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Behold the Face

Praise Break

TENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, YEAR A

This opening week of a praise-focused series invites us to recognize God's presence in both ordinary and extraordinary moments. Centered on awareness, it encourages embodied worship practices that engage the whole self—helping individuals and congregations connect action with reflection as they grow in gratitude, attentiveness, and praise.

REFERENCES

Genesis 32:22-31

Psalm 17:1-7, 15

Romans 9:1-5

Matthew 14:13-21

COLORS

Green

Preaching Notes

Focus text: Psalm 17:1-7, 15

What does it mean to behold the face of God? Isn't there a verse that says something about seeing the face of God and not living through the encounter? (Exodus 33:20, if you're wondering.) So, is seeing the face of God a terrifying experience or a source of comfort and strength? And of course, the answer to this conundrum would have to be "yes."

Maybe we should set aside the what and why questions for a moment and focus on the how. Psalm 17 is full of advice on seeking the face of God. In this “Praise Break,” we hope to help followers embrace the need for praise at regular times in their lives, beyond the weekly gathering for worship. We are called to pay attention to opportunities to praise throughout our day. We cultivate an awareness of God’s presence that then bursts forth in spontaneous praise—sometimes loud; more often, quiet.

But how? How do we cultivate this awareness? How do we make room for praise in our daily lives? The expected answer is that we must become more spiritual. Tune out the world and focus on the unseen. Look beyond the horizon—geographical, occupational, and relational horizons— and seek the face of God beyond.

That is not the advice Psalm 17 gives, however. Look again at how physical the psalm is. Count the body parts; for example, ear and lips, eyes and heart, mouth and feet. It is an anatomical inventory of praise. The psalmist grounds us in the physical, even in the call for the face of God to appear—or perhaps as the means by which the face of God will appear. Maybe it is through our faces, as part of our faces, that the face of God is seen.

But the psalm is not a static inventory of body parts. No, these lips speak; these feet walk; this heart passes the test of faithfulness in action. There is a kinetic quality to this act of praise. There is movement, action, effort in the search for the face of God. There is a time when stillness is necessary. “Be still, and know that I am God,” another psalm tells us (Psalm 46:10 NRSV). But that is not the only way to encounter the face of God.

As a pastor, I was asked how someone might find the will of God for their lives. “I’ve prayed,” they told me, “But I’m not getting a clear answer. How do I know what God wants me to do?” My advice was to keep moving. God seems to work best with moving targets. Keep moving. Pick a direction, and if it isn’t working, then make a change. Like a river that sometimes has to meander until it finds its true path, course corrections can come if we keep moving forward.

“Give ear to my prayer” means keep praying. “Let your eyes see the right” means that you keep looking, listening, and discerning. “My steps have held fast to your paths” (verse 5) means that you were walking as best you could, walking by the light you could see. And in this light, “Wondrously show your steadfast love, O Savior of those who seek refuge from their adversaries at your right hand” (17:70).

Here is a key piece to seeing the face of God and finding the strength to praise at all times. We can't wait; we don't wait until all is well before we seek God's face. We don't wait until all the pieces are in place or the coast is clear and the living is easy. No, we go; we seek; we praise when we feel threatened and when we feel secure. We praise when we feel satisfied and when we are unsettled. That's the beauty of praise; it comes from many sources within us. It carries many moods. Read through the psalms and find an emotion not contained there. It is difficult. Yet they are all invitations to praise.

But then how, in our multidimensional, multifaceted, multi-emotional praise, do we encounter the face of God? What does the psalmist offer to us as a way of experiencing that presence? Verse 15 is key:

As for me, I shall behold your face in righteousness; when I awake I shall be satisfied, beholding your likeness. (Psalm 17:15 NRSV)

I shall behold your face in righteousness. Or we might say, "I shall behold your face as I honor my relationships." Righteousness is a relational concept. It is being faithful to our relationships, with God first of all, but also with one another, with those around us. We see God as we honor and keep those relationships. Jesus told us that when we serve others, we serve him; when we see others—particularly the ones our society doesn't see— we see him. I shall behold your face in righteousness.

But wait, there's more! "When I awake, I shall be satisfied, beholding your likeness." So ... a dream? Is that what it means to encounter God? Do we dream our face-to-face moments? And that's enough, apparently, when I awake, I shall be satisfied. Good enough, we think. The dream was enough. But is that what is being offered? "I shall be satisfied beholding your likeness." Connect those last two phases of the verse, not the first two. When I awake, then I shall be satisfied beholding your likeness. Where? Everywhere? In the mirror as I get ready for the day. In the faces, the needs, and the energy of our loved ones, as together we launch out into the world. In our coworkers with whom we wrestle, in the neighbors we encounter, in the needy who ask for recognition, in the adversaries who seem to want to oppress us. In short, everywhere.

Disciples seek the face of God and find that face in the work to which we are called and in the worship by which we are strengthened. Beholding the face of God is more about taking a faith stance toward the community around us than about developing an individualized devotional practice. When we expect to see God in the world around us, then we will be blessed to see that divine presence in surprising places. And in moments worthy of a praise break.

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