

**Preacher:** Pastor Twyla

**Scripture:** Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19

<sup>1</sup> Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel,  
you who lead Joseph like a flock!  
You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth  
<sup>2</sup> before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh.  
Stir up your might,  
and come to save us!  
<sup>3</sup> Restore us, O God;  
let your face shine, that we may be saved.  
<sup>4</sup> O Lord God of hosts,  
how long will you be angry with your people's prayers?  
<sup>5</sup> You have fed them with the bread of tears  
and given them tears to drink in full measure.  
<sup>6</sup> You make us the scorn of our neighbors;  
our enemies laugh among themselves.  
<sup>7</sup> Restore us, O God of hosts;  
let your face shine, that we may be saved.  
<sup>17</sup> But let your hand be upon the one at your right hand,  
the one whom you made strong for yourself.  
<sup>18</sup> Then we will never turn back from you;  
give us life, and we will call on your name.  
<sup>19</sup> Restore us, O Lord God of hosts;  
let your face shine, that we may be saved.

About 25 years ago, I was in my office at the Conestoga Church, writing my sermon for that Sunday's service. I was using an older laptop computer that the church gave me to use. I don't remember exactly what went wrong, but what I do remember is that when I saved the sermon, or thought I saved the sermon, I actually lost it. As you might expect, I began to panic. Sermons don't just happen. It takes study and time, lots of time to write one.

Adding to my panic was the fact that it was Saturday afternoon and that evening our son, Nicholas had a Christmas band concert at school. I had no idea what I was going to do. I was not a tech whiz and was at a total loss. The only one I knew to turn to for help was our son Nicholas. So, I grabbed the laptop and went home. I told Nick what happened, and he said he had an idea for how to find and restore the sermon.

He worked with a program called Norton Commander and eventually found my sermon and restored it on my computer. It was restored as one long continuous sentence. So, I was going to need to reformat it, but that would take much less time than writing a new sermon. I was so, so, very grateful and happy.

In today's scripture text, we hear the Psalmist cry out three times for the restoration of God's people. The tribes of the Northern Kingdom, Ephraim, Benjamin and Manasseh, were being held in exile by the Assyrians. Their suffering was great. The psalmist knew the people needed help, God's help.

In the Psalmist's view, likely also the view of the people with him in exile, God must have been very angry with them and had turned His back on them. It was a common belief in those days that when suffering occurred, it was a result of God's anger and punishment for sin.

But it's important for us to note here that the Psalmist makes no mention of sin; although we know that the people had a history of breaking their covenant with God. In fact, the psalmist seems confused, and he seemingly asks, “Why? Why is this happening? Where are you, God?” He sees a disconnect between what he knows as the faithfulness of God because of his experience of God’s faithfulness in the past (which he actually mentions in the middle of the Psalm, verses 8-15); and his current experience of what seems to be God’s disregard for them.

The “why” question, when bad things happen, is an age-old question we find in the bible. Even Jesus cried out when he hung on the cross dying, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” We ask it too, many times over. The truth is, brothers and sisters, that while we might insist on having the answer to why suffering, the reason for some suffering is simply unknowable. It is a mystery, and requires us to trust God, faithfully holding on to Him. We should also be cautious about naming God as the source of our suffering. There are other forces at work in creating and inflicting suffering, and yes, we must admit that sometimes suffering is a product of one’s own doing. However, the focus in psalm 80 is not to determine why they are suffering.

Rather, this psalm, along with many other psalms, points out that we can cry out to God, with full disclosure, our frustration, confusion and anger, because God can handle even our strongest emotions. Perhaps as we let out all our emotions and interpretations in regard to what is happening in our lives, a light will be shed on the circumstances that can help us discern more clearly the truth and what we really need to help us through the difficulties of life.

Three times, the Psalmist calls on God, building each time on his understanding of God, calling on God as the One and only One who can restore us. It’s a call that recognizes we need our relationship with God, for not only forgiveness and guidance, but also for healing. Even as we face the unknown journey towards death, which we all must do eventually, it is that relationship with God that gives hope for the ultimate blessing of life everlasting as promised by our Savior.

