11-29-20, The Holy Way

Sermon on Psalm 80:1—7, 17—19

1. Introduction
2. Many commentators believe that this Psalm is the product of someone in either the 8th or 6th century BCE building on a much earlier one. Assuming that this is true, the Psalm was “updated” to reflect either the fall of the Northern Kingdom of Israel in the 720’s or the end of the Babylonian Captivity in the 530’s BCE.
3. This Psalm is in the style of a communal lament.
4. Three times in this Psalm we encounter the expression, “let your face shine” or “shine forth.” The psalmist calls upon God to enter into the darkness of grief, loss, and pain and to bring God’s light.
5. Prayer
6. The text
7. (Introductory phrases)
8. To the leader [As we have seen before, this is a reference either to the music leader or to a political leader of some kind.]
9. On Lilies [This could be a reference to a particular melody or to a particular instrumentation.]
10. A covenant [This word can also mean witness. The Psalm reminds God of God’s covenant responsibility to God’s people.]
11. Of Asaph [By, for, about, or in the style of Asaph]
12. A psalm [This is created for use in worship]
13. (v. 1a) **A call for God to hear** Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock.
14. (v. 1b—3) **A call for God to act** You who are enthroned on the cherubim
15. (v. 1c—2a) Shine forth before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh [These are three of the twelve tribes of Israel.]
16. (v. 2b) Stir up your might and come to save us!
17. (v. 3) Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved.
18. (v. 4—7) **A call for God to forgive and relent** O Lord God of Hosts, how long will you be angry with your people’s prayers? [The sense is that God has taken offense at Israel’s insincere, empty, or possibly absent prayers and has abandoned it and left it on its own.]
19. (v. 5) You have fed them with the bread of tears and given them tears to drink in full measure.
20. (v. 6) You make us the scorn of our neighbors; our enemies laugh among themselves.
21. (v. 7) Restore us, O God of Hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved.
22. (v. 8—16) These intervening verses use the metaphor of a grapevine to describe God’s grace to and protection of Israel, followed by the destruction which occurred when that holy protection was lifted.
23. (v. 17—19) **Call for intervention** But let your hand be upon the one at your right hand, the one you made strong for yourself. [This passage has been described as referring either to the Messiah or to Israel. For this sermon I’m assuming that the reference is to the Messiah.]
24. (v. 18) Then we will never turn back from you; give us life, and we will call on your name.
25. (v. 19) Restore us, O Lord of Hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved.
26. What shall we take away from this passage this morning, as we begin our Advent journey to the living Christ?

Our Advent theme for this morning is restoration. The psalmist calls for a restoration to the way things had been before. If we take the position that this Psalm, in the form we have received it, was completed in the 720’s BCE, the psalmist is looking upon the destruction of the Northern Kingdom by Assyria, Large numbers of people have been dragged away from their land. Perhaps even worse, strangers, captives from previous Assyrian conquests have been released, dumped, into the territory that had been the kingdom of Israel.

If we assume that the Psalm was completed in the 580’s BCE, the story is even more painful. The recent history of Israel would contain not only the fall of the Northern Kingdom in the 720’s, but also the more recent fall of the Southern Kingdom of Judah to the armies of Babylon. A part of this fall was the unthinkable: the destruction of the Temple itself, along with the exile to Babylon of all the elites in Judah.

Regardless of when the Psalm was completed, the cry is for a restoration to the way things were before, a cry to return to that which was familiar. This is natural behavior for us. Many of us have a tendency to look back to a simpler time, a sweeter time, a better time, and there is some nostalgic desire to return to it.

There is a problem here, though. That sweeter, simpler time wasn’t sweeter or simpler for everybody. When people my age look back to their childhoods and remember how good it was. We’re not, for the most part, remembering that our childhood was a time when, in many places, water fountains and restrooms were designated either “White” or “Colored.” I associate this with Mississippi and Alabama, but it was true in small towns and cities in Arizona as well. Do we want to return to that? I certainly don’t.

In the issue of health care, as well, the good old days weren’t that great. A diagnosis of Type I diabetes was a death sentence up until 1920, when Frederick Banting and his colleagues discovered the means of producing insulin for injection. In the same way, prior to the discovery and production of antibiotics, infections killed incredible numbers of people who might have otherwise lived and prospered.

It’s my view that God doesn’t go backwards. By that, I mean that what God is up to is always new and challenging and different and almost always scary. As we travel this road of Advent, a journey of preparation which leads us ultimately to God in a manger, we look to restoration. The restoration we seek, however, is not to the way things used to be. We seek, we hunger and thirst for, a restoration to a relationship with God which drives us forward. It drives is toward a life of greater love, greater humility, greater peace. It drives us toward a life of gratitude and devotion to our neighbors. It drives us to be peacemakers. It drives us to experience the transformation which is the very nature of God.

Sisters and brothers, our journey to the manger has begun. Let us walk this journey with purpose and determination. Let us walk it seeking God’s restoration of us, not to whom we’ve been before, but to whom we authentically are. Let us walk in love, in grace, in humility. And, as we walk, may God’s face shine upon us and upon our world. May it be so. Amen