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Scripture: Isaiah 7:10-16; Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19; Matthew 1:18-25

Restore Us, O God

Let's read a small portion of Psalm 80.¹ *Stir up your might, and come and save us! Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved. How long will you be angry with your people's prayers? Restore us, O God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved. Give us life, and we will call on your name. Restore us, O LORD God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved.*

What do you imagine the psalmist was experiencing when writing these words? The excerpt gives us a taste of the psalm, but didn't really help us experience the deep emotion it contains. Psalm 80 complains to God about how messed up the world is and includes many other cries for help – longing and demanding for God's presence. God, turn back to us. God, listen to us. God, bring us back to you. God, look at us. God, rescue us. God, protect us. God, bring us back to life. God, come back.

This is a psalm of passion. This is a psalm of trust. This is a psalm of honesty. The psalmist repeats the call for restoration three times, increasing in urgency each time. *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.*

I can imagine this psalm being prayed around the world today. By people living behind the wall in Bethlehem. By Rohingya families who fled Myanmar and are living in Bangladesh. By women residing in Kenya, creating gifts to sell while hoping and working for peace in their home countries. By citizens and refugees in Ecuador addressing physical and emotional needs. By people living in this country deeply divided along political lines. By those of us who wrote down our questions, concerns, sorrows, and remembrances and placed them in the box on the worship table last week. Restore us, O God; please!

During this season of advent, we've been waiting and wondering. The texts we've read are full of questions, cries, and longings. They've also included promises of hope, peace, joy, and love. As Christians we believe the promised hope, peace, joy, and love come to us from God through Jesus, whose birth we celebrate next week. Each of the four gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John – tell the story of Jesus in their own way, emphasizing different things.

Today we read the birth story of Jesus as told by Matthew. Luke's version of the story, the one we'll read on Christmas Eve, is much more familiar to us. These two birth stories differ in some fairly significant ways. According to Matthew, Jesus is from Bethlehem, heralded by a star and worshipped by kings. According to Luke, Jesus is from Nazareth, forced to be born in Bethlehem, laid in a filthy manger, and attended by lowly shepherds.

These stories reveal different aspects for different reasons. Both versions focus on the "why" of Jesus' life not the "how" it exactly happened. Luke emphasizes Jesus' connection to the least, the last, and the lost – God's mission of peace, harmony, healing, and restoration to the Gentiles. Luke focuses on Mary and her family connections. Matthew emphasizes Jesus' connection to the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament – God's promises to the Jews; promises

¹ Psalm 80:2b, 3, 4b, 7, 18b, 19 *New Revised Standard Version.*

of peace, harmony, healing, and restoration. Matthew focuses on Joseph and his family connections. He does this to convince his Jewish readers that Jesus is the Messiah, the restorer, the one they've been waiting for.

In order to do this, Matthew begins with the genealogy of Jesus, found in Matthew 1:1-17. Matthew connects Jesus to the patriarchs, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The people are familiar with these stories. They know about God's promises to Abraham – to give him many descendants, to bless all people everywhere through him.

Matthew connects Jesus to the monarchy, to King David. All their lives, the people have been hearing stories of King David, a man after God's own heart. They know what the prophets have been saying, that the promised Messiah, will be a descendent of David.

Matthew demonstrates that the connection to the patriarchs and to the monarchy was not broken even during the downfall of the northern and southern kingdoms, the deportation, the exile in Babylon, and the return to the land of Israel.

***Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved.*² Matthew wants the people to know Jesus fulfills the promises of restoration God made to them. We too believe God will restore us – and actually is in the process of restoring us – because we trust that God's promises are still in effect.**

Matthew's genealogy of Jesus not only includes heroes of the faith; it also includes some shady characters, some flawed people. In fact, we know the heroes themselves were flawed characters. Abraham and Sarah got impatient with God and began their family using the slave-girl Hagar before Sarah finally got pregnant and gave birth to Isaac.³ Judah thought he had slept with a prostitute, but later discovered he had fathered a child by his daughter-in-law, Tamar.⁴ When he found out Tamar was pregnant, but before he knew he was the father of her child, he ordered that she be burned alive for her sins. David saw a beautiful woman, Bathsheba, from his rooftop, ordered that she be brought to him, slept with her, and arranged for her husband, Uriah, to be killed in battle.⁵

The four women in Jesus' family tree would likely have been viewed with some suspicion, maybe even with disdain, by devout Jews. Either they were Gentiles or they associated with Gentiles. In each of their stories there is something extraordinary or irregular in their union with their partners. I already mentioned Tamar and Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah. Rahab was likely a prostitute.⁶ Ruth was not a Jew; she was a Gentile from Moab.⁷ Because of her loyalty to her mother-in-law, Naomi, she left her homeland and traveled with Naomi to live in Bethlehem. The story of how she became Boaz' wife involves some calculation and a bit of deception. I could go on, but I'll stop there. The rest of the genealogy contains questionable characters as well.

***Turn us again to yourself, O God. Make your face shine down upon us. Only then will we be saved.*⁸ Matthew lets the people know that God's restoration comes through flawed people. This gives us hope that God can work for restoration through us, with our flaws.**

² Psalm 80:3, *New Revised Standard Version*.

³ Genesis 16.

⁴ Genesis 38.

⁵ 2 Samuel 11-12.

⁶ Joshua 2:1-21; 6:22-25.

⁷ Ruth 1-4.

⁸ Psalm 80:3, *New Living Translation*.