The psalmist calls on God for restoration because he knows God is the only one who matters when it comes to healing and fixing our lives. God created us and knows us intimately, better than anyone. He knows what we need and provides us with what we need most.

In a remote Swiss village stands a beautiful church - Mountain Valley Cathedral. It has high pillars and magnificent stained-glass windows, but what makes it special is the most beautiful pipe organ in the whole region. People would come from far off lands just to hear the lovely tunes of this organ.

One day something went wrong with the pipe organ. It released the wrong tones and sounds of disharmony. Musicians and experts from around the world had tried to repair it. No one could find the fault. It was made uniquely, customized and no one really knew how to fix it. They gave up.

After some time, one old man came. He asked, "Why isn't the pipe organ used?"

"It's not playing right," says the church staff.

"Let me try." Since it had been just sitting there, the staff reluctantly agreed to let the old man try his hand at it.

For two days the old man worked in almost total silence. The church worker was, in fact, getting a bit nervous.

Then on the third day - at noon – suddenly the music came. The pipe organ gave off the best music after so many years. The people in the village heard the beautiful music. They came to the church to see.

This old man was playing at the organ. After he finished, one man asked, "How did you fix it? How did you manage to restore this magnificent instrument when even the world's experts could not?"

The old man said, "It was I who built this organ fifty years ago. I created it, and now I have restored it."

God does the same for us when we recognize our need for him, even in the most troubling and confusing circumstances of our lives. It is our relationship with Him that gives us hope to persevere and overcome challenges. In this season of Advent, we are reminded that God breaks through the darkness of our lives and brings hope. For this reason, we seek him.

We hear in the psalmist's prayer a cry to God to, "shine his face on us." The psalmist obviously realizes that God wants to be known. In the psalmist's day, getting to know people occurred most often in face-to-face meetings. It wasn't as easy as putting a letter in the mailbox for the postman to deliver, or as easy as picking up a phone and calling someone.

Today, face-to-face interaction happens even less. Instead, we can text or facetime or skype with people instead of talking in-person with each other. These ways of connecting, while providing immediate responses to one another, misses some other ways that we use to communicate, like the nuances of body language.

God does shine in our lives. He breaks through our darkness through his Word. He sheds light into our days through his messengers, friends, family and strangers who carry His light into our lives. Most importantly, through His greatest Gift of all, His only Son Jesus. God made a face-to-face appearance in our world through His Son; and He continues to make face-to-face appearances to us now through the presence and indwelling of the Holy Spirit. God chose to do more than send us a text message to perk us up a little. He comes to us personally.

The psalmist cried out to God to make his face to shine upon them, because he knew that in doing so, God would restore hope to the people lost in darkness without hope, and they would be saved. That's the third part of the psalmist's prayer, that God would save them.

The prayer of the psalmist echoes the same hopeful yearning of God's people today, "Let your face shine that we may be saved." We are saved from whatever darkens our way from being connected to God. The question for us then is: "where do we see and experience God's face shining today?" There's plenty of darkness all around us: illness, death, wars, shootings, greed, the list goes on and on. If we allow these things to have complete power over us, we won't see God's light that brings hope. If we live with the attitude that nothing really seems to matter, everything is hopeless, we won't look for God's light. If we submit to the selfish sinful nature of the world we will not see God's light shining in our lives.

The answer to the melancholic plea in psalm 80 is a resounding "Yes." We know the psalmist believes this, otherwise, why would he offer this prayer in the first place. He trusts God to say: Yes, I will give ear to your cry. Yes, I will come and save you. Yes, I will restore our relationship fractured by your faithlessness and sin. Yes, I will save you from neighbors who wish to destroy you. Yes, my hand will be upon you. Yes, you will know the strength of the living God.

Advent reminds us that there is good news, the light does shine into our darkness. We can be restored from a state of hopelessness to the hope we find in Christ who saves us. The darkness cannot overcome God's light, the darkness imposed on us by what happens around us or in our world, nor the darkness of our own choosing that arises in us if we reject God. God's light shines hope into our lives. May you see God's face shine upon you. Let go of darkness and be open to God's light, and embrace the hope that he brings. Amen.