



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School
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A Stephen Ministry Congregation
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First Sunday of Advent

December 3, 2017

“O God, Let Your Face Shine!”

(Psalm 80:3)

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“Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved!” (Ps. 80:3).

**Every day, everywhere, by everyone...
sharing the grace of the Good Shepherd.**

Collect: Stir up Your power, O Lord, and come, that by Your protection we may be rescued from the threatening perils of our sins and saved by Your mighty deliverance; for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

We're in that season of the year when we appreciate the sunlight more than ever. The days are crazy short, and often overcast. Many of you drive to work in the dark and also come home in the dark. We miss the sun. Some are trying to ward off this seasonal affective disorder with light therapy, and maybe antidepressants and psychotherapy, or maybe even flying somewhere sunny. Sometimes Wisconsin people find the window that has the sun shining through it, and we bask, letting the rays sun soak into our faces. Even our dog gets the idea. He looks for that crooked rectangle, a rhomboid of warm sunlight on the living room carpet, and spends the afternoon shuffling to stay in its arc. I come home and give him a pat, and his torso is toasty. What a rough life he has!

Our text says, "Restore us, O God; let your face shine on us that we may be saved!" The psalmist likens the face of God to the soothing warmth of the sun. The days are short, the nights long; the Last Day near. Bring us through it with your grace and love. It's cold and dark, Lord. Enlighten our darkness and warm us with your favor. "Let your face shine on us, that we may be saved."

It's actually a refrain that happens three times in the psalm, and divides the psalm into three parts. The refrain grows more earnest each time we hear it. But it's not because of seasonal affective disorder. It appears the northern kingdom of Israel has fallen to the armed assault of the Assyrians. Therefore refugees from the north have been streaming into the southern kingdom of Judah, and its fortified capital, Jerusalem. As a matter of fact, archaeologists discovered at just this time in history, many small homes were built in a hurry around the outskirts of the city of Jerusalem, presumably made by that crush of refugees.

In any event, the psalmist is praying for restoration and salvation. “Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved!”

“Let your face shine;” it’s the same idea in the words the Lord gave Aaron to use to bless his people. We hear this benediction every Sunday. “The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.” “Countenance:” it’s the same word used for face, and “to lift up one’s countenance,” is a common Hebrew expression for viewing someone favorably, just like a smile turns the corners of the mouth upward. When the Lord’s face shines on us, when he lifts up his countenance on us, the result is peace.

But what happens when the Lord doesn’t let his face shine on us? In Scripture, when the Lord hides his face, it feels as if he has forgotten us. Psalm 13, “How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?” When the Lord hides his face it feels as if the Lord has abandoned you. Psalm 88, “Why, O Lord, do you reject me and hide your face from me?” (v. 14). It is terrifying (Ps. 104:29) and leads to despair (Ps. 143:7). Therefore, Psalm 27 pleads, “Do not hide your face from me, do not turn your servant away in anger . . . Do not reject me or forsake me, O God my Savior” (v. 9).

Said in the negative: “Do not hide your face from us.” Said in the positive: “Let your face shine on us.”

Maybe it’s your health and vigor. You feel past prime and worn out. “Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved.”

Maybe it’s your faith. Sometimes you feel strong and sure, but there are those other times when you’re groping about in the darkness. Or maybe it’s your son or daughter in whom there is no evidence of faith. “Let your face shine, that we may be saved.”

Maybe it’s for family cohesion. There was a time when the kids were young it was easier to hold the family together. But they’ve grown, and mostly gone. They’ve

become independent and have other plans, other priorities. “Let your face shine, O Lord, that we may be saved.”

Maybe it’s this country. There are things we love and cherish about it, but other parts of which we are deeply ashamed. In many ways, it’s not trending well, and there is a growing list of enemies and vulnerabilities. “Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved.”

Maybe it’s this church. How the Lord has blessed us over the decades, nearly five of them now. And yet, we have not become all God would want us to be, have we? “Let your faith shine on us, that we may be saved.”

Not everyone cares about the denomination to which we belong, but many of us do. And there’s cause for concern there too. As a whole, we’re trending downwards. Churches and schools are closing already, and the absence of the Millennials does not bode well for the future. The promise is the church shall stand. We know there will be a remnant of the faithful as there always has been, but don’t we want to be more than a remnant, a stump? “Restore us, O God; let your face shine on us, that we may be saved.”

