

SERMON: “Let Your Face Shine That We May Be Saved”

July 5, 2009

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION: Your word, O Lord, is a lamp unto our feet and a light upon our pathways. Illumine us by your Word and Spirit, that we may live in the light of your grace and truth, seen most clearly in the face of Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, the Light that shines in every darkness. Amen.

Old Testament Lesson: Psalm 80

New Testament Lesson: 2 Cor. 4:5-12

Behind the words of our psalm for this morning, Psalm 80, lies some unnamed crisis in the life of the nation of Israel. Scholars disagree as to what the crisis may have been. Some believe that the psalm may have been written during the final years before the northern Kingdom of Israel was conquered by the Assyrians in the 8th century BC, or sometime after the conquest of Israel. We are not told in the psalm itself what crisis is in view. That broadens our understanding and use of the psalm. James Mays says, “Whatever the original historical setting, the psalm in its continued use belong to the repertoire of the afflicted people of God on their way through the troubles of history.” Thus it belongs to us today. The fact that no specific calamity is named in the psalm invites us to fill in the blank with whatever crises we face as a nation, as a church, as people of faith, on our way “through the troubles of history.”

The psalm opens with a series of strong imperatives addressed to God and a haunting question. “**Give ear**, O Shepherd of Israel... **Shine forth** before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh. **Stir up** your might, and **come** to save us!” The psalmist calls God to listen--to hear and heed his people’s cries and prayers! Wake up, O God! Listen to us! “Get out of bed,” paraphrases Eugene Peterson, “you’ve slept long enough! Come on the run before it’s too late.” Then comes a refrain repeated three times with slight variations in the psalm, “**Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved.**”

Whatever the particular crisis in history may have elicited the psalm to begin with, the deeper crisis in the psalm is that of faith itself. Where is God in the midst of the crises that befall us? That is a question that runs throughout the psalms, as indeed it runs throughout the life of faith. As we have asked before, Where is God when we need God the most? Why do our prayers seem to go unanswered? Does God not hear? Does God not care? Is God unable or unwilling to come to deliver us when we cry out to God?

In almost the same language as that of Psalm 80, the author of Psalm 44 pleads, **Wake up, Lord! Why are you asleep? Rouse yourself! Do not reject us forever! Why do you hide your face? Why do you forget our affliction and oppression?... Rise up, come to our help! Deliver us for the sake of your steadfast love!**” That is a theme that runs throughout the psalms, as indeed it runs throughout scripture.

The psalms of Israel make it clear that the presence of God in our lives and in our world is not obvious, like a billboard along the highway of life. Neither do we have God on a leash to do our bidding as we desire. God is far greater and more mysterious than that. The Presbyterian *Declaration of Faith* puts it well when it affirms that

God is greater than our understanding. God’s reality far exceeds all our words can say. The Lord’s requirements are not always what we think is best. The Lord’s care is not always what we want. God comes to us on his own terms and is able to do far more than we ask or think.¹

¹ *A Declaration of Faith*, Ch. 1 lines 7-13, PCUS, 1977.

That is clearly the case in Psalm 80. It seems to the community of faith that God has hidden his face from them. God has turned a deaf ear to their prayers and cries. So the psalmist laments, **“O Lord of hosts, how long will be angry with your people’s prayers? You have fed them the bread of tears and given them tears to drink in full measure.”**

Then three times in the psalm, with increasing urgency, the people of God respond, **“Restore us, O God; let your face shine that we may be saved.”**
“Restore us, O God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved.”
“Restore us, O Lord God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved.”

Those words are a liturgical refrain as the psalm was used in the worship of Israel. The setting of the psalm is the **corporate worship** of the people of God. That may seem fairly obvious, but it has something very important to say to us about who God is and how we worship God “in spirit and truth.”

It is in worship itself that deep questions are raised about God and God’s involvement in human life, and it is in worship itself that the People of God beg, plead, even demand, that God be there for them as he has promised. **“Listen, O God...shine forth...stir up your might...restore us,” ...lest we perish!**

The psalmist rehearses the “mighty acts of God,” who “brought a vine out of Egypt, who drove out the nations and planted it.” Yet now it seems that the same God, who led Israel out of slavery in Egypt, has allowed other nations to “tear down its walls,” and endanger, if not destroy, the people whom God had planted in the land of Promise. **“Turn again, O God of hosts, look down from heaven and see; have regard for this vine, the stock that your right hand planted.”**

“Turn again, O God...” Turn again your face to us. Turn us again our faces to you. “Bring us back, Lord God Almighty. Show us your mercy, and we will be saved.” The psalmist knows that there is no hope, there is no life for the People of God, unless God continually turns toward them with divine favor. **“Let your face shine...that we may be saved.”** “Israel’s hope and consolation” lies with God alone. And so does ours.

