



THE UNITED CHURCH OF CANADA

CANADIAN MEMORIAL CHURCH  
& CENTRE FOR PEACE

Sermon Preached By Susan McCaslin

Psalm 91:1–2, 9–16

Luke 4:1–13

March 4, 2007

Second Sunday of Lent

## “Transforming the Shadow”

The other day I was considering how often I feel guilty for something or second-guess myself. For instance, an object goes missing in the house, and because I tend to be the one in my family to tidy and put things away, I immediately blame myself for throwing it out or misplacing it. I tell a friend she can't come over because I need some time alone in which to write, but beat up on myself for being inhospitable and anti-social. In the name of being helpful and to maintain a bit of control, I do things for my daughter that she can better do for herself; then feel guilty for having done them. If we actually enumerated our guilt-thoughts in a single day, I think most of us would be shocked. How crippling! In the world of Jungian psychology, these mostly unacknowledged sides of ourselves full of fear, desire for control, and self-loathing that we sometimes project on others is called “the shadow.” I won't bore you with what my shadow looks like, since my purpose in mentioning it is to explain how the following question suddenly popped into my mind when reading the passage from Luke: “What was Jesus' shadow?”

In the days when my theology was a bit more traditional, I would have thought such a query almost blasphemous. I considered Jesus fully human and fully divine; yet as the divine son of God, his struggle recorded in the archetypal temptation scene from Luke couldn't have really amounted to much. After all, wasn't he special from the “get go”? Perhaps he

worked these things out in heaven before he incarnated. In “The Grand Inquisitor,” Dostoevsky criticizes the way the Church presented Jesus as blithely floating through his tests a few inches above the ground. We might admire such a one, but how could we possibly identify with him? Nikos Kazantzakas in his novel *The Last Temptation of Christ*, challenges other-worldly portrayals of Jesus by depicting him as longing for an alternative existence even at the time of his crucifixion. It seems to me now that to remove the struggle from the story is to diminish Jesus. My favourite poet William Blake had it right when he spoke of the “Divine Humanity” in each person. Once when Blake attended a soiree, he was asked if he believed in the divinity of Jesus Christ. The interrogator was probably testing his orthodoxy. He answered, “He is the only God,” but then to the surprise of those assembled added, “and so am I and so are you” (Henry Crabb Robinson's *Reminiscences*, 1852). Most thought Blake not just theologically incorrect, but mad. I think, of course, he was simply ahead of his time in recognizing the sense in which we are all sons and daughters of the Holy One, and what Blake called “partakers of the divine nature.” Jesus also spoke of this mystery of at-one-ment when he said things like, “You are gods,” and “I and the Father are one (at-one).” So I will begin from the premise that what makes Jesus great is that he struggled greatly with his shadow, met it face to face, and transformed it, just as each of us must do in our own lives. Since God

does not likely set out to put anyone to the test, but is one with us in the whirlwinds of temptation, a truer rendering of the phrase from the Lord's Prayer, "Lead us not into temptation," might be, "Do not leave us in our temptations," or, "Be present with us in the process of our testings."

In Luke's narrative, Satan represents what Blake called the "Selfhood" or "Spectre," that part of human consciousness identified with the egoic or lower self when it attempts to appropriate to itself the whole. The question is whether the part will serve the whole, or try to coerce the whole into serving the part. Scholars think the story is not likely literal; yet it enacts a real interior process the historical Jesus must have worked through. Whether or not we take the story literally, the process of interior investigation that Jesus underwent must have taken a much longer time than forty days, forty being a symbolic number in the Hebrew First Testament for a period of testing. My suspicion is that Jesus as a young man was fairly confident and knew he had charisma, special healing abilities, and a unique mission related to his vision of God's kingdom as opposed to that of Caesar. Yet attending these qualities might have been a nagging fear that he was in it for himself, or that a part of him had the potential to become intoxicated with power. The Devil's voice is the one in all of us that says two contradictory things at the same time. The first is, "Who do you think you are, big shot?" And the other is, "Okay, you are exceptional. You can do this good and serve your needs for self-aggrandizement at the same time. Go ahead, turn the bread into stones; take up the leadership of a movement; consider yourself specially protected." The bottom line is that in all this you will place the ego or small self and its

needs first: "If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." The truth is exactly the reverse; if one puts the self or ego first, the world gained is not the kingdom of heaven, but a limited kingdom of one's own making that is sure to collapse. Happily, the story tells us that Jesus did his inner work with power and the potential for its abuse. On another occasion when speaking to Peter he says, "Get behind me, Satan," not, "Get out of here Satan." The egoic self is a construction, but still part of himself, so he embraces it rather than running from it. He does not reject it entirely, but does not allow it to lead or to determine his actions.

