

Today in our Lenten series, Pause, we will take a look at Psalm 27 and its connection to faces. As I was preparing for this week's message, my memories were drawn back to a time when we longed to see faces.

During the pandemic seeing each other's faces was a challenge. Overnight it seemed like we were transported into a different dimension. In a snap we were asked to Communicate with masks covering our faces. To adjust to using only someone's eyes as an indicator of feelings and emotions. We had to get really good at gestures.

It was especially challenging for me as a brand-new pastor. Only 8 months wet behind the ears when the shutdown occurred. Licensing school definitely didn't prepare me for ministry during a pandemic. I was in good company, because even some of the most experienced pastors struggled.

My work at Intuit prepared me for something that would be helpful. Remote technology, so we were able to quickly pivot to zoom worship. While remote worship gave us some semblance of gathering, it just couldn't compare to those face-to-face opportunities. No passing of the peace. No serving communion to each individual, calling each person by name. No opportunity to linger for a moment as we look each other in the eye knowingly, remembering why we observe this sacrament.

Once during preschool chapel, one of the kids asked me, "Can you tell me what God looks like? I used to know, but I'm beginning to forget." What a question! What reasoning! What theology! It reminds me of how Moses asked to see God with that same yearning. We want concrete. We want physical proof. We want physical assurance. And what do we get? A presence that is deep and mysterious. God responds to Moses with assurance that while the Most High would be near he would not get to see God's face.

Our Psalm today offers us a chance to think about God's presence. Not in the way that we've come to visualize Jesus through the Gospels. Today's Psalm offers us a chance to move away

from our known visualizations of Jesus and focus for a few moments on the mystery of the unknown as we encounter a God whose face is unknown.

The NRSV gives this psalm the title, Triumphant Song of Confidence. As we reflect back on what we heard as this psalm was read just a moment ago, we see expressions of confidence in God's presence. The Psalmist does not doubt God's presence.

Verses 1-6 affirm trust and confidence in God. Look at the metaphors used to describe God: light, salvation, fortress. Because of the trust in God's abiding presence, we need not fear the enemy.

In verses 4-6 the author shares his desire to live in God's house where God will provide shelter. And under that shelter the Psalmist will sing praises and thanksgiving to this sheltering God.

In verses 7-10 David turns to specific requests of God. He asks God to listen to his voice. He asks God to be merciful and respond. And finally, he asks for God's face to be revealed to him, not hidden. He trusts that God will not push him away.

Closing out, we have verses 11-14. In these verses we find 3 specific requests from David, followed by an affirmation of faith. First David wants to be familiar with God's ways. He urgently wants God to show him paths to take "because of my opponents". Finally, he asks God to spare him from his enemies who are engaging in false witness and violent accusations. Verse 14 is one that may be familiar to you. It's an affirmation that God is good. It acknowledges that strength of heart is made possible by hope. (Repeat, amen?) 2 times in this one verse we hear the words "hope in the Lord!" We are to hope in the Lord. You are, and you, and you. "We will hope in the Lord."

This week we will look at verse 8-9 through 2 translations and a paraphrase.

From the CEB: Come, my heart says, seek God's face. Lord, I do seek your face!

From The Hebrew Bible translation by Robert Alter: Of You, my heart said: “Seek My face.” Your face, Lord, I do seek. Do not hide Your face from me, do not turn your servant away in wrath. You are my help.

A paraphrase in the Manhattan Psalter by Sister Juanita Colon: My heart cried out to you, “look at me!” I’ve heard your hidden prompting in the depths of my soul urging me to turn to you and I have, truly I have. Don’t be angry with me, don’t turn away from me, please. You’ve always come to my aid in the past; don’t fail me now.

In our translations David’s desire to seek God’s face is evident. But what a contrast is the plea from verse 9 compared to how this psalm starts out in vs 1. The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? David’s pleading tone in our paraphrase brings with it a shadow of fear. A fear so deep that he is desperate to remember how God has been present with him in the past. Looking for those memories to give him assurance that this divine presence will be with him now. By this request to seek God’s face, David is asking for God’s presence to be with him.

This isn’t the only place in Scripture where God’s face is mentioned. 2 Chronicles 7. God appears to Solomon after the temple is built. In vs14 God promises that the sins of the people will be forgiven and their land healed if they pray and seek God’s face. Seeking God’s face. Church family, this has and always will be a visible act of faith that reveals belief, demonstrates a relationship with God, and confirms a commitment to follow a good path.

