

Feeling the Smile

Isaiah 7:10-16

Romans 1:1-7

Matthew 1:18-25

Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18

One year, when I was in college, I participated in the school's annual fundraising phone-a-thon. I am not a salesperson, but I was trying to be helpful. Before we began making calls, we went through a training implemented by a marketing professional. She told us that we should smile while making these phone calls. Even though people couldn't see our faces, the shape of your face changes when you smile, subtly changing the sound of your voice. It's called an auditory smile. There is scientific proof that hearing someone's smile initiates an equal reaction in response. Biologically, if someone smiles at you, even though the phone, you will be triggered to smile in return. And the very act of smiling, does in fact, cause you to feel happier. What I learned that day is that if I was ever feeling insignificant in this world, I should smile at someone. It will change the way they feel, triggering a cascade of elevated feelings in my wake.

Today's Psalmist repeats a refrain, designed to highlight the power of God's smile.

"Restore us, O God of hosts; show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved".

The light of God's countenance refers to the illumination of God's face. It is the joy that warms God's heart when looking at us, the glow that makes God's eyes smile in response to God's feelings about us. We hear that auditory smile and imagine those smiling eyes when God promises to send us Emmanuel, the God who is with us. And that brightening is so powerful that it our very salvation.

We live in a world where much of Christianity has been hijacked by those who use the fear of God as a means of control. God is often portrayed as angry at our sin, distant, and disgusted by our inadequacy. So many people have been damaged by the church's response to them, feeling that the church's judgments against them project God's own feelings. So many feel defined by their sins, rather than by their adoption as children of

God, loved and desired. Consequently, it's not uncommon find ourselves hiding from God, alienated from the warmth and love our souls need.

It makes sense. Even without a warped version of God's love, our own shame regularly condemns us. This Psalm is a perfect example. God's people had gotten themselves into a terrible situation through their disobedience and they were experiencing the natural consequences of walking away from God's protection. Their country had experienced war, exile, and deprivation. They felt as if they had been abandoned by God. But God is always reaching towards us, even when we cannot feel it, or our circumstances are overwhelming. God's presence is always our restoration and our salvation. And God's presence never leaves us. ---

Today's passage from Isaiah is one that we always hear from Matthew's perspective as a prophecy foretelling the Messiah. But when Isaiah wrote these words, they were immediately relevant. King Ahaz was in trouble because of the wars brewing around him. God wanted to help Ahaz and even offered to provide a sign of help as proof. But Ahaz didn't want to trust God; he wanted to control Judah's destiny himself. He rejected God's help and the offered sign of the proof of that help. In exasperation, Isaiah scolded Ahaz for rejecting God. Isaiah said God would send the sign anyway, but Ahaz' rejection meant that sign would end up feeling like a condemnation of his rejection rather than proof of the comfort of God's love. Within the time it took for a baby to be born and grow old enough to be accountable for his own actions, the kings that Ahaz feared would be defeated. The child Isaiah pointed to would be called Immanuel, the proof of God's presence even as Ahaz rejected God's offer of help. Ahaz rejected the very proof of God's love and his country was torn apart by war.

God is always reaching towards us, always looking upon us with the warmth of a smile. The Light of God's countenance is always available to us, even when our own choices and the choices of others make it difficult for us to feel it's light. But God is Emmanuel, the God who is with us, and by whom we are forever being saved. The plea of the psalmist is

for God to restore us. Our alienation from God and one another is **SO** destructive. He's asking for the renewed ability to feel God's smile. It is what we all want; the salvation we all need. ---

In his letter to the Romans, Paul speaks of those who are called of God. Paul, a Jewish man, has been called as an apostle. The Romans, gentiles, and outsiders, had also been called to belong to Jesus. All those reading this letter were called to be saints. The invitation of God's smiling voice goes out to everyone willing to hear and respond. Paul speaks of the obedience of faith in response to that call. The word "obedience" comes from the root word which means "to hear". Our ability to hear God, to detect the smile in God's voice, is linked with our willingness to obey. To be a saint is to be set apart, to live a life determined to hear and follow the voice that smiles on us, the invitational voice of the call of God, and to be restored into the fellowship of unity with that voice.

However, we do not always like what that voice says. Regardless of how warm, loving, and invitational the voice of God's loving presence is, the faith part of trusting that voice sometimes feels insurmountable. It was for Ahaz, and his rejection of God's offer had catastrophic consequences. The Jewish people were devastated by the king's unwillingness to trust God's love.

But today we hear another story as well. Rather than a powerful king who rejected God's audacious request for faith, we read about Joseph. Joseph heard the same type of dramatically shocking invitation from God, and yet, his willingness to hear and follow the loving smile from that voice, became our means of salvation and restoration. Like Ahaz, Joseph had made a plan resolving to protect himself and everyone else from an impending crisis. Unlike Ahaz, when Joseph was confronted with God's invitation to change that plan, Joseph trusted God's love, he forfeited his own agenda; obeying God, he protected Mary and provided for the safety and security of the infant Messiah. His faith and obedience in response to the smiling voice of God was the means through which Emmanuel made God's presence known to us.

We are now called, just like the believers in Rome, to belong to Jesus Christ. The voice we hear invites us to feel the light of God's countenance shining on us, and through it to be restored. That smiling voice speaks to us of unbreakable love, compassion, tenderness, and joy. And just as that voice speaks to us, God also speaks through us. As saints, set apart to live God's presence into this world, we become the voice that smiles on us as we smile on others.

God's face lights up and God's countenance smiles on all of us. In faithful love, God offered the divine presence to the rebellious king, Ahaz. God's love reached out to Paul when he was actively pursuing and killing Jesus' followers. God's invitation reached out to the disillusioned Joseph while he planned to abandon the mother of Christ. God is not looking for brilliant people making perfect choices to participate in the divine plan of restoration. God delights in all of us, smiling on us in our brokenness so that we might be restored.

When we hear God's voice and feel the smile of God's countenance lighting up the divine face, we are saved. The smile we hear transforms our own face so that smiles break out from us and onto the people around us, triggering a chain reaction through which the world is saved. Sometimes God's voice will invite us into acts of faith that confound human reason. God does not ask us to understand, be prepared, or perform perfectly. We merely respond to the smile and offer it back out into the world. Like our Lord, sometimes those we are invited to smile upon will seem questionable, God's people are a motley crew to be sure, but the same divine smile that changes us will change the world around us if we allow it.

May we be a people who let ourselves feel God's delight, who bask in the light of God's countenance; a people whose own smiles are transformed by the love of God so that everyone we encounter knows the restorative joy of having someone's face light up in response to their presence. And through that infectious love, may we all be saved.