served but to serve, to use power not from above, but from underneath.

Their deception revealed, the devil left Jesus alone in the wilderness. And God’s angels, the embodiment of God’s presence, came and attended to him.



Good morning. My name is Joe, and my pronouns are he and him.

This story of Jesus confronting the devil in the wilderness feels like a scene from Star Wars. The epic showdown between the hero and the villain, the light side against the dark side in the desert. George Lucas didn't have too many original ideas!

Actually, the confrontation between Jesus and the devil reminds me of [the Dagobah cave scene](#) from *The Empire Strikes Back*. For the uninitiated, that's the scene where the young hero, Luke Skywalker, is sent into a mysterious cave by his mentor, Yoda. When he asks what's in the cave, Yoda cryptically replies "Only what you take with you."

So Luke goes into the cave, and meets the ultimate devil knock-off, Darth Vader. And they fight, in 70's slow-motion glory, and Luke cuts off Vader's head. But as the head rolls on the floor, Vader's face mask breaks open. And it's Luke's face inside the mask...

Turns out the fight was only some kind of vision, a lesson from Yoda. The point being, in Luke's fight against the dark side, the only enemy was the Dark Side within himself.

The true struggle wasn't outward, but the inward journey, learning to control the darkness within.

Classic.

And rather directly ripped off from Matthew chapter 4. In my humble opinion.

This is a story about power.

On the surface, it's drawing a direct contrast between the way of the devil and the way of Jesus.

The way of the devil says that if you have the power to turn stones into bread, why would you ever be hungry?

But the way of Jesus recognizes that there's more to life than comfort and satisfaction, that humans need not be ruled by our desires.

The way of the devil says that there is power in religious spectacle, that if you give the people what they want, they'll follow you anywhere.

The way of Jesus replies that true religion is not about attracting followers on your way to the top but about learning to *follow* and obey.

The way of the devil says that might makes right, that the ends justifies the means, that if only *I were in charge* then I really could do some good around here.

The way of Jesus rejects the path of power, denies the desire to be on top of the mountain, for there is a God and that's not me.

It's not an accident that the gospels begin Jesus' ministry with his clear denial of that kind of power. In the even more ancient story of the Hebrew people, they came out of their wilderness journey determined to establish their own kingdom, to build their own holy city, to win their own bread.

Not Jesus. Even as he retraces their steps, he's a new kind of Israel, an upside-down Messiah on a different path.

The first thing we learn about Jesus on this journey of Lent is what he is not.

If you'd like to pursue that further, I highly recommend the Mennonite classic, [*The Upside Down Kingdom* by Donald Kraybill](#). 40 years later, it still holds up.

This story also works on a more personal level.

Like Luke Skywalker in the cave, even though the scene is set up as a conflict between Jesus and the devil, the true struggle is within. The devil poses the questions, but the choice of what to do with them was all about what Jesus brought with him into the wilderness.

Are you familiar with the term, the "shadow self"? It has a long history, in psychology, through the work of Carl Jung, who called it the "shadow aspect" or the "id", the "unknown dark side of the personality," the blind spot of the ego. Philosopher Joseph Campbell popularized the shadow as one of his archetypes for mythology, a key part of the hero's journey. Which is how it is presented in Star Wars, the Lord of the Rings, Breaking Bad, and so many other stories.

And of course the idea of the conflict between Darkness and Light is as old as human history, so there are many, many different connections to be made with the shadow metaphor.

The term “shadow self” came to me particularly through the writings of Father Richard Rohr, who [talks about spirituality as “shadow work”](#) or sometimes “shadow boxing.”

He describes it like this. Each of us have a “True Self” , the center of all that is love, joy, peace, patience, self-control, etc within us. The Divine Image, the Spirit of God within me, I’d call it.

And each of us also have this “shadow self,” that seems to be the opposite of those things--our self-interest, our anger, our drives and desires, our ego, our instincts and primal urges. Most of the time, these things happen beyond our view, at the level of our “lizard brain” or habits and patterns that we choose to not see.

When we’re young, these two parts just kind of co-exist, they’re just part of who we are, for better and for worse.

Somewhere along the line as we grow up, we learn that these shadow parts are bad--our anger gets out of control and hurts people; we’re told that our physicality, our desires are shameful; we fail at stuff and our egos get hurt, etc.

And so we’re given this sense of shame around our shadow, that our shadow is weakness, it’s sinful, perhaps, it’s evil.

And so we learn to hide our shadow--no one must know!

Rohr says that most of us spend the first half of our lives crafting a persona, a mask, the identity that we project to others to keep them from finding out about our shadow self that we’re so ashamed of. And not just others--for most of us, our hope in the mask project is that we’ll *become* the image we’re trying to project, and so our masks hide our shadow even from ourselves.