Strangely enough, if you look at Jesus' life in the Gospels, he goes on to perform in new contexts the apparently rejected miraculous acts Satan wants him to do here. After facing down his inner demons, he comes to use his power authentically. He doesn't shy away from being charismatic, lets the crowds follow him, acknowledges his role as teacher, prophet and even Messiah (in at least some of the scriptures), but continually refuses to use the power that flows through him for himself alone. Service becomes his signature. At the wedding in Cana he does not transform stones into bread, but water into wine, not for himself but for the celebration of the kingdom. In the story of the feeding of the multitudes, he multiplies substance not for himself, but to feed the crowds. And his healings, of course, are both manifestations of the power of God and acts of love and compassion.

When examining the implications of quantum physics, some scientists and theologians suggest that what we know as matter and what we call Spirit are one substance in various phases of

metamorphosis. Stones over time may indeed become bread, and bread stones; the molecules of our bodies may become parts of stars and vice versa. So it is not the act of transformation in itself that is problematic, but the desire to manipulate it in our own rather than cosmic timing, to use it for ourselves rather than the health and life of the whole. It is not power itself that needs to be renounced, but the inappropriate use of it. Furthermore, this principle of interconnectedness that Jesus so often highlights in his wisdom sayings suggests that everything affects everything else. If this is so, then it is wisest and best to serve the whole because you are a part within which the whole dwells. The true you is not simply the egoic identity: “In so far as you do it to one of the least of these, you do it to me.” In a sense, serving the larger good rather than the broken shadow is a paradigm for ecological wellness.

In the end, Jesus opens himself to God’s power, performs the miracles, walks as a divine child of Wisdom; yet because he has faced his shadow and set it behind him, he becomes the Christ. It seems to me that if every leader, head of state, college president, teacher, and each of us with our bits of power, however great or small, embarked on this same inner work and made up our minds to offer up each moment as much as possible in service of the whole, the world might be transformed.

And if we can be transformed as individuals, perhaps our nations and institutions will follow suit. For nations as well as individuals have to struggle with their shadows. Since I was born in the United States, I will use it as an example. Much has been made of the demise of the American dream of equality, justice,

democracy and its early contamination through the institution of slavery, its “trickle down” economics, and a form of imperialism driven by the ideology of “Manifest Destiny” which has now morphed into “the New American Century.” The misconception that self interest yields public interest ends in the kind of thinking that assumes “What’s good for GM is good for America,” and “What’s good for America is good for Iraq.” Today, leaders convince themselves that they are bringing democracy to the world when, in fact, they bring chaos, anarchy and violence. Perhaps if the country had dealt with its shadow in its early decades, as did its artists, Melville, Hawthorne and Poe, it would be less inclined to rush blindly into other cultures without respecting their diverse history and traditions. In the recent film *All the King’s Men*, based on the American novel by Robert Penn Warren, the narrator Jack intertwines his life and identity with that of the up and coming governor of Louisiana, who ultimately falls to destruction like a classical Greek or Shakespearean tragic hero because of his lack of self-awareness and hunger for power—his failure to come to terms with his shadow. In fact, no character in the novel is immune from corruption, possibly because none has done the work of getting to know the more expansive self.

In the temptation story, after Jesus enters the wilderness or wild places of his own psyche, we see the emergence of a person who is continually presented with situations where he could use his personal power to his advantage, but who consistently opts for service, humility and non-violence. He taught of a mysterious kingdom within that would slowly emerge in the outer world if first nurtured and birthed in the heart—a kingdom of peace and love

in which no one stands higher than another and all are servants. He rides into Jerusalem in fulfillment of scripture, but chooses a lowly donkey on which to ride. He speaks as one who has had direct experience of the Holy One, and reveals God as a unifying power of unconditional love, compassion and mercy that his disciples may enact by washing each other's feet. He never reneges on the power that flows through him, especially when asserting it against the corruption of worldly systems, though doing so results inevitably in his crucifixion. Jesus continued to struggle from moment to moment with the issues raised in this archetypal event of the temptation, but the overall shape of his life and teachings shows he offered up everything to a higher good. He was able to integrate his shadow because his concept and experience of God was of a love so powerful it could accept him, shadow and all. Therefore, he was not crippled by his doubts and fears, but able to open himself to the powers of the universe that fulfill individual potential. It is through the transformation of his shadow that he set the pattern for a mode of living free from anxiety, guilt and fear. May it be so for each one of us.