

A Sermon  
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Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
December 3, 2023

## **Absence Becomes Presence**

Psalm 80

Our lives are driven and shaped by the calendar. Our priorities and our plans are formed by how we mark time. Though this is true throughout the year, it's especially so during the season we're entering. As December gets underway, we can already feel the pressure of dates and deadlines. Those 24-hour blocks of time called Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and so on, are starting to fill up with events, assignments, and objectives, most of them Christmas related. The period running from late November up to December 25 has a way of overwhelming us and overbooking us.

That's why we as a congregation gather on this Sunday and do something as revolutionary as lighting a candle on a ring of greenery called the Advent wreath. Lots of other churches are doing the same thing today. That's because there's more than just one calendar in play. In many parts of the Christian community, including a range of denominations, today is the first Sunday of Advent.

The word *advent* derives from a Latin term that means "coming" or "arriving." It's a reminder that the God of the Christian faith, rooted in the faith of God's people Israel, is a God who comes to save. God arrives on the scene to redeem and restore, to heal what is broken, to make right what has gone wrong. So during Advent we reflect on and cultivate our longing for the coming of Christ.

In the Christian faith, we actually speak of Christ's coming in three senses. First of all, the coming of Christ in the incarnation, as we remember and celebrate Jesus' birth, the arrival of God in human form. Secondly, we speak of Christ coming at the end of history, his arrival in final judgment, bringing in the fullness of God's kingdom and the new creation. And thirdly, we speak of Christ coming in the present, meeting us in our daily lives through the presence and work of the Holy Spirit, embodied in the life of the church. In some respects, Advent holds together all three senses of Christ's coming.

But the primary accent is on Christ's final coming, to complete the redemption of the world and fully unveil the reign of God. That's why Advent has traditionally been a season focusing on self-examination, repentance, and preparation for the arrival of the Lord. It's a season for proclaiming watchfulness and practicing faithful waiting. We need to renew our sense of longing and yearning for the arrival of God's salvation. In this way, we live out what we pray when we say, as our Lord Jesus taught us, "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:9-10).

Our prayer is an expression of hope, and we light a candle to signify it. Granted, one little candle may not seem like much compared to all the illumination coming at us from all directions this month. Christmas certainly has its place, but it also has a way of becoming too much. Our yearning for Christ's arrival in the future can get overwhelmed and drowned out by our remembrance of Christ's arrival in the past. That's why many parts of the

Christian community have maintained Advent as a means of preparing slowly and patiently for the arrival of Christmas Day and the nearly two-week period following it. The joy of Jesus' birth is important, but it can take on even greater depth when it's preceded by a time of careful preparation. As one person has put it, "... we cannot truly sing 'Joy to the World' unless we have thoroughly rehearsed 'O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.'"<sup>1</sup>

This longing for God's arrival to save comes through in today's text, Psalm 80. This psalm is full of lament. Lament is a form of expression, often poetic, in which an individual or a group of people give voice to trauma, suffering, and loss. Lament is more than just complaining or griping. It often involves a deep sense of pain and rage against the injustices of life. Lament involves calling out, seeking out, reaching out, particularly to the Lord. As one person has put it, lament "allows both the individual and community to 'stay real' with God about the stuff of life."<sup>2</sup>

In Psalm 80, the people's perception of reality is that God is absent. True, the psalm begins with an acknowledgement that God guides and protects his people with the power of a king. The psalmist cries, "Awaken your might; come and save us" (v. 2b). This probably reflects a situation where the Northern Kingdom of Israel had fallen to Assyria in 722 BCE. So God's people cry out for the Lord to show the full power of his divine radiance, to come defeat their enemies and deliver them from bondage. Notice how this psalm is punctuated by the refrain, used three times: "Restore us, O God; make your face shine upon us, that we may be saved" (vv. 3, 7, 19).

This repeated plea for God's love and presence is a cry for restoration of their relationship with God, especially because God seems so distant, so angry, so indifferent to his people's distress and suffering. They have so much that they want to say to God, yet God seems to have nothing to say to them. Their experience reflects the experience of countless individuals and communities who feel a sense of despair in the midst of their pain and suffering. Where is God? Does God see and know what I'm going through? Has the Lord abandoned us? In the face of things that are so wrong, why is God not working to make things right?

