

Restore Us, O God: Hope

Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19 | 11/27/2011

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 -- and dial a number, b) write a letter and mail it, c) record a message on a little spool of tape, or a cassette and put it in the mail or d) actually go visit someone and chat face-to-face.

Today far fewer people use these options to make a human connection. Yes, we talk on the mobile phone, but many prefer to text. And yes, we'll visit in homes with friends, but drop-in visits are a thing of another era.

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, and they're texting, showing someone photos, reading e-mails or listening to music. Indeed, to the dismay of office workers everywhere, it's increasingly difficult to unplug and disconnect from constant, ongoing communication. The concept of downtime and private vs. work time seems to be diminishing.

The concept of face time has taken on a whole new meaning, particularly with the advent of Skype and other computer-enabled visual technologies. Grandparents Skype with their grandchildren across the country and love staying connected in this way -- not possible a generation ago.

Still, all of the above notwithstanding, we're hard-wired to be in community with one another; we yearn to be in the physical presence of others. The irony of our modern, over-connected world is that we're becoming physically insulated. Too many people are feeling alone and isolated. 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. Our vocal expressions can reflect our emotions in a way that a computer screen cannot. 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. One can convey anything from excitement (You're here!) to amazement (you're here?) to disgust (*you're* here). 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.

If our "face time" with one another is dwindling, our time spent one on one with God is on the endangered list. Our busy world with endless to-do lists challenges the notion of the importance of quiet time with our Creator. Advent invites us to turn that life-draining pattern upside down. Advent celebrates the Word-becomes-flesh God. Advent announces that God was not willing to have a distant, arms-length relationship with us. Advent is all about God's insistence on being vulnerable, accessible, reachable, and attainable. *Advent breaks down the barriers between the created and the Creator.*

God does begin the process with a message. There's the silent, distant memorandum of the star in the sky, an open invitation to anyone who will receive it.

God does not stop there; God *also sends messengers* to deliver this urgent, good news. God has the corner 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.

But messaging was not enough. God did not choose to communicate only through a third person. God's desire was to deliver the Good News of mercy, love and hope *in person*. God chose face time in a way that would change the world. God spoke to the hearts of the people through Jesus, God's son.

Not only does God yearn to communicate deeply and intimately with God's people, God chooses the perfect way to slide into our lives. 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. 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. Invite passersby to come and adore and lo -- a relationship is born.

Psalms 80 lays bare our need for God's intervention. The psalmist repeats the heartfelt need of God's children throughout this prayerful song: "Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved" (v. 3). This writer isn't asking for a message or a brief assurance. These are people without hope. They feel alienated and alone. They need a word of hope and assurance. This is a cry for a relationship, for personal interaction, for "face time" with God.

These people want a sip of the cool waters of hope. And so the prayer is lifted up to God who wants to be seen by us. God's desire to be among His people is outlined in centuries of prophecies preceding the arrival of the Christ child. God's presence and availability is announced by a star in the sky, angels singing God's glory, and heavenly messengers providing detailed directions to startled shepherds.

The prayer of the psalmist echoes the hopeful yearning of God's people today. "Let your face shine that we may be saved," is the call of people *who are surrounded by technology but are still lonely for meaningful communication*. It's the cry of people who may receive hundreds of texts every day but who still feel unheard. It is the yearning of the human heart which does not want simply to be **told** of love but needs to be **transformed** by love, and hope for nothing less.

The psalmist calls out "shine," and throughout the season of Advent, the Good News of *hope* is indeed illuminated. 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. Advent is an invitation to us to receive the gift of hope.

"Let your face shine," pleads the psalmist: The question for us is -- where do we see and experience God's face shining today? The good news for this dark season is that the light does continue to shine in the darkness. We can be restored by God's grace. The darkness cannot overcome God's light. God's face will shine.

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.

This is the promise of Advent -- that God's strength meets us in the midst of our weakness. There is no place so dismal, no sin so horrible, no transgression so awful that it can separate us from the love of God who now comes to us in Christ.

Don't allow Advent to be only about picture-perfect scenes or candle-lit windows. Advent isn't about "Christmas wish lists" sent *from* us *to* God. Advent is about the desperate need for the restoration of hope via a loving relationship with God and God *coming to us* to restore that relationship.

We need God who is our hope -- in person, tangible. Not a message, not a text, not even just a star in the sky. 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. 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 appears, shines with love and invites compassion. And that is a message of hope.

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