

**NOTE:**

Poem referred to in sermon is at end of sermon.

# ILLUMINATING THE SHADOW

Scriptures: Deuteronomy 18:15-20; Mark 1:21-28

FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

Sunday 28 January 2018

by Norm SD Esdon

In Deuteronomy 18:20 God tells Moses:

*“... any prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, or who presumes to speak in my name a word that I have not commanded the prophet to speak—that prophet shall die.”*

Have you ever thought how scary it is for preachers to stand in front of you every Sunday and dare to interpret the Word of God? We preachers have! We try not to dwell on it, though – not to look for some hidden trapdoor beneath our feet!

Because, if we DO dwell on it – to use Hamlet’s last words – “The rest is silence.”

Then again, if you can’t feel for the preacher, Deuteronomy warns that maybe you should feel for yourselves, too. The verse before this one says –

*Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable.*

So this isn’t just about preacher-prophets – or BIBLICAL prophets. It’s about EACH of US. There are times in daily life when EACH of us will be called to be a prophet – to speak up for God’s self-sharing way of life. As the Pope said about fake news last week, “None of us can feel exempted from the duty of countering these falsehoods.”<sup>1</sup> We’re BOTH in this scary prophet-business – TOGETHER.

By the way, biblical prophesying is not “future predicting” – being “soothsayers or diviners.” The verse just before today’s reading says

*Although [other] nations ... DO give heed to soothsayers and diviners, as for you, ... God does not permit YOU to do so.*

Biblical prophets are not future-predictors. They’re called **to warn about the future consequences of continuing any present action that goes against God’s way of self-sharing love** – “Keep doing THAT – and THIS is what’ll happen.”

Also, biblical Israelites believed they couldn’t encounter God directly and live.

*If I hear the voice of ... God any more ... I will die.*

Whether or not they would actually die (And who would want to test THAT?) they knew they couldn’t handle direct communication with God. They needed an intermediary – someone to interpret – to illuminate – what God was saying so they could understand how to put that into action in their own life and time. They needed A PROPHET.

Being a prophet was not a popular calling – still isn’t. Speaking truth to power is scary – especially if that power has no use for truth. Saying out loud “The emperor has no clothes” can open a trapdoor beneath your feet. Prophets are called as messengers for the Word of God. And when their hearers don’t like the message – well, you know what happens to the unpopular messenger!

If the prophet doesn’t interpret God’s message faithfully, God will get them. If they DO, then their hearers might! No wonder so many who were called either refused at first – or ran away. The call to prophesy is a heavy responsibility.

A symbolic reminder of this for preacher-prophets used to be the elevated pulpit. The trend today, though, is to put the preacher-prophet on the same level as the congregation – as a symbol of equality. Congregations came to see it as the preacher being “six feet above contradiction” – or the preacher “being better than everyone else.” (Could it be, too, that the congregation had too low an opinion of itself?)

But maybe there was some WISDOM in elevating the pulpit – maybe even putting it half-way up the wall, as you can still see it in Old Hay Bay Church. Such a high pulpit could be a sober reminder TO THE PREACHER-PROPHET – as they mounted those many steps to the pulpit – that this prophesying in God’s name is serious business. If you get it wrong ... and you fall from grace at THIS height ... !!

But there’s another more down-to-earth scary aspect of prophesying – whether the prophet be clergy or laity. Even if you or I have the message right, and even if it gets lots of “likes”, a shadow of misunderstanding can fall between speaking and hearing. Daily life is full of examples. The poem “Falls the Shadow” we just read explores this.

I knew last fall that the lectionary passage for today would be this Deuteronomy prophets one. As I thought about the shadow of misunderstanding that prophets often cope with I recalled the quote from T.S. Eliot’s poem “The Hollow Men”:

*Between the idea / And the reality... / Falls the shadow*

With Deuteronomy’s prophets in mind, I reworked Eliot’s image to this:

*between the speaking / and the hearing / falls the shadow /  
of mutual misunderstanding*

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Some misunderstandings can be funny. When I was a kid, misunderstanding one line in a carol had me thinking I could detect the presence of angels by the smell of cloves. The carol? “It came upon the midnight clear.” The line?

*“Still through the cloven skies they come ...”!*

Between the singing and the hearing falls the shadow of misunderstanding.

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Misunderstanding happens a lot today with emails, texting – and tweets. And these could have serious fallout. Here’s an example of misunderstanding between tweeter-er and tweeter-ee.

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Suppose the US – or North Korean – President tweeted this:

**“I’m only considering having the missiles readied.”**

*Does he mean what he’s **actually** saying — that he’s only **considering** having the missiles readied as opposed to actually **ordering** them to be readied? Or, does he mean he’s considering having the missiles **only readied** as opposed to **being fired**?      *Language matters.**

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Here's a personal example of a misunderstanding between speaker and hearer. This happened when I came out privately to a couple I had gotten close to in one of my congregations. (Call them Jane & John.)

