

Let Your Face Shine

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Scripture: Psalm 80
Romans 5: 1-5

One summer during my college years I had an idea to teach myself patience. There was this beautiful hummingbird needlepoint kit. The finished product would be 16 inches long and 8 inches wide. As I went to the cashier I thought to myself what a beautiful surprise it will be for Mom when I give to her a lovely completed needlepoint. I began it eagerly that Saturday. I worked on it all day long. And I finished the head of one bird, one square inch portion.

They say you can tell the quality of the work by the backside of the needlepoint. It should be just as pretty as the front. I turned my work over and it wasn't pretty. There was a humongous knot.

I put the needlepoint, head and all, back into the box. I didn't touch it again until the time came to wrap Christmas gifts. The gift is legendary in my family who erupted in laughter when Mom took the needlepoint out of the box and showed all the knotted head.

My Mom likes to needlepoint. She likes all handicrafts. So, that year, she took out the knot, began again and framed the pretty hummingbird needlepoint. It still hangs on my Mom's wall. Looking back on it, I have decided that patience isn't all it is cracked up to be. It is easier to have patience when you know there will be an end. But when no end is in sight, as it was that day I put the needlepoint back into the box, we need more than patience to keep us on track.

Instead of arguing for Advent patience, waiting for something to be completed, let's use this day to talk about Advent Attraction, that which keeps us connected to God, on track, when all we have for our efforts is one big knot.

Mom knew, unlike me, she could complete any needlepoint project because she had a history of success. God with Israel also had a history of success. You hear it alluded to in verse 8--the story of the Exodus: O God, You brought a vine out of Egypt. You drove out the nations and planted it. You cleared the ground for it; it took deep root and filled the land.

It continues on.

Oh God, remember....

This vine you planted, the mountains were covered with its shade, the mighty cedars with its branches; it sent out its branches to the sea, and its shoots to the River...

Oh God remember when "Judah and Israel were as numerous as the sand by the sea; they ate and drank and were happy. Solomon was sovereign over all the kingdoms from the Euphrates to the land of the Philistines, even to the border of Egypt..." (1 Kings 20-21).

Oh God, we remember.

Those who sing the Psalm sing of their history with God. They remember as if God is by their side now.

The Psalms were spoken out loud, sung by the people. They were part of worship, as they are today, and they purpose to bring us together with God...to keep the attraction alive. Worship indeed is a remembering together. By placing the reality of God's work in our world in the forefront of our week we stay connected to God. That which is historical takes on present meaning.

Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock.

This first verse of the Psalm is an intriguing snapshot of God as Shepherd and Joseph his flock. Joseph's story, while it has its pitfalls, doesn't admit to fear or sorrow but is unrelenting in drawing our attention to God's acting to prosper God's people in all circumstances.

Remember, Joseph was a handsome young man, the only child of the beloved Rachel, and was favored over all the other sons fathered by Jacob. Joseph was far from humble. He paraded around in his special colorful cloak and spoke openly of his dreams that one day he'd be in power and all the other children, the brothers, would bow down to him. When the brothers had heard enough they dropped him into a pit and sold him into slavery.

Even so, scripture says, "The Lord was with Joseph" and the story charges ahead to tell of how Joseph became a highly successful servant. Joseph, in fact, is made the top man, put in charge of all his master's possessions. Then the day comes when the master's wife notices how good he looks.

One day, Joseph was alone with her. She asked him to lay down with her. He refused. As he rushed out of the room she caught hold of his clothes and tore them. Holding a scrap of his clothes in her hand she screamed and told all that Joseph tried to seduce her. Joseph was stripped of everything and thrown into prison.

Even here the story remains upbeat reporting what happens next with these words: "But the LORD was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love; he gave him favor in the sight of the chief-jailer. The chief jailer committed to Joseph's care all the prisoners who were in the prison, and whatever was done there, he was the one who did it. The chief jailer paid no heed to anything that was in Joseph's care, because the LORD was with him; and whatever he did, the LORD made it prosper."

Then Joseph again was given dreams.

The Psalm's reference to Joseph calls into our awareness the idea that even when the worst happens, God is there. Further, God acts in lives, allowing those who trust in God to prosper. Even when all is stripped away...there are new God given

dreams.

Never underestimate the creativity of the Holy Spirit. When God saw Joseph's plight, God crafted dreams and visions which lead to the story's happy ending.