Now, there’s no judgment around that. Creating a strong self-image and learning to control our impulses and passions is part of growing up. It’s not good to be vulnerable with everyone all the time, and there’s a lot to be said for the “fake it till you make it” approach to some things. Our masks are quite often useful and helpful.

But they can also cover up the harm that we do to others and to ourselves. As Rohr puts it, *“neither our persona nor our shadow is evil in itself; they just allow us to do evil and not know it.”*

For example, part of my shadow self is a deep discomfort with people who are different from me. I grew up in a very, very homogenous bubble. Small town, with very few non-white folks around. A very middle-class, exclusively heterosexual church (or so we thought). A Christian school with very strict doctrine and behavioral guidelines--people who didn't believe like me weren't welcome.

So I can count on one hand the number of non-white kids that I knew before I graduated and left town. I knew one guy with Down Syndrome, and nobody at all who didn't have English as their first language.

And I was part of much larger institutions and systems that gave me a very limited worldview very much centered on people like me.

So, part of my shadow self is this discomfort with people who are not like me, because for a very long time, I didn't know anything else, and so of course I thought that my way is the right way and everyone else is "the other."

Now, somewhere along the way, probably much later than I should have, I started to realize that that just wasn't true. I met some people that were outside that bubble, I learned a little bit about non-white history and religion, I heard a diversity of voices and stories, and--huh, they're actually *not* inferior to me. Which is a very good thing to realize!

But my instinct, a large part of it, was still the shadow reaction--fear, misunderstanding, and definitely discomfort.

So then I've got this thing where I know I shouldn't be uncomfortable, I shouldn't think those things... but I still am, I still do. I start to recognize that I've got more than a little racism there. A little homophobia. A whole wide heaping pile of privilege and ethnocentrism.

I know that, and I'm ashamed of the shadow. And so I started to build that mask. I learn to say the right words so that it will be clear that I'm not homophobic. I add some Beyonce and Kendrick Lamar to my playlists so that I can say that I'm learning from black culture. I choose to go to a church that worships in three languages and supports refugee sponsorship. Etc. etc.

Now, those kinds of things can be simply a persona. Those could be ways of convincing others and myself--look, I'm a good person, see all these things I'm doing! I'm not a racist, believe me!

If things stay at that level, then that's all the further it will go. That's still all about me, just my mask, which means that nothing is really changing.

And inevitably, it will catch up to me at some point and I'll be exposed. We're not nearly as good at hiding the shadow self as we'd like to think. (One definition of the shadow self is that it's the parts of our personality that we can't see but are obvious to everyone else.)

At the very least, I'll have to live with the shame of suspecting that deep down, I'm still a racist. And even if my mask is so successful that I remain convinced that I'm not, like Rohr says [in *Falling Upward*](#), that mask is really just about allowing me to do evil and not know it.

But on the other hand, if I accept my shadow, if I'm able to recognize that yes, I am a racist, then that's a place where I can begin to change.

That's where the shadow boxing can begin.

First and foremost, moving towards the shadow defuses the shame--in naming it, I'm able to recognize that there isn't blame there, my racism is part of this larger story that is about so much more than me, and so I don't need to be ashamed.

But I do have the capacity for change.

Stepping towards the shadow, naming it for what it is, it changes the nature of the persona, the mask I've built. Instead of the mask hiding my discomfort with difference, the mask is now part of a strategy to defuse that discomfort.

For example, when I got up here today, I introduced myself using my pronouns, he and him. If I'm trying to hide my shadow, then that expression is simply a way to make you think I'm such a woke person--look at me, I'm sooo comfortable with gender diversity!

But, if I'm operating from my shadow, I'm well aware that I'm uncomfortable with gender diversity. It's unfamiliar to me, still--and by calling attention to it, I might just mess it up and expose that discomfort to everyone.

BUT, I also know that the way to get more comfortable is to practice, and to trust that my willingness to go there in spite of my discomfort creates space for the others that I genuinely do care about. So the same behaviour could be part of the mask, or, if I embrace the shadow, it could be part of tearing down the mask.

That's the other thing that moving towards the shadow does--it reveals the true self at our core. Because the only way I can see the shadow is because there is also light. The only way I can recognize my discomfort with people who are different from me is because I genuinely have compassion towards them. In naming my racism for what it is and working to change it, that is me living out of my true self.

That's the lesson a lot of us need to learn--we've become very good at feeling the guilt and shame around our shadows, and so we hide from them.

But when we move towards them, whatever yours are, when allow yourself to *have* a shadow, when you accept your shadow, that's when you move into and operate out of your true self, the Spirit of God within you.

So, back to Jesus with his shadow self in the desert. That's the movement I see, the movement to acknowledge the temptation as part of his story.

As I said, these temptations are all about power--the power to provide food for the hungry, the power to transform the religious institution of the Temple, the power to create a new world order, the reign of God.

Jesus *wants* that kind of power, that's basically his mission statement. Later in his ministry, he actually *does* a version of all of those things--the feeding of the 5000, the theatrics at the Temple, the mountain transfiguration and claiming the title "King of the Jews."

