

## First Sunday in Advent: Let the Face of God Shine

### Psalm 80

A Season of Singing

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Sunday, November 27, 2005

Worship at 9 and 11 a.m.

Let us pray. Come now, Word of hope. Come now, Living Word, in the midst of our waiting and expectation. Come now, and sing to our hearts, that we might join you in melody and harmony. Come, speak to the great sense of loss, and yet hope, that is within us. Through Jesus Christ we pray, Amen.

We enter that time of year in church tradition called “Advent.” We wear dark blue in honor of the Advent season. Dark blue represents the sustained period of the night. Night that always comes in longer periods of time than we hope. It is a time of anticipation...a time of yearning and looking forward because things are not the way they should be. It is the beginning of the church year. It is the beginning of discipleship—when we recognize, at the front end of our faith, that we are looking for God. We hunger and thirst after the living God. We desire God to come to us...to meet us face-to-face...to talk with us, to encourage us, to lift us up. And so we pray, and we hope, and we sing.

Advent – a time from the beginning of scripture when, even in the creation, those who wrote the ancient text understood that night always precedes day: “It was evening and morning of the first day,” on that first day of creation. Night always precedes day. We begin our discipleship in the darkness. Even in the great masses of history, particularly Christmas—the ‘Christ mass’—the Lord is called upon at the beginning: “Lord we are in trouble here. Lord have mercy upon us. Christ have mercy upon us.” Lead us in the midst of our dark place. And so we come, in Advent, recognizing that the world is full of darkness. There are dark places. There are people who walk in darkness. There are sustained periods of loss, grief and pain; and it is night in many places of the world.

The irony is that this time of Advent is also a time of traditional and ancient singing. The people of God sing in the darkness. The people of God find poetry and ways of expression and exultation in the midst of the tough places. That is one of the things we do – we find a way to sing and read the poetry of God. And so it is we will look at the Psalms during this Advent – the great poetry of God.

Andy Rooney, curmudgeon that he is, has always had a certain skepticism about the value of poetry. He wrote a letter to someone who had invited him to come to a live reading of poetry. “Dear Mrs. Worth, I don’t understand most poems when they’re printed, even after I’ve read them over several times. If I don’t understand the poem in print, how could I understand a poem that is read aloud just once...and often poorly... by its author? Even Carl Sandburg, a poet, whose work I often confuse with Robert Frost, said, ‘Poetry is a spot half-way where you listen, and where you wonder what it is that you heard.’ Some newspapers print poems regularly. They are often either unintelligible or just plain bad. I’d like to meet an editor who chooses the poetry and ask him a few questions: Am I not a person of average intelligence who should be able to comprehend a poem? Why don’t I? Am I culturally retarded? Heaven forbid (and I hardly dare mention it), but are you sure that it isn’t the poet’s fault?” And he goes on. Poetry can be tough to understand. When you read the Psalms of God, it can be difficult to comprehend.

This particular Psalm is put in the context of people who are waiting for God to show up again. Are you waiting for God to show up again? Are you waiting for God to show up in your family because the family dynamics are not good? Are you waiting for God to show up in your body because your body is not working well? Are you waiting for God to show up because you are looking forward to death and death hasn’t come yet? Are you looking for God to show up because you have sent friends and loved ones over to Iraq and they’re in harm’s way?

The fact is that this poem of God assumes that the wrath of the world is alive and well. The wrath is real and so the psalmist says, “How long Lord will you be angry? You make our neighbors scorn at us; our

enemies laugh among themselves. Why have you broken down our walls so that all who pass along just take what they want? We're ravaged by wild boars and we're burned by fire." We're cut down, Lord. Where are you? The wrath is around us and we're vulnerable to it. God you've stopped shining. You are not here; the sun is no longer upon us. God you've pulled away. And all the time you can hear the faint whisper of God in the background, saying, "I haven't moved. You've pulled away from me." God is always present. The people who moved to bring wrath are those of us, in our humanity, who turned from God.

In a recent Rolling Stone interview, Bono said, at a low point in his teenage life, he wanted to commit suicide. "I was praying to a God I didn't even know was listening." He goes on to comment about the purpose of the Psalms: "Music that turns me on is either music that runs away from God or music that runs towards God. The blues are about running away from God and the Gospel is about running towards God."

This Psalm is the blues. This Psalm is Advent; this Psalm is about people in darkness who've turned away: 'O God, where are you when I need you? If you call yourself God then do something; show me yourself.' And so the prayer begins, "Shepherd, God of hosts," the God who literally has all the power of heaven—all the forces and majesty of the universe are in God's hands. The God of hosts...the God who collects all the armies, tribes, and forces, and the angels in heaven... and gathers them together to do what God wants to do in the world. 'O God of Hosts; O Lord of Hosts, you made your people like a flock. You are enthroned in a high place upon the cherubim, the angels. You are the one who brought this nation of Israel out of Egypt. You drove the nations out of Canaan so that we could be planted there. You planted us there; you cleared the ground; you gave us life. We know that you care about us. We know that you can do powerful things. Where are you?'

As I mentioned last week, Bill Neil has given us a wonderful gift of 25 Christmas carols, in a rendition of songs to sing by with our wonderful Aeolian-Skinner organ. I advise you to get a copy of "Noel," the CD, and sing along with the Christmas carols during this time of Advent – remembering that it is in the darkness that Christians sing. Remember this one that is on the recording: "It came upon a midnight clear, that glorious song of old; from angels bending near the earth to touch their harps of gold. 'Peace on the earth, goodwill to all, from heaven's all-glorious King.' The world in solemn stillness lay to hear the angels sing." When do we hear the angels? When do the angels show up? In the middle of the night; in the middle of the darkness. "Still through the cloven skies they came with peaceful wings unfurled, and still the heavenly music floats o'er all the weary world. Above its sad and lowly plains, they bend on hovering wing, and ever o'er its Babel sounds, the blessed angels sing." Even when there's total chaos and all you hear are the sounds of Babel, the angels sing. So the prayer begins with the realization that God is in charge of all the hosts of heaven and God will bring the hosts of heaven to sing in the midst of the darkest times.