And yet, would all of life have a happy ending such as Joseph's! Some might use Joseph's story to suggest if we adjust our minds to believe God is with us all the time, we will be blessed, we will see miracles all around. Like all things derived from the Bible, there is truth to their conclusions. However, the Psalmist doesn't let us off so easily. Faith isn't only about making our minds behave. Faith is about our being in relationship with one whose ways we do not, will never, fully understand, yet with one who loves us. People of faith admit there are times when it feels as if God has gone away, times when dreams descend. In these times, the community of faith unabashedly calls on God to appear.

O LORD GOD of hosts,
How long will you be angry
with your people's prayers?

You have fed them with the bread
Of tears,
And given them tears to drink in
Full measure.

You make us the scorn of our
Neighbors;
Our enemies laugh among
Themselves.

Notice what isn't said. Not how long until we get our land back or how long before you again allow us to prosper...but how long will you be angry with your people's prayers. Your people's... your people's prayers. Even as those who worship express their grievance they state their attachment... we are your people. Our prayers are yours. You, O God, must turn back to us.

The bread that symbolizes God's presence has been replaced by the bread of tears. How different their experience is from Joseph where God seemed to always be with him. The Shepherd, the one who

feeds and protects his flock, has allowed his own people, his sheep, to be devoured. God's people are left alone, hungry and unprotected.

O Lord, you brought a vine out of Egypt...

So why then have you broken down

Its walls,

So that all who pass along the

Way pluck its fruit?

The boar from the forest ravages

It,

And all that move in the field

Feed on it.

The Psalmist becomes like Moses arguing with God to turn back to his people. He argues, we have been given tears to drink in full measure. See how our enemies laugh?

Turn again, O God of hosts;

Look down from heaven, and

See;

Have regard for this vine,

The stock that your right hand

Planted.

They have burned it with fire,

They have cut it down;

May they perish at the rebuke of

Your countenance.

This is the monologue of one who expects the other to change. The belief behind the song is that there can be no life or future for God's people unless God repents of his anger. The people of faith sing of the experience of God's absence. Yet, God's people hold onto the one who gives us life even though...

Even though the last months, the last year, has been hell.

Even though we feel let down by God.

Even though there are easier ways to make ourselves feel good.

Even though the fires...even though the terrorists...even though the floods, the hurricanes, the earthquakes...even though the lives lost in senseless battles...even though

This is not a time for patience, but a time to tenaciously hold onto the belief that God will one day make all right.

Victor Frankl noticed that when prisoners of concentration camps believed the guard's words, "You will never leave this place," their spirits broke and they died soon after. But those who believed there could and would someday be an end to the evil...they hung on...they had a chance to live.

In Advent we do more than long for God's presence. We join the Psalmist's insistent voice that God come again...and again...and again.

Here once more Paul's words of Romans 5...

Even though we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to the grace in which we stand; we boast...

Not in what is, not in God's presence now, not in Jesus' coming to earth, not in the blessed living of one who believes in God's creativity...

In our hope of one day sharing the glory of God.

Even after Jesus...God will come again.

And not only that...

But we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us...

God through the Holy Spirit has given each of us the tenacious faith that sees beyond the trouble of the present to a future hope, a one day sharing of God's glory.

What we know of God's glory in this time in this place isn't all there is or will be.

Restore us, O God of hosts;

Let your face shine, that we may

Be saved.

The Hebrew word behind restore is rich in meaning.

Twice it is used in the Bible for "bring us back from exile (1 Kigs 8:34; Jer 27:22).

Twice it is used for "repentance" Nehemiah 9:26; Lamenations 5:21

And Twice used for 'return to life' 2 Samuel 12:23; Job 33:30

Restore us, O God of hosts;

Let your face shine, that we may

Be saved.

The verb behind let your face shine... shine forth...it is the language that describes the appearance of God on the mountaintop...the language of epiphany.

Restore us, O LORD, God of hosts

Let your face shine, that we may

Be saved.

O LORD, Jhwh, God's most intimate name used only in the last refrain.

That we may be saved...

Only one can unravel the knots of our lives

As you have, O Lord, in the past, be here now in the present. Restore us to life with you. Let your face so shine that we fall to our knees in wonder. Unravel the knots of our lives and so free us to be crafted by your hands.