

## Imagining God's Face

Psalm 80 is a community lament composed for use when the people had suffered humiliation, probably at the hands of a foreign enemy.<sup>1</sup> It is a request for revival, renewal, restoration.

Many psalms have a superscription that we tend not to read. This title or heading indicates the nature, authority, and use of the psalm. Psalm 80 is dedicated to the worship leader, the director of music. It is to be sung to the tune of "Lilies, a Covenant," the same tune listed for Psalm 60. It's attributed to Asaph who in other psalms is mentioned as a singer, cymbal player, and chief among David's musicians. Perhaps the name Asaph represented a guild of temple singers who participated in nearly every major celebration.

We didn't sing the psalm this morning, but by reading it antiphonally with a leader and response we got a taste of how it might have been used in worship thousands of years ago and how it continues to be used in some churches today.

The psalm begins with a call to God – a plea, maybe even a command – to listen to our cries, show yourself to us, use your power, and save us. God is depicted as a shepherd who is required to display great concern and offer tender care to Israel, God's sheep. A shepherd must direct the flock, look for its pasture, defend it from its predators, care for its injured and sick members, ensure the safety and nurture of its young, and search for and return its wayward members.

For the psalmist, the present darkness engulfing Israel is due to God's absence. In their fervent prayer, "Restore us, God! Make your face shine so that we can be saved!"<sup>2</sup> the people cry out for the light of God's favor. In their broken lives, only a renewal of God's favor and goodwill can restore Israel. They urge the shepherd to rouse his mighty powers and come forth to save his people.

The psalm continues with a complaint describing the nation's plight. The lament centers on unanswered prayer. The people aren't sure how much longer they can endure it. They accuse God of failing as a shepherd, of feeding them with tears instead of bread and allowing them to be objects of scorn by their neighbors and enemies.

Their plea intensifies, calling on the all-powerful God to restore and save them. "Restore us, God of heavenly forces! Make your face shine so that we can be saved!"<sup>3</sup>

The psalmist then switches images of God, depicting God as a vine grower and Israel as the vineyard. Similar to a shepherd, a vineyard keeper must display great concern and offer tender care to the vines. The vineyard keeper must prune the vines in season, fertilize the plants, weed the fields, and protect the crops from marauders and plunderers.

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<sup>1</sup> Sources for this sermon include Fred B. Craddock, John H. Hayes, Carl R. Holladay, and Gene M. Tucker, *Preaching Through the Christian Year: Year C*, Trinity Press International, 1994, pp. 20-25; Douglas E. Wingeier, *Keeping Holy Time: Year C*, Abingdon Press, 2003, pp. 30-35; James H. Walther, *Psalms: Believers Church Bible Commentary*, Herald Press, 2006, pp. 391-394, 746, 772-774; *Leader, Fall 2021*, MennoMedia, pp. 44-45, and Pulpit Fiction, Advent 4C, <https://www.pulpitfiction.com/notes/advent4c>.

<sup>2</sup> Psalm 80:3, *Common English Bible*

<sup>3</sup> Psalm 80:7, *Common English Bible*

The parable of the vine found in the middle of the psalm appeals to the Lord's previous great acts and miracles. In depicting Israel as a vine that God transplanted from Egypt to Canaan, the psalmist retells the story of the exodus and the people settling in the land, a marvelous feat of deliverance and restoration.

But now the vine has been ravaged because God has broken down the walls and allowed it to happen. The nation has been destroyed. And the people have been displaced. The psalmist accuses God of being a failure as a vineyard keeper, leaving the vineyard without protection, to be used as public property and a haven for wild beasts. Why has God allowed this to happen?

This unanswered question leads to the petition asking God to come back, take notice, and tend to this vine again. Some translations use the phrase “turn again” in verse 14 instead of “return to us” or “please come back.” The word “turn” is used elsewhere for human repentance. How daring to tell God to repent, or at a minimum to change direction, to make an about turn! Yet the plea is for God to turn toward the people. Restoration comes from God.

