

Pastor Chris Matthis
Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Advent 1, Series B
Saturday, December 2nd, 2017
Sunday, December 3rd, 2017

Sermon: Stirred Up
Texts: Psalm 80

Focus Statement: God hears and answers our prayers.

Function Statement: That they would be confident of God's good and gracious will.

Sermon Structure: Four Pages (Law-then-Gospel)

Doctrinal Locus: "This means that I should be certain that these petitions are pleasing to our Father in heaven and heard by Him; for He Himself has commanded us to pray in this way and promised to hear us. Amen, amen means 'yes, yes, it shall be so'" (SC, Conclusion of Lord's Prayer).

Trouble in the World

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Things don't look good. Almost weekly we hear of another bloody massacre in America or Europe. North Korea finally developed nuclear weapons capable of striking our mainland. And Washington currently looks more like a three-ring circus than a functioning democracy. In the past few years, we've introduced gay "marriage" and physician-assisted suicide. You might say our entire society has "gone to pot"—so we legalized that, too. That's how our country is doing.

The Church doesn't look much better. We regularly hear polls and research about the rise of the "nones," that is, people with no religious affiliation, who now make up nearly a quarter (23%) our population.¹ (That number barely registered when I was a kid.) Fewer people go to weekly worship, and church attendance among millennials is almost non-existent. For what it's worth, our congregation and denomination are not the only ones struggling to reach people with the Gospel. The Catholics, Presbyterians, Baptists, and others are hurting too. More

¹ Heath Curtis, "Where Have All the Christians Gone?" in *The Lutheran Witness*, vol. 136, no. 11 (November 2017), 6.

and more it seems like we live in a world that just isn't interested in hearing the Good News. We are rightly encouraged by news of the Church's growth in Africa and Asia, but it's still disheartening, if not outright depressing, that the influence of Christianity is waning in our culture.

No wonder that so many Christians have become pessimistic about the future of the Church in America. No wonder that we bewail our situation and wonder what God is doing. How can he just sit up there in heaven and watch as the world around us goes to hell in a handbasket? Where *is* God in the middle of all of this? Does he care?

[Read paraphrase of Psalm 80 from *Psalms/Now* by Leslie Brandt (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1974, 1996), 131-32].

Trouble in the Text

The people of Israel shared similar concerns in our Psalm today. They looked at a world of trouble around them and wondered if God had forgotten about them or simply abandoned them. "How long will you be angry with your people's prayers?" they cried (Ps. 80:4, ESV).² Why they thought God was angry with their prayers, we cannot know for certain. Perhaps it felt as though their prayers went unanswered. Or maybe they assumed God would not listen because of their guilt or unconfessed sins. Regardless of the cause, the effect was the same: they felt completely destitute and cut off from God's goodness, complaining that Yahweh "fed them with the bread of tears and [gave] them tears to drink in full measure" (v. 5), a powerful image of their sorrow.

We don't know the exact historical context of this Psalm, but the verses excluded from our reading (vv. 8-19) put us in mind of the Exile that began in 586 B.C., after the Babylonians

² All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

tore down the city walls of Jerusalem (cf. v. 12), burned the Temple (v. 16), killed most of the Jewish people, and carted most of the survivors off to Babylon. Asaph, the poet who wrote this psalm, imagined the nation of Israel as a vine that the Yahweh had transplanted from Egypt and replanted in the Promised Land (Ps. 80:8). For a time, it took root and flourished, spreading well beyond its original boundaries. But now the garden wall was broken down, and wild animals ate its fruit and trampled it. How long could God turn a blind eye and ignore the plight of his people?

Grace in the Text

And yet, despite Yahweh's apparent deafness, blindness, or absence, the psalmist refused to give up on God. He persisted in prayer for his people, the nation of Israel and congregation of the Lord. One of the most powerful petitions comes in verse 2: "Stir up your might and come to save us" (Ps. 80:2). The Hebrew verb behind "stir up" has the idea of being greatly disturbed. In other words, Asaph wants God to look at Israel's situation and get outright upset about it. Because when God gets stirred up, he *acts*! He does something about it. He saves his people.

There is a refrain that repeats three times in Psalm 80 with only slight variation: "Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved" (Ps. 80:3). The refrain repeats in verses 7 and 19: "Restore us, O God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved" (v. 7). "Restore us, O LORD God of hosts! Let your face shine, that we may be saved" (v. 19). The verb restore is related to the Hebrew word for "turn" or "repent." To ask God to restore us is not just a matter of asking God to return us to former glory or privilege. It's a prayer for God to cause us to *repent*—to turn from sin and return to him for mercy and grace. Repentance, of course, is one of the themes of Advent, the season of preparation as we await the return of the King.

When God's people repent, he forgives them. He takes away their sin and gives them grace. That is why the psalmist prays for God to shine his face upon Israel once again—a beautiful allusion to the High Priestly Benediction in Numbers 6:

“The LORD bless you and keep you;
the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;
the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace” (Num. 6:24-26).

Asaph prays for Yahweh's blessing and favor. Above all, he cries out to God for *salvation!*

God always hears and answers the prayers of his people because he is pleased by their prayers. Despite the feeling that he was angry with their prayers (v. 4), God was still listening. And so in 516 B.C., Yahweh raised up King Cyrus the Persian to proclaim liberty to the captives and allow the Jewish exiles to return to the land of Israel in order to rebuild Yahweh's Temple and the walls of Jerusalem.

Grace in the World

Of course, God's wonderful answer to prayer was only partly fulfilled after 70 years of exile. The real answer to prayer came in the form of Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God who became man and made his dwelling among his people Israel. For Jesus came preaching repentance and Good News (Mark 1:15). When he smiled at people, his face shone with God's unconditional blessing and love. And Jesus, whose name means “salvation,” came to do what his name says: he was born to die so that he could save all of us from our sins, not just ethnic Israel, but also the Israel of faith, which includes both Jews and Gentiles who believe in Jesus.

“Stir up your might,” the people prayed, “and come to save us” (Ps. 80:2). And so God sent his Son, born of a virgin, to do just that. He saved us from our sins—and even saved us from death.

After Jesus died and rose again, he ascended into heaven. But before he went, he promised he would return someday to raise the dead and set the world to rights. Yes, it is true that things don't look good in the world today. Poverty and violence, disease and disaster rage around us. Things always get worse before they get better. But they *will* get better because Jesus *is* coming back. And so, as we await the Second Coming of Christ, we pray with the psalmist, "Stir up your might and come to save us! Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved" (Ps. 80:2-3). In the name of Jesus, Amen.