

God's face shines (Isaiah 7:10-16; Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19)

Can we sense the Holy Spirit's presence as God's face shining upon us?

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I am in the habit of asking for God's face to shine on people. I have done this for elders who are in their final days. Most recently I prayed this for a baby who was one hour old.

I volunteer as a chaplain to people who are hospitalized and people who are incarcerated. The majority are from various Christian traditions; lately many are part of the group characterized as spiritual but not religious. For almost all of them, though, at least some phrases from the Bible are still familiar. I weave words of scripture into prayers, often ending with a version of the Numbers blessing, including "God's face shine upon you."

Many of the people I encounter have been fed with the bread of tears and given tears to drink. They feel that God's face is turned away from them. Some say God gave them their hardship as a way to test them, and they search themselves for what they must have done wrong. Others see God as bringing about their arrest or hospitalization as a way of forcing them to choose a different path. One man facing his mortality tells me about the scriptures he has been reading—and his fear that though he has tried to live as a Christian, he may not be saved.

Psalm 80 pleads for salvation, for God's face to shine on the people again. From the psalmist's perspective, God has been angry with the people's prayers. It's easy for me to think I know whose prayers arouse God's ire. It's not those of the people I see who are humbled by their circumstances, who fervently seek to know and follow God's will in their lives.

I convince myself that I could draw up a list of people whose prayers make God angry, complete with photos, audio recordings, and video clips. I could put it on social media, and it would probably garner agreement from my like-minded friends and colleagues. We could all go on in that vein for quite some time, spiraling out in our righteous anger.

But then scripture stops me in my tracks. The psalmist writes, O Lord God of hosts, how long will you be angry with *your people's* prayers?

As much as I want to separate myself, my congregation, and kindred people of faith out from my list of people whose prayers make God angry—we're not like that kind of Christian or like those religious people—I can't do it. We're all God's people. We all place our hopes in the same God, however different those hopes might be. We all call on the same God to save us, however differently we might envision salvation. We all want God's face to shine on us, that we may be restored.

What does it mean for God's face to shine? Yes, people can bring brightness to each other in dismal places. I remember especially the one-hour-old baby I had the honor of blessing. Surely in his face is the face of God. Yet to see God's face only in other people feels a little trite. Even when we're alone, can we sense the Holy Spirit's presence as God's face shining upon us?

Chaplaincy has cemented the place of the Holy Spirit in my understanding of incarnational theology. The Holy Spirit is often spoken of as ethereal, neither creator of all substance nor the Christ who took on flesh. This is especially true with the older language of Holy Ghost—language the Mennonite tradition to which I belong still uses regularly, when singing a version of the doxology we call 606 because of its number in an old hymnal.

In my work as a chaplain, I often note that if Jesus is God in a human body, and Jesus suffered everything we endure in our bodies, then when Jesus sends the Spirit to accompany us, the Spirit knows intimately all that we face. The Holy Spirit is not otherworldly; the Spirit is the incarnate God with us. When we feel that presence in joy as well as in dismal places, God restores us, face shining, that God's people may be saved.