

*“Tugging God’s Ear”*

*Psalm 80*

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I’m thinking a lot about faces these days—two hundred fifty some fresh, new faces with names and souls I’m blessed to get to know. I’m eager for this, but also a little of anxious. I’m told only 500 name tags were ordered for Sunday mornings, which means I’ve got about a month to match name and face! I think I’ll need some patience with this!

The name with the face, the face of the name. Of the Almighty. Of the Lord. The psalmist prays from a face-yearning heart. “Restore us, Lord God Almighty; make your face shine on us, that we may be saved.” It’s a common thing in the Scriptures, this anthropomorphizing of God—to speak of God in human terms, as in God’s right hand, the strength of God’s arm, a blast from God’s nostrils. But to speak of God’s face—there’s peculiar power and puzzle in asking for the face.

A face is a presence, a deeply personal, tangible thing. Even though the microphone would still do its job, I think people would take umbrage if I preached with my back to them. The face says, I’m really here, right here with you.

Over the years Christians have thought differently about renderings of the face of God. We Presbyterians, of course, tend to shun depictions of the divine, while Orthodox sisters and brothers welcome icons that give human likeness to Father, Son and Spirit. They say these images make more palpable God’s presence among us to save.

“Make your face shine, O God, that we may be saved.” Salvation as from a face. It’s not the mighty arm, the victorious right hand, the wrathful blast from the nostrils for which the psalmist yearns. It’s the visage—if you’ll show us your glorious mug, Lord God, then we’ll know you haven’t turned your back on us.

There’s a desperation about this psalm, like a hospice patient holding on because there’s just one more face to be seen and then there can be peace. Or could the face the psalmist prays for be more like mom or dad cradling their newborn and being swallowed by infant eyes that lock on faces as though they could be nourished just by a look? Or perhaps it’s like the longing for presence felt by a soldier and family as Thanksgiving and Christmas roll around and video chats across the miles just aren’t the same as cheeks pressing, light glinting off teeth as smiles are exchanged in fleshy, real time. Make your face shine, Lord God, give us your countenance. Let us you know you are here to save us.

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Even with its cozy, gradually-increasing light, Advent is a season tinged with dissatisfaction. In Advent the church longs for God’s coming among us to bring the fullness of salvation. Advent points to creation’s yearning for a wholeness that is ever

beyond its making or possessing. Psalm 80 is a traditional Advent psalm. John Calvin called this psalm “a sorrowful prayer.” It’s got heaps full of trouble.

“What—are you angry, God?” the psalmist prays. “Why do you feed us a diet of tears, make us drink down big buckets of salty tears?”

“People laugh at us, God, and we’re pinning their scorn squarely on you.”

It comes from one of Israel’s darkest times when, in the 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C., Assyria tore through the land of Ephraim, Benjamin and Manassah, razing and pillaging and taking captive the people of God’s promise. Psalm 80 rises from days when it seemed God had turned on heel and walked away from the people God had called chosen. If God’s shining face had been Israel’s light their conquering had brought on the sense of darkness that comes with a total eclipse.

Advent can be jarring and dusky. It shakes us, as does Jesus in Mark 13, telling of days of darkened sun, lights-out moon, stars falling from heaven, as though the world is descending further and further into darkness.

I’ve had people tell me that the time between Thanksgiving and Christmas can be one of the gloomiest times of the year—weeks when grief and loneliness shouts through a megaphone. Psalm 80 says, “Amen, brother. Amen, sister. Tell me all about it.” Tell me about how much you long to see a face that isn’t present to you anymore. Tell me about the life repair you’re still waiting to know. Tell me about your search for a reason to hope that all will be well someday. Tell me your dark spaces—those places where you need a shining face.

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I’ve learned that it gets dark at night out here. It’ll take a while to get used to this. I’ve grown accustomed to more streetlights and life closer to the city’s glow. The first time I drove at night on Wilson-Mills I flipped on the brights! One of Heather’s friends came over from the West Side last week. When she crossed the county line she got off her phone, “It’s really dark out here,” she said. “I gotta go so I can focus on the road.”

Darkness is disconcerting. It’s not a color or shade, but an absence, the nonexistence of light. Still, we have a strange need for spaces where light doesn’t shine. Some consider it torture to subject a person to bright light for days on end. And there are times when life can only burgeon in the dark. Ask an expectant mother if she wants her baby to come early and she will say no, the child needs more time in the darkness of the womb.

I suppose that’s what Mary would have said about the child growing within her, that seed of salvation forming lungs and kidneys and developing a face. When the face of God truly came and *lived* among us, it began in space empty of light. And even when he was born Jesus arrived in the dead of night, some distance away from the radiant singing heavenly host. How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is given, this face of God, this presence of God, this nightlight piercing our gloom.

To use John's words, "The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it." Part of what this means is that God doesn't just preside over the light, where life seems good and fit to display and we're glad have it just like that. God presides over the darkness too. God is present to our hidden spaces and secret pains. God presides over the hurts we are afraid show; God rules over the shadows we can't seem to get ourselves pulled out of.

According to Paul in Galatians, our lives are a womb of sorts, space where Christ is being formed in us. I suppose there are a number of ways one could think on this. In Advent, as our imagination is seized by Jesus' impending stable birth, it's fitting to think about salvation being formed in us as Jesus was formed in Mary. There is a face in that darkness, a personal presence, a kicking, burgeoning life. Yet it's a hidden kind of shining. There's waiting involved, maybe more than we'd want, before the actual glow is seen. But but sometimes you can't hurry new life. Sometimes walking in faith means patient trust that God is shining in our lives in ways we can't see, and confidence that one day, the face will become more apparent and shine in ways we actually can behold.

"Let your face shine, O God." Let your face shine and then we will be saved. It's an urgent prayer, a patient prayer, a prayer that has some pang to it, like the ache you feel at the thought of a visage you'd give anything just to see. Most days we might get just glimpse of the face breaking in where it's dark. Advent keeps us walking, looking forward, toward the day of brighter light when we will see, as Paul says, "face to face."

Or as in the book of Revelation, Advent keeps us gazing toward the day when Jesus' face, his mere presence will be the light of all creation. There will be no need for sun or moon to render their light for the Lamb, the face of the Lord, will be the illumine all there is. There are days when having faith in God and hope in the future might be less about being brave and fending off life's trouble and more about catching a shaft of this face glowing from the future. Or by eyes of faith, perceiving Christ's face in the womb of our souls.

Psalm 80—it's a tugging on the ear of Christ. Shine on us, Jesus! Shine from your throne in heaven, shine from your throne in our heart. For then, even where it's dark, we may be saved. Amen.

*This sermon was delivered at Christ Presbyterian Church, Chesterland, OH.*