Interestingly enough Psalm 80 is set in the common lectionary of the church as the psalm reading for the first Sunday in Advent. The ancient cry of the psalmist, “Restore us, O Lord God of hosts, let your face shine, that we may be saved,” finds echo in the hymn we often sing during the first weeks of Advent.

“Come, thou long-expected Jesus, Born to set thy people free;
From our fears and sins release us, Let us find our rest in Thee.
Israel’s strength and consolation, Hope of all the earth Thou art;
Dear desire of every nation, Joy of every longing heart.”²

It is appropriate to use the psalm during Advent. Listen again to how the psalm moves to its conclusion. **“Let your hand be upon the one at your right hand, the one whom you made strong for yourself.”** For the psalmist the one at God’s right hand was most likely Israel. But in time that hope came to be focused on the coming of the Messiah--the one to whom God would declare in the words of Psalm 110, **“Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool.”** That is the most often quoted verse from the Psalms in the New Testament, always with reference to Messiah Jesus. “Sit at my right hand ...”

² “Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus,” Charles Wesley, 1744, No’s 1 and 2, *Presbyterian Hymnal*

The desperation of the psalmist, and that of the people of God who used his words in worship “on their way through the troubles of history,” lean forward toward the coming of the One who sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. On our own journey “through the troubles of history,” we, too, are invited to lift to God, not only our prayers of praise and thanksgiving, as we have done over the past several Sundays, but also to bring before God our most heartfelt concerns, our fears and despair, our concerns and complaints, as well as our faith.

The psalms of Israel invite us to radical honesty with ourselves and with God. There are no plastic smiles on the faces of the psalmists. They do not pretend that all is well, when clearly it is not. They name the struggles of faith for what they are. And they invite us to share their struggles, as together we seek to come to grips with the deepest issues of faith in a fallen world where the face of God often seems hidden by the events that shake the foundations of our lives, and most of all hidden by our sins. The great gift of the psalms to all people of faith is an invitation to a radical faith in God in the midst of even that which makes us wonder whether God the Shepherd, the word in Hebrew is literally, God the *Feeder*, were feeding his people, not Manna from heaven, but in the words of the psalmist, “the bread of tears and giving them tears to drink in full measure.”

Over against all the crises of that shake the foundations of faith and life, the psalmist pleads,

“Let your hand be upon the one at your right hand, the one whom you made strong for yourself. Then we will never turn back from you; give us life, and we will call upon your name.”

The words of the psalmist echo down through the centuries, until at the turning point of the ages, the one at God's right hand from the beginning of creation would indeed come to give us life in all its fullness. He would not only hear his people's prayers, he would ceaseless pray for us all. He would not feed us with the "bread of tears," but the bread of life, HIS life, given for us, that we may have life in his name. Instead of tears to drink in full measure, but would offer us the cup of the new covenant, sealed in his blood, the cup of salvation, poured out in full measure for us all. And in him God would indeed "shine forth" in divine glory, though not in the way we might have expected. For the glory of God would "shine forth" from a manger in Bethlehem when the hosts of heaven sang "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, good will to all." And it would shine forth on a mountaintop as Jesus "was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun and his garments became white as light," ...and on a godforsaken cross in a glory hidden in the deep darkness of Golgotha, and at an empty tomb at the dawn of the new creation.

The Apostle Paul sums it up this way. **"It is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' who has shown in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ."** In him God turns his face to us, never to turn it away. It is a face in metaphor lined with grief and marked by tears—a face of infinite love.

"Restore us, O Lord God of hosts," prays the psalmist. **"Let your face shine, that we may be saved."** And he has, and so we are, in Jesus Christ. With the deep realism of faith, Paul declares,

"We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may

also be manifested in our bodies. For while we live we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you," ...the life that is ours as we are united to the risen, crucified Christ, who feeds us with the bread of his body, broken that we may be made whole, and with the wine of his blood poured out that we may have life in the fellowship of his new covenant people, until he comes again in glory. "Then we shall no longer see through a glass dimly, but face to face." **"Restore us, O Lord God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved." Amen.**