

THE WORD

Prayer for illumination

God, source of all light, by your Word, you give light to the soul. Pour out on us the spirit of wisdom and understanding, that our hearts and minds may be opened to know your truth and your way. Amen.

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON

Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19 (Page 919)

¹Hear us, Shepherd of Israel,
you who lead Joseph like a flock.
You who sit enthroned between the cherubim,
shine forth ²before Ephraim, Benjamin and Manasseh.

Awaken your might;
come and save us.

³Restore us, O God;
make your face shine on us,
that we may be saved.

⁴How long, Lord God Almighty,
will your anger smolder
against the prayers of your people?

⁵You have fed them with the bread of tears;
you have made them drink tears by the bowlful.

⁶You have made us an object of derision to our neighbors,
and our enemies mock us.

⁷Restore us, God Almighty;
make your face shine on us,
that we may be saved.

17-19

¹⁷Let your hand rest on the man at your right hand,
the son of man you have raised up for yourself.

¹⁸Then we will not turn away from you;
revive us, and we will call on your name.

¹⁹Restore us, Lord God Almighty;
make your face shine on us,
that we may be saved.

²⁴“But in those days, following that distress,
“the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light;

²⁵the stars will fall from the sky,
and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.”

²⁶“At that time people will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory.²⁷And he will send his angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens.

²⁸“Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near.²⁹Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that it is near, right at the door.³⁰ Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened.³¹ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.

³²“But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.³³ Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come.³⁴ It’s like a man going away: He leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each with their assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep watch.

³⁵ “Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back—whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at dawn.³⁶ If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping.³⁷ What I say to you, I say to everyone: ‘Watch!’”

Power of Hope

I. Communication

- A People are talking or communicating with each other more frequently than at any other time in human history.
- B. Back in the day, if you wanted to talk to someone you might
- a) pick up the phone a black device owned by the Bell company or AT & T - and place a call,
 - b) write a letter and post it in the mail,
 - c) record a message on a little spool of tape, or a cassette and put it in the mail as well or
 - d) actually go visit someone and chat face-to-face. Parlors were invented for such
- C. Today, these limitations do not exist and in fact few people use these options to make a human connection anymore.
- D. Yes, we talk on the mobile phone, but many prefer to text.
- E. And yes, we'll visit in homes with friends, but drop-in visits are a thing of another era.
- Fr This is not a bad thing necessarily.
- a) Take a look at people on the street, or in a crowded room, or on the bus. Chances are at least 50 percent or more of those people have some kind of phone in their hands,
 - b) and they're texting, showing someone photos, reading e-mails or listening to music.
 - c) And the kids! They can carry on several conversations simultaneously; multiple messages pop up, demanding instant responses and immediate attention.
 - d) Cryptic replies are sent out at a feverish pace.
- G. With texting, sending instant messages, and (now regarded as "slow communication") e-mailing, there are increasingly numerous ways for people to communicate.
- H. to the dismay of office workers everywhere, it's increasingly difficult to unplug and disconnect from constant, ongoing communication.
- a) The office -- and the boss -- are only a key stroke away; constantly checking our handheld screens has become a 24/7 obsession.

b) The concept of downtime and private vs. work time seems to be diminishing.

I. The concept Of face time has taken on a whole new meaning, particularly with the advent of Skype, Noom, and other computer-enabled visual technologies.

a) "Face time^R no longer means sitting down, face-to-face, looking into the eyes of another human being, and using your senses to pick up on the nuances of expression, pauses, tone and inflection.

b) Any interaction is considered face timer II. When was the last time you had a "heart-to-heart" talk where there was real give and take?

- A. Can you remember a conversation that was focused not on logistics or problem solving, but an exchange of feelings, emotions or deeply held beliefs?
- B. We're hard-wired to be in community with one another; we yearn to be in the company of others.
- C. The irony of our modern, Cyber-connected world is that we're becoming physically insulated.
- D. Endless "conversations" can take place in the seclusion of one's home,
- E. In this society where the word "friend" has become a verb, too many people are feeling alone and isolated.
- F. It turns out that seeing words appear on a screen may not be as emotionally satisfying as exchanging ideas, tips and needs face-to-face with another person.
- G. Our vocal expressions can reflect our emotions in a way that a computer screen cannot.
- H. When we are in conversation with one another, we can express a wide variety of meanings using the God-given gift of the human voice.