*They had invited me for dinner. From things they'd said before, I had a feeling they'd likely be supportive. So I decided to risk confiding in them.*

*After I did, John said, "No problem. We've always been very tolerant."*

*I knew they meant well, but I was uncomfortable with their choice of words. I had to decide: 'Do I just let this pass, and possibly let it fester between us? Or, do I risk offending them by having them think their comment had offended me?'*

*I decided to be open. So I said, "That's good to hear. But, to be honest? It would be nice to be more than just 'tolerated.'"*

*Both their faces fell. But thank heaven they had the grace to be open with me, too.*

*Jane explained, "We've always thought of being tolerant as a good thing. But when you said, 'tolerated,' suddenly it didn't sound so good. You're right. Who wants to be just 'tolerated?'"*

*After that dinner our friendship deepened, and this allowed me to REALLY be there for them a few years later when John died suddenly of cancer. Words matter.*

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Between the speaking and the hearing falls the shadow of misunderstanding. And this shadow can be very DESTRUCTIVE —

*we think we say what we mean  
they think we mean what we say  
out of our miscommunication  
out of their misinterpretation  
falls the shadow  
where quarrels and wars are born*

Daily life gives us lots of examples:

<i>between the Donald-Trumps</i>	<i>majority and minority</i>
<i>and the Kim-Jong-Uns — between</i>	<i>male and female</i>
<i>tweeter-er and tweeter-ee</i>	<i>adult and teen</i>
<i>party-blue and party-red</i>	<i>preacher and congregation</i>
<i>Israeli and Palestinian</i>	<i>church-one and church-two</i>
<i>Christian and Muslim</i>	<i>falls the shadow</i>
	<i>of mutual misunderstanding</i>

But the shadow doesn't HAVE to have the last word.

***Every shadow falls  
to illumination***

– to a prophet’s FAITHFULLY interpreting what was said – to illuminate this shadow of misunderstanding that falls between speaking and hearing.

For us Christians, the key word here is FAITHFULLY interpreting – faithful to the ways of God. And we have as our prophet-models both Moses and Jesus –

<i>the shadow between God and the Israelites falls to Prophet Moses’ illuminating — his faithfully interpreting commandments of God to foster understanding</i>	<i>the shadow between God and humanity falls to Prophet Jesus’ illuminating — his faithfully interpreting God’s way of self-sharing love in down-to-earth-human terms to foster understanding</i>
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As limited human beings, neither hearer nor speaker can directly know – let alone understand – the “Cosmic Mind” of God. The Cosmos is an infinitely big place, spanning an infinitely long time, containing infinitely much dark matter-and-energy – an infinite amount of shadow. Like the ancient Israelites, WE need a prophet-illuminator, too.

So, as Christians we look to Prophet Jesus. And just as his people recognized that his was (as Mark puts it) “a new teaching – with authority,” we look to Prophet Jesus as OUR authority – our authority to interpret God’s way of self-sharing love in down-to-earth-human terms we CAN understand – terms that foster understanding in our world of misunderstanding.

In any misunderstanding between two sides, even more important than who is right, is how both sides go about resolving that misunderstanding – illuminating that shadow; how we – both speaker and hearer – LISTEN TO and UNDERSTAND each other, how we carry out our prophetic calling as Christians.

<i>between speaking and hearing is a shadow that needs to fall to OUR prophetic illuminating —</i>	<i>OUR faithfully interpreting the way of self-sharing love through our daily living to foster understanding.</i>	AMEN.
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<sup>1</sup> Pope’s Message for World Communications Day, 24 January 2018, [https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/communications/documents/papa-francesco\\_20180124\\_messaggio-comunicazioni-sociali.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/communications/documents/papa-francesco_20180124_messaggio-comunicazioni-sociali.html)

## ***Falls the Shadow***

*by Norm Esdon, 2017-12-30*

***Between the idea/And the reality .../Falls the Shadow***

*– from “The Hollow Men” by T.S. Eliot –*

*we think we say what we mean  
they think we mean what we say  
out of our miscommunication  
out of their misinterpretation  
falls the shadow  
where quarrels and wars are born*

*between the speaking  
and the hearing  
falls the shadow  
of mutual misunderstanding*

*between the Donald-Trumps  
and the Kim-Jong-Uns – between  
tweet-er and tweet-ee  
party-blue and party-red  
Israeli and Palestinian  
Christian and Muslim  
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falls the shadow  
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*but every shadow falls  
to illumination*

*the shadow between  
God and the Israelites falls  
to Prophet Moses’ illuminating –  
his faithfully interpreting  
commandments of God  
to foster understanding*

*the shadow between  
God and humanity falls  
to Prophet Jesus’ illuminating –  
his faithfully interpreting  
God’s way of self-sharing love  
in down-to-earth-human terms  
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*between speaking and hearing  
is a shadow that needs to fall  
to our prophetic illuminating –  
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