

## Salvation's Face

Isaiah 9:1-4  
1 Corinthians 1:10-18  
Matthew 4:12-23  
Psalm 27:1, 5-13

This morning, I imagine everyone is a bit on edge. We find ourselves waiting and anxious. When will this snow turn to ice? What if we lose power? Are the pipes going to freeze? Do we have enough food, water, blankets, candles, and batteries? As our fears grow, we lose our grounding. When anxiety consumes us, it becomes increasingly challenging to remain open to God and others. When we turn inward, we close off from our source of help. This morning's readings offer us an alternative to the chaos that develops inside us through our fears, by showing us the way of salvation.

It is ironic that on a day when we cannot access our church buildings, we hear David saying the one thing he asks of God is to dwell forever in the temple. Gratefully we live at a time, unlike David, when we recognize the presence of God is as available to us in our respective homes as in any prescribed house of worship. David's sentiment remains pertinent, however, because we understand that to experience the blessing of God, we must be open to receiving it. When trouble and anxieties threaten to overwhelm us, God's peace is available when we turn towards God to accept it.

David says, "You speak in my heart and say, 'seek my face'. Your face, Lord, will I seek." The language of one's face refers to a relationship, one's presence, attention, accessibility, and favor. This poetry is describing relational trust. He says humbly, "hide not your face from me." Every time we admit our vulnerability to God, naming our dependence, and our desire for God's nearness, we are following in David's footsteps. The Psalmist trusted God so much, a trust built through some very difficult days together, that he knew God's presence was a deeper good than mere physical protection. He chose a relationship with God even through difficult circumstances. And his love for God made him able to behold God's beauty and provision in a way that makes it possible for us to identify this same truth for ourselves centuries later.

Our fear can cause us to turn inward. But as much as our rugged American individualism wants us to believe we are better off taking care of ourselves than depending on anyone else, our highest good is when our faces remain open to God's face. It is in relationship with God that we find the resources we need to overcome through life's difficulties. It is through that relationship that we are saved.

Salvation is not just about our own experience of God as we navigate life. It often begins there, but our experience of God's presence is always about the way that works itself out in our life together with others. Paul had a strong finger wagging at the Corinthian church for the way they weaponized their baptism against one another. He told the church to be united without division, of the same mind and same purpose. If they had remembered that their purpose was to stay in a dependent relationship with one another before the face of God, they probably would not have been fighting over whose baptism had greater value. He ends his scolding message to them by upending their way of valuing hierarchy.

Whereas the Corinthians still believed their greatest good was in claiming power over others, Paul offers Jesus' followers the way of the cross. The power of the cross is in its confrontation against the world's way of valuing. Jesus' way is upside down. The cross is victory through failure, power revealed through weakness. In fact, Paul speaks of those who "are being saved". He indicates that salvation is ongoing, something we experience as we humbly lean on God's power. In other words, rather than being saved by something we accomplish and move from, salvation comes through our ongoing identification with Christ's death. It is our face remaining open to Jesus' face smiling back at us as we experience pain, confusion, and deprivation that we learn the power of God's presence on our behalf. Power to heal, restore, and comfort.

In today's lessons from Isaiah, we hear Isaiah refer to the Land of Zebulun and Naphtali. And we hear of Jesus leaving Nazareth to take up residence in Galilee. None of this is helpful to us if we don't understand a little of the geography. Galilee is in the northern part of Israel; it is also called Capernaum. Its central feature is the Sea of Galilee, where Jesus spent most of his ministry. Galilee was a bordering region of Assyria, Israel's enemy. There was a trade route that ran from Assyria straight down through the center of Israel connecting it with Egypt in the south. In Isaiah's writing, he refers to it as "The Way of the Sea", The Via Maris. It was a necessary highway for the movement of goods between powerful nations, but those who lived near it were not well loved. Routes like this have always blended people groups who would otherwise remain separate. The mixing of differences blurs otherwise well-defined lines, making people who exist in those spaces suspect. Their purity of their thoughts, beliefs, and practices were compromised, and their own tribes could no longer be certain of their loyalty.

The border region in the north was the land of Zebulun and Naphtali. As with all border regions where purity is despoiled, this region was exposed, compromised, and the first to be invaded. When Isaiah wrote to that region, they had been decimated by Assyria. He was promising that, while their own country had abandoned them, and they felt distanced from God, they would be remembered. By the time Jesus

arrived in this region, the locals still bore the stigma of having been rejected by God. And while this land was part of The Promised Land and theoretically claimed by Israel, in reality, the religious purists had written it off. By the time of Matthew's writing, this region was referred to as "Galilee of the Gentiles". -

Jesus had begun his ministry in relative obscurity, out in the wilderness. When John was arrested, Jesus recognized that John's ministry was complete and it was time to begin his own in earnest. He did not head to Jerusalem, the heart of his religious world. Rather, he went to Galilee. He took his ministry to the place that was literally ground zero of Israel's humiliation. He went to love the rejected, to heal the broken, and bring light into the darkest of places.

Jesus began by preaching repentance; a change in thinking that would lead to a change of being. Nothing can stay the same when the Kingdom of God has come near. God was turning towards mankind through Jesus, inviting humanity to experience God's nearness. Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom was so powerful that men instantly left their livelihoods when Jesus asked them to follow. His offered salvation was so complete that disease fled in his presence, proving that God's kingdom powerfully works for repair and restoration. Nearness to Jesus reversed the social and religious exclusion of those living with illness. It restored people into community, reversing shame, and undoing isolation. Like with the Psalmist, the people experienced the reality that seeking God's face through Jesus calmed their fears. It didn't change everything about their circumstances, but that relationship emboldened them to face fearful situations with peace, strengthened by God's limitless resources to then share the message with others.

It is totally bonkers that Simon, Andrew, James, and John would drop everything, in the middle of work, leaving their means of financial support and stability to follow a man they barely knew simply because he told them he'd make them fish for people. They had no way of knowing what that even meant. They didn't know what the Kingdom of Heaven was or what Jesus wanted them to repent from or to. They hadn't seen him heal anyone yet. The only thing they could possibly have known was what it felt like to be in the presence of God in human flesh. That nearness changed everything for them. They had much to fear, but Jesus' presence transformed their lives and changed the world.

We too have much to fear. Beyond a crazy winter storm, the daily news cycle can be terrifying. If we don't stay near Jesus, maintaining that closeness as our highest good, our fears can tear us apart and weaponize us against one another. But we carry within us the transformational power of the Holy Spirit.

We are now God's physical presence to a world desperate to feel the transformational love of God's nearness. To be that we must first know it for ourselves. We find our salvation in the face of God.

May we be a people so transformed by our experience of Jesus that we find peace in the midst of chaos and spread God's restoration into the darkest places with the light of Christ.