The psalm ends with a petition for a return to normal in the relationship between God and the people. For the Israelites, this involves restoration of the kingdom, enthronement of a king from the line of David, and peace for the nation. The people vow to obey and praise God when deliverance has come. And the familiar refrain follows, this time adding another layer of urgency, “Restore us, Lord God of heavenly forces! Make your face shine so that we can be saved!”<sup>4</sup>

While the intensity of the refrain increases throughout the psalm, the request remains the same, “let your face shine, that we may be saved.” In our worship this morning we are daring to imagine God’s face. What do you see when you ask God’s face to shine on you?

Our reading from Malachi a few weeks ago stated the Lord of hosts is like a refiner’s fire and a launderer’s soap.<sup>5</sup> It’s not unusual to hear God depicted as a solemn judge sitting on a throne condemning people for their grievous wrongdoings and even simple mistakes.

The psalmist imagined a shepherd and a vine keeper. Other scriptures describe God as almighty, everlasting, faithful, gracious, liberating, and loving. Images of God include comforting mother, creator, father of orphans, protector of widows, mother bird, refuge and strength, rock, and shelter.

While mourning the perceived judgement of God in allowing the destruction of their nation and their displacement from their homeland, Psalm 80 sings of the God whose face is not set against them, but rather brings salvation, peace, provision, and security.

We read Psalm 80 during this time of year because it’s appropriate for Advent. When the psalmist asks God to “let your hand be with the one on your right side—with the one whom you secured as your own,” it’s natural to give this a royal meaning and assume it is referring to a king. Christian traditions read this as referring to a future messiah.

This is the one who Mary sings about in the first chapter of Luke.<sup>6</sup> Her cousin Elizabeth confirmed the message she had heard from the angel Gabriel. Her child would be called Jesus, the Son of God. Mary’s song opens with joy and praise that God has favored a lowly servant girl.

But she speaks of herself only briefly. She sees God’s grace and goodness toward her as only a single instance of the many ways God works in the world. God blesses the poor, the oppressed, and the hungry. In a final flood of reversal, God will bring down the proud and rich oppressors and exalt those who have been disenfranchised, disregarded, and dismissed.

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<sup>4</sup> Psalm 80:19, *Common English Bible*

<sup>5</sup> Malachi 3:1-4

<sup>6</sup> Luke 1:46-55

In Mary's song, the face of God is given a body revealed to us in Jesus of Nazareth, who exemplifies this justice and mercy in his life, ministry, death, and resurrection. As we dare to imagine God's face, we can add the names and images of Jesus, the incarnation of God, the Word made flesh. Jesus described himself as the bread of life, the light of the world, the gate, the good shepherd, the resurrection, the vine, the way, the truth, and the life. Other names and images include cornerstone, deliverer, friend, healer, high priest, prince of peace, mediator, reconciler, redeemer, teacher, and savior.

Adding to our image of God are the names and images of the Spirit, such as advocate, comforter, counselor, intercessor, spirit of holiness and spirit of truth.

We keep all of these in mind as we cry out, "Restore us, God! Make your face shine so that we can be saved! Restore us, God of heavenly forces! Make your face shine so that we can be saved! Restore us, Lord God of heavenly forces! Make your face shine so that we can be saved!"

And, we remember love, the traditional theme for this fourth Sunday of Advent. As the coming of the Messiah draws near, we dare to imagine God's face revealed to us in Jesus, and we discover that God's face in Jesus is love. Not a fleeting infatuation, but a fierce, all-encompassing love that refines, that heals, that restores relationships, that desires the best for all God's children, for all God's creation.

During Advent, we both celebrate and we wait. We continue to address God out of our affliction and look to God as the source of light and life. Even as we await Jesus, we look to him to see who God is and what God desires. We celebrate the good news that the Lord is here, even as we wait and pray, "come save us."

Thanks be to God for this amazing love!