



making God's love visible in downtown Memphis

Raw Prayer
The Second Sunday in Lent
March 13, 2022
The Rev. Paul McLain

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

Years ago, I heard a sermon in which the pastor said, 'Too often, we seek the hands of God rather than seeking the face of God.' By that he meant, we often pray to God for things such as, 'God, please help me pass this test,' 'God, please help me pay these bills,' While these are valid prayers, they are prayers for what God's hands might give us.

Psalm 27, which we prayed (chanted) this morning, calls us into a deeper prayer – a prayer, yes, about what God's *hands* can give us, but more about how seeking God's *face* can change us. There is something elusive, even dangerous, about the face of God. And there is a tension throughout the Bible between the face of God as hidden and the face of God as revealed. There was a tradition, based on God's dialogue with Moses in Exodus, that one could not see the face of God and live. Yet, the writer of this Psalm, dares to express the deepest longing of the writer's heart: 'Your face, Lord, do I seek. Do not hide your face from me.'

During a confirmation class a few years ago, one of the participants described how she loves the Psalms. She shared how the prayers expressed in the Psalms spoke to her at so many times in her life. The Psalmist's prayers became her prayers.

The Psalms are different than the other Scriptures. Rather than giving us narrative or exhortation, the Psalms give us something best described as *raw prayer*. It often sounds like the Psalmist is writing these verses as a wild beast is chasing her up a hill, or a bully is waiting to pounce on him just downhill.

Listen again to the third and fourth verses of Psalm 27:

'Though an army encamp against me,
yet my heart shall not be afraid;
And though war should rise up against me,
yet will I put my trust in the Lord.'

We can't help but think of the people of Ukraine, fighting and fleeing, in these dark days in their homeland. We can imagine them lifting up all sorts of raw prayers. And as our hearts ache for the people of Ukraine, and ache for the crises and griefs in our own lives, we have the courage to pour out the raw prayer to God found in verses 12 and 13:

'Hide not your face from me,
nor turn away your servant in your displeasure.
You have been my helper;
cast me not away.
Do not forsake me!'

The Psalmist, and we, take confidence that God listens to our prayers, no matter how raw they are. Maybe, especially, because of how raw they are – since these are our most honest prayers.

We treat the Psalms differently than other Scriptures. It is the only part of the Scriptures that each Sunday the entire congregation gives voice to praying or chanting.

I remember my first week in seminary. We, the new first year students, were so excited to be there. We all arrived early each day for Morning Prayer. St. Luke's Chapel was set up like a small gymnasium with four rows of seats on the north side directly facing four rows of seats on the south side. The north side said the odd verses of the Psalms; the south side said the even verses. And we first year seminarians were determined to impress the Dean and upper-class students that we were the most motivated class to ever arrive at seminary. So, each day we said the Psalms louder and louder. It got to the point that the actual words of the Psalms no longer mattered to us. It was as if we were at a Grizzlies game yelling: 'We've got spirit, yes we do, we've got spirit, how 'bout you? No, we've got spirit, yes we do, we've got spirit how 'bout you?'

This went on for several days until finally, one morning, wise Professor Beeley got up to have what he called a 'teaching moment' with all of us. He explained to us how the Psalms are meant not to be shouted, but *prayed*. He talked about how the Psalms are to be spoken or chanted *reverently* - almost *under the voice*. He told us how important it is that each of us listen for how our neighbor in the seat next to us is praying the Psalm. Because there are days when a neighbor may be so moved by the words she is praying that I will need to '*hold* her voice up.' And then the next day, this same neighbor may need 'to *hold* my voice up.'

After his talk, we prayed the Psalms very differently. We became more reverent and attentive to the words. We listened for each other's voices. We began *holding* up each other's voices. We began *being held* up by each other's voices. As this happened, we ceased being a class. We became a community.

As we prayed (chanted) Psalm 27 together this morning, the raw prayer of an individual became the raw prayer of our community. We all shared in prayer the deepest longing of our heart- to be in such intimate communion with God that we dare to seek the face of our Lord.

How and where do we find the face of God? Well, I don't know that we so much find it. Rather, I believe that if we are attentive, God reveals it to us. This revelation may happen in moments when the light suddenly shines in. Or it may happen more gradually over the journey of a lifetime.

The Psalmist, and we, pledge to be open to God's revelation by praying: 'One thing I asked of the Lord, that I will seek after: to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the

beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in his temple.' We seek the face of God by being faithful in adopting a rhythm of worship.

The Psalmist also prays, 'Teach me your way, O Lord, and lead me on a level path.' As we glimpse the face of God, we are called to change how we live. We begin to see ways in which our lives are out of balance, and how we can find a more level path.

The Psalmist ends the prayer with these words: 'Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!' Waiting is hard for us. Yet, if we truly seek God's face, we wait. Waiting is not something passive. There is a servant aspect to waiting, as in a waiter at a restaurant.

Mother Teresa confessed that there were times when she felt the face and presence of God were distant and hidden from her. Yet, she continued to faithfully serve and minister. And, even during that time of waiting, I believe the face of God was revealed to us through her face.

I believe it is now being revealed to us through each of our faces. When I look into your faces as we share communion here at the Altar Rail each Sunday, that is when I see the face of God. During this Season of Lent and along the eternal path we travel together, we patiently wait for the Lord, and perhaps, along the way, we will all see nothing less than the face of God. *Amen.*