The prayer goes on to say: "Restore us, O God. Stir up your might. Come to save us. Restore us. Turn again to us and restore us." An ancient pattern of how poetry and music are put together is called 'sonata' form. It is simply a theme – an adjustment on that theme – and the theme restated. It's a great pattern of how things are put together in compositional poetic art. And here we see that "Restore us Lord" is the theme that's stated. "Let your face shine upon us. Restore us Lord;" the theme is restated. But a little bit further in the song, there's a change in that theme: "Turn again Lord. Look down from heaven and see us; regard us with yourself." Then it goes back to the theme at the end: "Restore us Lord. Let your face shine upon us." Poetry is written with a focus and a theme that is consistent: Lord, hear our prayer. Lead us in the midst of our dark place and restore us to the greatness and goodness of who we know you can make us to be.

The Psalm reminds us of two major people in scripture that are connected to events. Remember Joseph, the Psalm begins to say – Joseph who lived before Ephraim, Benjamin and Manasseh. Remember Joseph – the one who had the dream of greatness. And after his dream, he was sold into slavery. He was put into a pit. He was hated by brothers. He was framed by Potiphar's wife and thrown into prison. He was forgotten; he lived in a sustained dark night. Where was God? God had given him a dream. Dreams show up in the dark time. Do you have a dream today? Remember Joseph. You've not been able to experience your dream...your dream has been lost...your dream has been buried in the darkest times of life. Remember that God is faithful to complete dreams even when dreams become nightmares. Remember

Joseph.

The second image that is brought forth here is about Moses. Remember Moses – he was the one who led the slaves out of Egypt. The slaves prayed for 480 years. That's a long time to live in darkness. They were fed with the bread of tears. They even were filled up in the drink of tears to the fullness of everything they could possibly handle. They could not take any more. They were made the scorn of their neighbors; their enemies laughed at them. And they were brought out like a vine... a small vine... out of Egypt. Remember Moses – because in Moses, you've not forgotten us.

This past two weeks I have seen too many people who feel like they've been forgotten by God: a family who suddenly lost their husband and father to cancer, just in a matter of days – healthy, then gone. A woman who heard late one night that her brother had been killed by a hit-and-run. In the darkness, having to go see her brother and open the body bag. He was just doing some work on the side of the road – sudden death. God where are you? Have you hidden yourself from us because you do not want us to see you? That you do not want to speak to us? Why have you cut yourself off from us, Lord? The hope, according to the psalmist, is: Remember the way God has come to us in the past. Remember Joseph; remember Moses; remember that God never forgets. Even though it's dark outside, God's angels are still singing. The psalmist gets to the core of the prayer: "Restore us, Lord. Let your face shine upon us."

What is it like to be in the face of someone who is shining on you? You know, those people you like to be with because, when you are in their presence, they just make you feel good. A little bit like John Wagner when he welcomes us on Sunday morning. Something about John just makes us feel good. 'Let your face shine Lord. It's dark down here and we need some shining. Look down from heaven and see us, have regard for us.' It calls back to that old period of time when Moses went up to a high mountain and saw God face-to-face. Because God wants to know us face-to-face. God wants to be in your face. God wants to give you lots of face time. When was the last time you faced God? For if you turn to God and face God, God will shine in your face. Moses went up and the face of God shined on him. Moses went into the tent and the face of God shined upon him to the point that, when he walked out, people couldn't even look at his face. When they saw Moses they had to turn away because his face was so bright because he had been in God's face. God wants to meet you face-to-face. God wants his face to shine upon you. The core of our prayer is: 'Lord, let your face shine upon us, that we might see the light in the midst of the darkness; that we might be saved.' Because we know deep inside of ourselves that we are lost in a tough place.

Fred Rogers tells the story about a time when he got a phone call from the wife of one his friends. Mr. Rogers heard the woman at the other end of the phone kneel down and weep. Her husband had just committed suicide. Her husband had gone into a deep and dark place emotionally and had an emotional meltdown. They gave him some pills to try to help him recover, and put him in the hospital for a period of time, and then sent him home with some more pills. All he did was take his bike out into the woods and take all of those pills; they found his body three days later. His wife said he could never imagine that he was so much more than he thought he was. His wife later sent Mr. Rogers a wooden cross. On that cross was Jesus...his face looking at him...his face crying out in a sense of abandonment...as if this man could understand, at the depth of his being, that he had been abandoned by God. Mr. Rogers reminded the wife that it was on the cross when things were totally dark that Jesus cried out the sense that he had been abandoned by God. But God had not abandoned him...God raised him from the dead.

God is not overwhelmed by death – the darkest of the dark times. If you've lost somebody close to you, God is not overwhelmed by your darkness. God has come to shine upon you in the power of the resurrection in Jesus Christ. It's Advent...it's a hard time. Listen to the singing – the Psalms that are even heard in the darkness. Jesus came to give us life. Jesus is the true vine. And if we will stay in Jesus' face, then Jesus' face will shine upon us. Even when things are tough, we will be able to sing in the darkness.

Let us pray. Lord Jesus Christ, when you died, it was dark. When you were born, it was dark. But your face shines. Shine upon us today, and help us to know you and follow you so that we might sing, even in the midst of the darkness. Amen