One more: for some, your relationship with booze started out as a friendship, casual and fun. But the friendship turned into a torrid, reckless, self-destructive affair.

“Whiskey is a terrible lover” sort of thing. With a lot of help, you managed to quit, and have been counting the days, months, and years you’ve been sober. But this time of the year is no friend of sobriety. Booze and the holiday parties seem made for one another, especially in Wisconsin . . . sodden with alcohol. You’re going to the party, but you still have the inexplicable ache for a drink. “Let your face shine on us, that we may be saved.”

You recall Moses once asked the Lord, “Please show me your glory” (v. 18). That is, don’t mask it. Don’t mute it. Don’t cover it over with a cloud or a burning bush. Show me as you really are. What Moses didn’t understand is that the contrast between human sinfulness and God’s holiness is so great that no sinful man can withstand the full revelation of God’s presence, God’s glory. God’s holiness, writes the

author of Hebrews, is a “consuming fire.” Moses would be like a paper kite flying too close to the sun.

So the Lord said to Moses, “You cannot see My face, for no man can see Me and live!” (Ex. 33:20-23). Of course, that’s when the Lord tucked Moses into a cleft of the rock, and passed by while covering himself, reducing the dose of divine radiation to tolerable levels.

In Jesus, the Lord tucked himself behind the flesh of man, to intolerable levels. When God became man in Jesus, he covered over his glory so that we could look on the face of God and live. In Jesus, God let his face shine on all humanity, not as a consuming fire, but as a gracious Savior. In Jesus, God lifted up his countenance upon us; he smiled on us.

Hardly anyone saw it that way. Hardly anyone knew that when looking on Jesus, they were looking at face of Almighty and Holy God. How could they? Physically, he did not stand out. Isaiah wrote, “He had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him” (53:2). One time he gave three of his disciples a glimpse of his glory, again at tolerable levels. That happened when Jesus was transfigured before them. “His face shone like the sun” Matthew says (17:2). But most people remained in the dark, and many even grew to detest him, for “the sinful mind is hostile to God” (Rom. 8:7).

So they filed false charges against him and with some coercion and intimidation, he was declared guilty of the same. At any point he could have brought it all to an end by unmasking his holiness, which would have made a thermo-nuclear blast look like the soft glow of a firefly. But he did not do it. For us he suppressed and concealed his holiness, and so on went the abuse. Matthew 26: “Then they spit on his face and struck him and slapped him” (v. 67). Imagine, spitting on the face of holy and almighty God. Still, he did not hide his face from us.

Then we crucified him. Still he did not hide his face from us, but many are hiding their faces from him. Most of the disciples are nowhere to be seen. The crowds too hailing

him as king have vanished. Even God the Father has forsaken him. And can't you just see those families on pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the Passover? Can't you just see them shuffling their little ones past Golgotha, distracting them, pointing out something in the other direction so they wouldn't have to look at him, a horrific sight. They didn't want their children to see the depth of man's depravity and cruelty. Isaiah foresaw it, "as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not" (Is. 53:3).

Given what we did to him, we are awfully bold to be asking him "let your face shine on us." But we are appealing to his grace. Through his Word, he has revealed to us that he is merciful and compassionate. It's his true nature. We deserve the consuming fire of his holiness (which is his alien work), but we're asking him to shine on us with gentle grace and kindness, which is his proper work . . . who he is. He desires all should be saved (no exceptions) even those who got right into his face to mock, taunt, and spit.

Risen from the dead, he wasn't interested in the settling of scores but in the giving of grace. By that grace, we will one day soon be in the New Jerusalem, which John says will have "no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb" (Rev. 21). There we will be in his immediate presence. "For now we see in a mirror dimly, then face to face" (1 Cor. 13:12). So we will be in the presence of his unmasked holiness, without losing our heads, without shame or fear or guilt. "There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain" and he will "wipe every tear from our eyes" (Rev. 21). He will bless us and make his face to shine on us and lift up his countenance upon us and give us peace.
Amen.