Numbers 6 not only describes God’s face but serves frequently as a beloved benediction in many churches. Vs 24-26. “The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you. The Lord lift up his face to you and grant you peace.” Think about it this way. When God’s face is hidden, God’s presence is removed. When God’s face is present, God’s people are assured of receiving God’s care and blessings. Sounds a lot like that saying “No God, No Peace; Know God, Know Peace.

Lent is a time for us to consider our human limitations, to dig more deeply into how to live faithfully. Lent is a time for movement between deep confidence in God's presence and the anxiety we might have in facing difficult situations. Situations that can make us wonder if God is truly present.

Knowing that God's face is turned towards and not away from us. Isn't that a question we experience even today? Is God's face close to me when I encounter disaster, fear, my own sinfulness?

Back to the pandemic for a moment. Did you know what some pastors would do when they would preach into cameras in empty sanctuaries? They would put up photos of their church members in the pews and chairs to make the space look less empty. Talk about the ultimate Flat Stanley. This helped them remember their community as they gathered virtually. It brought a sense of togetherness as the pastor would on their behalf pray for healing, hope and safety.

What about the faces in front of you? Do you look into the faces that are in front of you? How about the stranger on the corner. The lady who walks up and down Stockton Hill in her winter coat waving at cars. Do you wave back or do you grab your phone to avoid contact?

Is there a face you haven't seen in a while? Is it time to catch up with that face? Do you need to have a hard conversation with someone? Are there enemy faces you just do not want to see? What would it take for you to see the face of that enemy through God's eyes?

Rev. Lindsey P Armstrong, in a commentary on Psalm 27 talks about how our Lenten discipline holds "fear and faith, doubt and trust together." She goes on to say that we as Christians are to form communities where people are allowed and taught to talk honestly. (Imagine that!) We are part of a culture that needs connectivity and thrive on authenticity. As a Church Family, why can't we be the ones to offer a safe space to people whose lives, views of the world, or whose clothing are so different from ours?

Psalm 27 is an invitation for us to wrestle with the tension between honest doubts and fears AND faith and trust. To be able to encounter each other's faces and the face of God means to be real and vulnerable. Again I ask you, church family, can we intentionally make it a point to be a safe space for real, vulnerable, face-to-face conversations about issues of faith? Even, dare I say, those that divide us? And through those hard conversations, could we potentially find our way towards things that unite us?

When I say tough issues, I mean tough issues. Conversations about race, sexual orientation, faith traditions outside of Christianity, immigration. Are we as a church providing a space for honest wrestling with all of our humanity and doing so in a way that brings us more fully into the knowledge and presence of God?

Thankfully the pandemic years get further away from us. Now that we see each other face to face, it begs the question. What faces might not be welcome here?

David longed to see the face of God. Knew that when God's face was present and not hidden that he would follow a "good path". Don't you think that God's face is most completely seen when we ourselves see and acknowledge all the faces that God loves? Faces like:

- The autistic child who needs help finding space to be present in worship
- The widow or widower who grieves the loss of a beloved partner
- The teenager wrestling with anxiety and depression and who finds making friends difficult.
- The parents who struggle to make ends meet
- The one whose body is covered with tattoos and piercings.
- The older adult who can no longer live independently.

Each week we are learning about a spiritual practice to deepen our Lenten journey. We've talked about breath and heart prayers and using a labyrinth. Today let's talk about writing or illustrating your own psalm. No, David does not have exclusive rights on writing psalms!

I'm going to tell you something that is going to shock you. Ready? We are all wired differently. Ok, you can breathe now.

As you approach this spiritual practice, know that some of you will be drawn to visual expressions. These will involve markers, crayons, paints, fabric, wood, collage materials, yarn. This is how your mind and soul best connects with God.

Some of you enjoy written expressions. Words, phrases, sentences, and imagery that describe your trust in God. Describe the way God protects you. It is through words that you name fears and ask for God's help. Praise comes best to you through words. In words you describe what God's face looks like to you.

Your Psalm will want to include movements like we saw in Psalm 27. First, affirm trust in God. Second, name fears and petitions to God. Third, make your specific requests to God. Fourth, offer words of affirmation and praise to God.

To build your Psalm start with a few words or images in each area and then continue to expand. Go wild. Maybe even combine words and art. I'd love to see or hear whatever you come up with. I will be sharing my Psalm in the connection and bulletin for next week.

Psalm 27. A psalm of deep faith in the face of God's abiding presence. I pray in this week as you reflect on it, you'll consider the faces of God's beloved people around you. May we be able to say with David. "But I have sure faith that I will experience the Lord's goodness in the land of the living!" I think that's something we can put a good face on!