He's not denying the temptation of power, he's not hiding from it. He's acknowledging it, and allowing that knowledge to guide his response to it.

It's a "Yes, and" response.

"You want to turn these stones into bread"

"Yes, I'm hungry, and I also know that bread isn't everything."

“You want to prove to everyone that you’re the Chosen One”

“Yes, and I’m going to do that by way of humility, not spectacle”

“You want to rule the world”

“Yes, and the greatest in the kingdom is the servant of all”

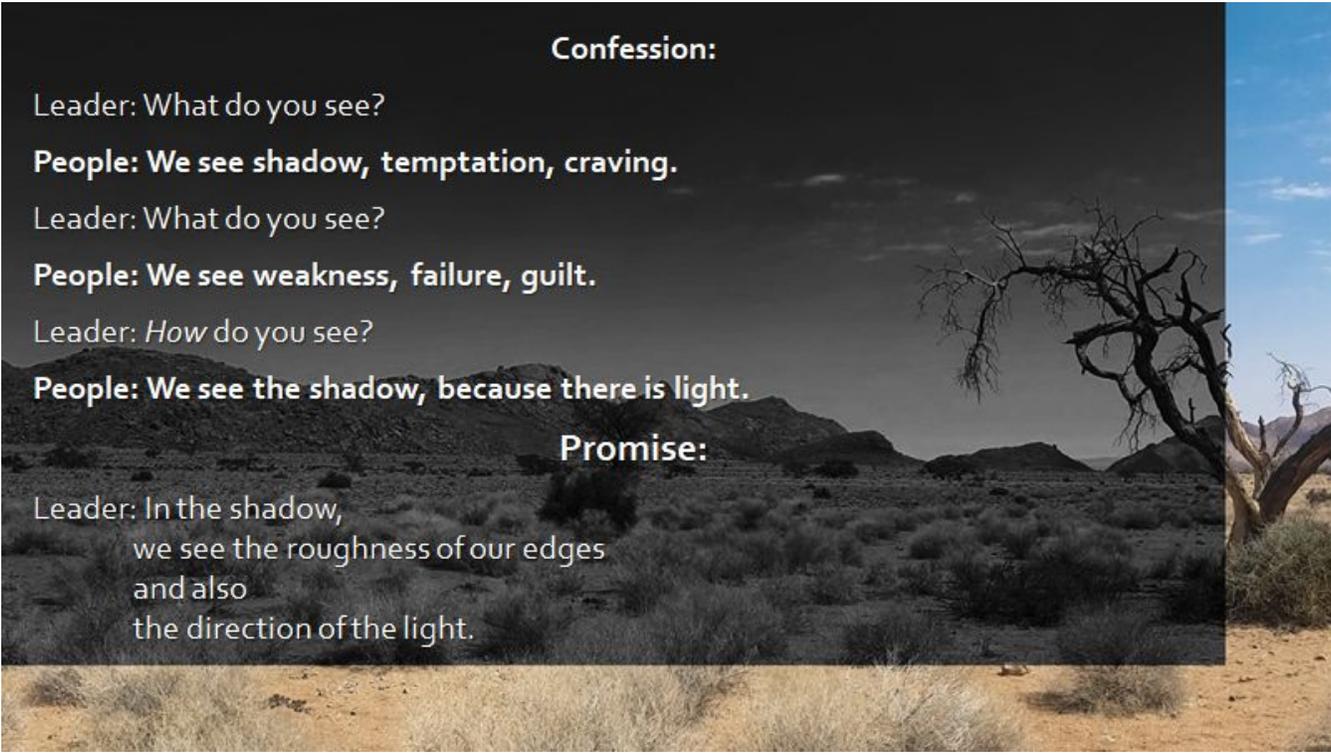
That’s what shadow work does--it names the nature of the struggle, and that allows a choice of what to do with it. Embracing the shadow creates space for us to choose our response to it.

So, welcome to Lent. This is a season of shadow. And yes, we will lament all that we struggle with, we will feel the weight of our guilt and the suffering of the world.

But we will also know that we are not alone in our journey, and that walking towards the shadow is also the way that we find the Divine Light.

As the Psalmist says, “even the darkness is not dark to you, God; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you.”

Amen. May it be.

A photograph of a desert landscape. In the foreground, there is a dirt path with some dry grass. In the middle ground, there are several gnarled, leafless trees and some low-lying desert shrubs. In the background, there are dark, rocky mountains under a dark, overcast sky. The overall mood is somber and reflective.

Confession:

Leader: What do you see?

People: We see shadow, temptation, craving.

Leader: What do you see?

People: We see weakness, failure, guilt.

Leader: *How* do you see?

People: We see the shadow, because there is light.

Promise:

Leader: In the shadow,
we see the roughness of our edges
and also
the direction of the light.