After the genealogy, Matthew tells his version of the birth story, but the birth appears to be an afterthought. Matthew is more interested in telling us about Joseph than about the baby's birth.

Joseph and Mary are engaged to be married. Getting married in those days was a long process involving several steps over the course of many years. First came an agreement transacted by the families of the bride and groom, perhaps when they were still children.

Matthew 1:18 mentions the two-step process of engagement and marriage.⁹ Saying that Mary was engaged to Joseph meant there have been a formal exchange of consent before witnesses. From then on, they were legally regarded as husband and wife. Any severing of their relationship required a certificate of divorce. However, the bride continued to live in her family home until the wedding, which often took place about a year after the engagement. The wedding was a festive celebration when the man would go to the bride's house and take her to live with him in their new home. Mary and Joseph are engaged but not living together when the pregnancy occurs. This is not good news.

Joseph has some choices.¹⁰ One choice is to break off the engagement publicly. This is actually the faithful thing to do according to the scriptures, according to the law. The law describes two scenarios. If a man has sexual relations with an engaged girl in a city, stone both of them.¹¹ Kill the man for adultery. Kill the girl because she didn't scream for help. But if a man forces sexual relations on an engaged girl out in the country, kill only the man.¹² Don't do anything to the girl, because she may have screamed for help, but there was no one around to rescue her. Joseph has every right to publicly humiliate Mary and expose her to the possibility of stoning.

Another choice would be to quietly break off the engagement in front of two witnesses without making any formal charges. This is the kinder choice that Joseph is leaning toward.

The hardest choice is to continue the engagement. Joseph faces shame because his fiancé is pregnant. He faces ostracism from the community because they'll assume he is the father. Beyond the stigma, both he and Mary could face punishment, even death.

Joseph knows he's not the father of the baby. Joseph doesn't investigate whether Mary conceived in a field or in a city. And he chooses not to search for the man either. It appears he chooses to accept Mary's version of how she conceived. Her version is confirmed when an angel appears to Joseph in a dream.

Joseph disregards the Jewish law – at least the part that seems to fit Mary's situation – and yet Matthew describes him as righteous – as upright, good, and honorable – because of this kindness. He's a righteous man who is willing to interpret the law in a different way.

This sounds familiar to us. Jesus does the same thing in the Sermon on the Mount. Over and over again he says, "You have heard what the law says, but I say to you...." Jesus does the same thing throughout his ministry – touching people the law considers unclean, eating with people the law considers unrighteous, healing people the law considers unworthy.

God offers this same grace to us. We should offer grace to other people.

Restore us, O God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved.¹³ **Matthew lets the people know that God's restoration comes both through the law and through grace.**

⁹ Richard B. Gardner, *Believers Church Bible Commentary: Matthew*, Herald Press, 1991, p.38.

¹⁰ <https://www.pulpitfiction.com/notes/advent4a>

¹¹ Deuteronomy 22:23-24.

¹² Deuteronomy 22:25-27.

¹³ Psalm 80:7, *New Revised Standard Version*.

We know God restores us through grace and through obedience, through faith and through works.

Matthew ends his account with the naming of Jesus.¹⁴ Matthew makes it clear that it's Joseph who names Jesus. This is the ultimate act of claiming the boy as his own, clearly placing Jesus into the line of David.¹⁵

Joseph names the baby Jesus, meaning "God saves" Jesus is the Latin translation of Joshua. Matthew presents Jesus to his Jewish audience as both the new Moses who will bring people out of the bondage of sin and also the new Joshua who will bring them into the Promised Land – the Kingdom of God

In addition, Matthew refers to the prophet Isaiah telling of a child named Emmanuel, meaning "God is with us." The great mystery and blessing of Jesus is that he is God incarnate, God taking on human form, God with us.

Restore us, LORD God Almighty; make your face shine on us, that we may be saved.¹⁶
Matthew lets the people know God's continuing work of restoration is coming through the birth of Jesus. We know God's continuing work of restoration is coming through the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

I can't end the sermon without mentioning the display on the worship table. What possible connection could suspenders have with Advent, or with Joseph, or with restoration? As we've moved through the season, the items on the table have represented frustration, impatience, and despair. The emotion portrayed today is hesitancy. We cry out to God, beginning (yet still afraid) to hope. This is illustrated with an object symbolizing suspension. Perhaps suspenders are too literal of an interpretation.

But I like how the design of these suspenders can also represent a fork in the road – reminding us of the options from which Joseph chose, causing us to question how often we choose what may be regarded as the easy choice because it's thought of as right according to some law, challenging us instead to make a more difficult choice which may lead to discomfort or reprisal but embraces the love of God.

It's during these times of hesitancy and choice, of distress and challenge, that we call on God for restoration. It's during these times that we would do well to remember Matthew's story about Joseph and the birth of Jesus. A story of compassion, a story of grace. A story of a man who sincerely wanted to follow God's teaching, who showed compassion and mercy when putting those teachings into practice, and who was open to the leading of God's spirit into an unexpected way of thinking and acting.

It's a story of God stepping across the threshold and coming to earth in human form. God promised this would happen; God promises that Jesus is still among us. God works in the world with the help of flawed people. God restores us through grace and through obedience, through faith and works. God's restoration comes through the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

This is good news! May the God of love visit us this Advent season and give us what we need for restoration in these days. Amen.

¹⁴ <https://www.pulpitfiction.com/notes/advent4a>

¹⁵ Eugene Boring, *The New Interpreters Bible, Vol. 8, Matthew*, p. 136.

¹⁶ Psalm 80:19, *New International Version*.