For example: The typewritten phrase "you are here" conveys only the factual statement of a person in a place. Yet that simple statement can hold a myriad of Implications depending on how it is expressed vocally. TO' saying it aloud "You're here. Experiment with the number of ways that you can change the meaning, depending on how ifs said. One can convey anything from excitement (You're here!) to amazement (you're here?) to disgust (you are here). How something is said can make a world of difference. That complex variety of possibilities can be lost in a text message: "U R here' as in capital U, capital R, plus here. It just doesn't convey the emotion behind the statement

III. Advent is about time spent with God

- A. If our "face time" with one another is dwindling, our time spent one on one with God is on the endangered list
- a) Our busy world with endless to-do lists challenges the notion of the importance of quiet time with our Creator
 - b) Advent invites us to turn that life-draining pattern upside down.
 - c) Advent celebrates the incarnational, Word-becomes-flesh God.
 - d) Advent announces that God was not willing to have a distant, arms-length relationship with us
 - e) Advent is all about God's willingness -- even insistence to be vulnerable, accessible, reachable, and attainable,
 - f) Advent breaks down the barriers between the created and the Creator.
- B. God does begin the process with a messages
- a) There's the silent, distant memorandum of the star in the sky; it's not clearly understood by everyone and is open to misinterpretation (just ask Herod). Yet there it is, an open invitation to anyone who will receive it.
 - b) God does not stop there; God also sends messengers to deliver this urgent, good news. God has the comer on the market when it comes to the best messengers. Gabriel and company announce the upcoming birth and sing their alleluias for the shepherds and anyone else who will listen.
 - c) But messaging was not enough*
 - (1) God did not choose to communicate through a third person.
 - (2 God's desire was to deliver the Good News of mercy, love and hope in person.
 - (3) God chose face time in a way that would change the world.
 - (4) God spoke to the hearts of the people through Jesus, God's son.
- C. Not only does God yearn to communicate deeply and intimately with Gods people, God chooses the perfect way to slide into our lives.
- a) While anyone might reasonably be intimidated by the idea of approaching the omnipotent, omniscient Master of the Universe and speaking up, even the most hesitant among us can be drawn into a conversation with a child*
 - b) Place a baby in meager circumstances -- like, for example, in a manger -- and even the hardest of hearts will begin to coo or at least grudgingly smile.
 - c) Invite passersby to come, worship and adore and 10 -- a relationship is born.
- IV. We long for God's intervention

"Hope," he continues, "means being surprised, because we don't know what is best for us or how our lives are going to be completed. To cultivate hope is to suppress wishing -- to refuse to fantasize about what we want but live in anticipation of what God is going to do next.

VII. The psalmist calls out "shine," and throughout the season of Advent, the Good News of hope is indeed illuminated.

A. God's face shines not only in the baby Jesus but also in the obedience of Mary, the willingness of Joseph, the amazement of the shepherds, and the faithfulness of the magi.

B. Advent is an invitation to us to receive the gift of hope which, if received, is indeed our salvation.

C. Hope is found in the shining face of God

VIII. Let your face shine," pleads the psalmist: The question for us is-- where do we see and experience God's face shining today?

A. The good news for this dark season is that the light does continue to shine in the darkness.

B. We can be restored by God's grace.

C. The darkness cannot overcome God's light God's face will shine and reflect God's mercy and forgiveness,

D. The answer to the plaintive plea in psalm 80 is a resounding "Yes."

- 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

E. This litany of need is answered by a refrain of assurance. This is the promise of Advent -- that God's strength meets us in the midst of our weakness. There is no place too dismal, no sin too egregious, no transgression too dire to separate us from the love of God who now comes to us in Christ.

IX. The insistent message of Advent is -- don't settle for less than the full power of God Immanuel, God always with us.

A Don't allow Advent to be only about picture-perfect scenes or candle-lit windows.

Advent is about the need for forgiveness and the restoration of hope via a loving relationship with God.

Anything less than that doesn't speak to the urgent, heartfelt cry of God's people.

B. We need God who is our hope -- in person, tangible. Not a message, not a text, not even just a star in the sky.

C. The beautiful imagery of the psalm with its description of God's shining face is particularly poignant during this season filled with candles, stars and lights,

D. We don't simply want the trappings of Advent; we want a hopeful sense that we're okay, that there's a future, that God is with us, that there's more to life than tinsel.

"Come to save us!" we cry out to God. And God does.

Defenseless as a baby, God reflects love and invites compassion.

And that is a message of hope.

Praise be to our all powerful God! Amen.