Reflecting on the experience of persecuted Christians, Turkish theologian Ziya Meral writes: "Where is God when millions of his children are being persecuted in the most brutal ways? Why does he keep silent in the middle of persecution but speak loudly in the middle of conferences with famous speakers and worship bands? I have prayed many times like Luther: 'Bless us, Lord, even curse us! But don't remain silent!'"<sup>3</sup>

What feels like the silence of God is what drives the psalmist to cry out, "O Lord God Almighty, how long will your anger smolder against the prayers of your people?" (v. 4). And soon the refrain, "Restore us, O God Almighty; make your face shine upon us, that we may be saved" (v. 7). This is the Advent cry for deliverance. It's why we, and millions of God's people in Christ, light the candle of hope, even when it appears that despair, destruction, and death rule the day.

"Make your face shine upon us." In the Scriptures, a person's face is often synonymous with his or her presence. This type of thinking is woven into the biblical portrayal of God as well. In fact, the most common Hebrew term for "presence" is also translated "face." We get a sense of this in the Scriptural blessing that's sometimes used in congregational worship: "The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace" (Num. 6:24-26).

Dallas Willard, who lost his mom when he was a young child, once wrote about another little boy whose mom had died. Because he was especially sad and lonely at night, the boy would come into his father's room and ask if he could sleep with him. But even then, he couldn't rest until he knew not only that he was with his father, but that his father's face was turned toward him. "Father, is your face turned toward me now?" "Yes," his father would say. "You are not alone. I'm with you. My face is turned toward you." When the boy was assured of this, he could finally rest.<sup>4</sup>

In my ministry of pastoral care, one of the situations I regularly encounter is individuals, normally enduring some type of suffering, pain, and hardship, asking if it's okay to be angry with God, to question God, to voice their doubts and to wrestle with God. I often point them to the psalms, where we find individuals and communities pouring out their complaint to the Lord. I encourage the folks I serve to take their pain and their pleas, and bring them honestly into the presence of God, baring their souls to our Maker and Redeemer. In a way, this is a very Advent kind of thing to do. It shows that in the midst of what feels like God's absence, you'll still seek his presence and call out for help.

Writer Kenneth Wilson tells about the multi-story house where he grew up in Pittsburgh. He and his family slept on the third floor in what was essentially a finished attic that included two bedrooms, a hallway, and a storage room for trunks. The second story of the house was rented out to a tenant. Wilson says that as the youngest child, he usually had to go to bed first, which meant a long trip up the stairs to that floor of dark bedrooms. There was no electricity above the second floor. A gas light had to be turned on, then turned off once Wilson was settled in bed. He writes:

That bed in that room on the third floor seemed to be at the end of the earth, remote from human habitation, close to unexplained noises and dark secrets. At my urging, my father would try to stop the windows from rattling, wedging wooden matchsticks into the cracks. But they always rattled in spite of his efforts. Sometimes he would read me a story, but inevitably the time would come when he would turn out the light and shut the door, and I would hear his steps on the stairs, growing fainter and fainter. Then all would be quiet, except for the rattling windows and my cowering imagination.

Once, I remember, my father said, "Would you rather I leave the light on and go downstairs, or turn the light out and stay with you for awhile?" ... [I chose] presence with darkness, over absence with light.<sup>5</sup>

The candle on our Advent wreath reminds us that as we yearn and pray for the full appearing of the light at final the coming of Christ, we still trust that God is with us in the midst of present darkness. That darkness, whatever forms it takes, calls for lament. As one commentator has put it, "All that is ravaged, fed upon, burned, and cut down in the world is crying out for the return of God's presence, for God's countenance to shine once more."<sup>6</sup> Remember that our way toward Christmas joy passes through the hard realities of our broken lives in a broken world. So we join with others in the cry, "Restore us, O Lord God Almighty; make your face shine upon us, that we may be saved" (v. 19).

<sup>1</sup> Stanley Grenz, "Drive-Through Christmas. Christianity Today (December 6, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> Keith A. Russell, "On Exposing the Lie," *The Living Pulpit*, Vol. 11, No. 4 (October-December 2002) 10.

<sup>3</sup> Ziya Meral, "Bearing the Silence of God." Christianity Today. March 19, 2008. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2008/march/29.41.html> (November 30, 2023).

<sup>4</sup> This story is summarized by John Ortberg, "God Is Closer than You Think." Dallas Willard Center. <https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2017/may/5052217.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Kenneth L. Wilson, *Have Faith without Fear* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970) 54.

<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth Webb, Commentary on Psalm 80:1-7. Working Preacher. December 23, 2012. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-of-advent-3/commentary-on-psalm-801-7> (November 30, 2023).