

The Power of God's Presence

Micah 5:2-5a
Hebrews 10:5-10
Luke 1:39-45, (46-55)
Psalm 80:1-7

Have you ever known someone whose presence just made you come alive and lit you up? Someone who gave you courage, comfort, or joy? Someone who could catch your eye across a room and lifts your spirits, making you feel loved and known. Someone who made you want to be the best version of yourself, who inspired you to overcome obstacles and take risks, someone you wanted to please, not because you're afraid of disappointing, but because you took so much pleasure in their joy? We're in the thick of the Hallmark Christmas Movie season so we're culturally steeped in romance right now. But it doesn't just have to be a romantic lover. It could be a parent or sibling, a friend or mentor. I think God gives us glimpses of these kinds of experiences with people so we can know how God feels about us, so we can imagine a way into that type of intimacy and enthusiasm with God. And it is possible that even Hallmark movies can be helpful in offering us a glimpse into that kind of relationship.

This is the kind of relationship God wants with us. It is this type of relationship with God that changes us, that heals brokenness in us and in our relationships with others. It's this kind of relationship that **is** salvation. In the same way these human relationships bring out the best in people, profound love for God increases our capacity to love others.

Perhaps it sounds like I have taken the idea too far. But. Asaph, the author of today's Psalm uses the same imagery. He uses this recurring phrase, "the light of your countenance" to describe the power of God's presence among the people. In fact, Asaph repeats the refrain that indicates it is in seeing God's face, "we shall be saved". Like intimate friends who have been reunited after a separation, seeing that loved one's face is

healing. This Psalm begins with a request for God's presence to "shine forth", indicating that circumstances had made it difficult to see God. So, if the concept of a close personal loving relationship with God feels inaccessible to us at times, we are not alone.

Let's talk about the history of Israel for just a moment to gain some context for today's story. God's vision for humankind as far back as The Garden was peace with God and harmony with the created order. That didn't last long, and we all know how it turned out. The vision was given again to Abraham, saying the whole world would be blessed through his offspring. His children grew into the people of Israel who, like all humans, struggled to get along. Their sin repeatedly caused them to be divided from God and one another. Over and over, they found themselves in the middle of conflict, turning against one another because they kept walking away from God. These two things have always been linked, hence the first two commandments (love God and love others). In fact, the nation finally split itself into a Northern and a Southern kingdom because they couldn't agree on political issues. Sound familiar? Psalm 80 was written when the Northern kingdom was being overthrown. Then our text from Micah comes a couple hundred years later when the Southern kingdom was about to be destroyed, and it looked like the end of the Hebrew people altogether. The captive people, carted off into faraway lands, listened to prophets heralding hope of a Messiah for another hundred years before experiencing 400 years of silence from God. The prophetic voice ceased, God felt impossibly distant, and the conquered, people suffering under oppressive political and military overseers waited for a messianic hope that would have felt as removed from them as the Renaissance is to us today.

It is into that world, that pregnant Mary visited her relative Elizabeth, and the profound experience of God's presence was felt once more. A presence that had been unseen and largely unfelt for over 400 years. The presence of the unseen Christ, hidden inside of Mary,

was so powerful that the unborn John, inside Elizabeth leapt within her, filling her with the Holy Spirit who inspired her enthusiastic blessing back on Mary. The presence of God is indeed a profoundly powerful force.

I don't think we ever understand just how much impact we have on others, especially when God's presence is alive within us. People are desperate for the light of God's countenance. Mary was a nobody from nowhere. The prophet Micah notes the obscurity of Bethlehem as one of the little clans of Judah. Jesus was born to such poor and inconsequential people that they couldn't even gain entrance to appropriate lodgings to give birth. And yet, that infant's body would change everything for all people for all time.

It can be easy for us to look at Mary, the God bearer, the mother of our Lord, and idealize her on such a high shelf that we fail to see her as a model for us. After 400 years of God's silence to her people, somehow her internal posture remained open and available to God's face shining on her. She allowed her body to carry the son of God and that proximity with God impacted those around her. We see the icons and the pendants and think of Mary as a queen, but she was a young girl, a peasant, living in obscurity, and it was through **her** "yes" to God, through her proximity to God in both body and spirit, that we now have access to Emmanuel, the God who is with us.

The author of Hebrews talks about the body God prepared for Jesus. The Israelites worked so hard to uphold God's laws because they believed perfectly upholding the sacrificial system was the only way to please God. They missed the point that God wanted to be **known** and **loved** by them. God didn't need them to perform perfectly executed worship. God wanted intimacy with the people, but their flawlessly executed sacrificial rites only created more distance. Jesus took on the Body God had prepared for him, to be the end of the sacrificial system. Not long after Jesus became the ultimate sacrifice for us on the

cross, the temple where all the sacrifices were performed was destroyed by the Romans, proving God's disinterest with people's attempts to please God through pious acts. After Jesus' ascension, God gave them the Holy Spirit and they gained access to a relationship with God that did not require a temple. God wanted to be with them, in them, shining God's face on them, and shining out from them.

The body that was prepared for Jesus, the one spoken of in Hebrews, was not just Jesus' own flesh. God also prepared Mary's body in which Jesus would develop before he was born. And God prepared our bodies for Jesus to dwell in as his hands and feet in the world.

Mary's Magnificat praises God for the work that would be done through us because of Jesus. Micah calls the Messiah the "one of peace". Mary's song explains how this peace would come about. The impoverished infant, born into obscurity, would not gain a kingdom because of his alignment with the rich and powerful. The peace of the Kingdom of Heaven would come through the lowly. The Body of Christ is now comprised of those whose hearts belong to Jesus, who make themselves available for the priorities of God. Those whose bodies feed the hungry and elevate the outcasts.

Jesus was born into a world marked by the division and brokenness of those who misunderstood God's priorities. I fear we too live in a time when God's name is often used to justify all sorts of behaviors inconsistent with Mary's Song, inconsistent with Jesus' own lowly advent. As Christians, we claim allegiance with the underdogs, the defeated, the infirm, and the unwanted. It is here that we bring God's presence through our body and shine the light of God's countenance through our face.... But first, we must allow that face to shine on us.

May we be a people who bear the Son of God, so filled with the presence of Christ that the Holy Spirit leaps inside others at our appearance. And may the light of God's countenance shine so brightly through us that we all may be saved.