

Dare to Imagine God's Face

A Sermon preached by Zac Klassen

on December 19th, 2021 at Bloomingdale Mennonite Church

Scripture: Psalm 80:1-7; Micah 5:2-5a; Luke 1:39-55

Two weeks ago I began my sermon by encouraging us to spend some brief moments together reflecting on the word “Embrace” as part of our worship service. During that time, I asked to close your eyes and consider what image or thought came to mind when you heard the word “embrace.” Today, as we “Dare to Imagine God’s Face,” I am going to begin my sermon with a similar exercise. What I want you to do right now is to take some time to remember a *face* or *faces*. Take a moment, close your eyes, and take a deep breath and visualize someone’s face. [PAUSE] I wonder, did you see the face of a loved one; maybe the face of someone you haven’t seen for a long time; maybe the face of someone who has passed away either a long time ago or just recently. Maybe you saw your own face; or the face of a stranger that you recently encountered.

I wanted to begin with this exercise, partly because I assumed that you would end up visualizing the face of someone who is important to you personally in some way. Faces, after all, are personal. The face is such a unique and intimate part of an individual; it is what identifies a person and sets them apart from a host of others. Early on when we get to know someone we have to “learn to recognize” them and identifying their facial features is a first important step in getting to know them. Maybe you’ve also had the experience of meeting someone and being surprised at the way someone’s face looks—perhaps because you have never met them in person but only seen them in a photo, for example, and you find yourself struck by the difference it makes to really see someone “face to face.” And I can only assume that, like me, you have found

it a bit of a learning curve during this pandemic to know how to relate to people because of the masks that we all necessarily have to wear over our faces.

The face of a person is also a fundamental part of their identity within the world, and in this respect, we must say that the face is a *political* site. One need only look at what happened just a couple of weeks ago in Chelsea, Quebec to see that this is the case. Fatemeh Anvari, a Grade 3 teacher, was let go from her job because wearing her hijab violated Quebec's bill 21, the law stating that religious symbols may not be worn by public servants while on duty. Fatemah chose to represent her identity, to carve out her place in this world, by wearing a hijab. This is what she said in an interview about what it meant for her:

it's more identity and it's sort of a resistance and resilience, because it's empowering for me to wear it.¹

Empowering; a resistance; a resilience; but, by the law, it is politically disallowed. The face is political. Many other examples of the politics of the face abound: the representation (or lack thereof) of faces in government, religion, art, and film to name a few, has become an increasingly important issue for our world as we continually grapple with racism. The faces a dominant culture allows and prioritizes makes a concrete difference for how we relate to each other in the world.

On a more general level, the face is also a fundamental site of communication and connection. The face conveys all manner of expression and emotion—you know by looking at a person in the face if they are sad or happy; introspective or excited; confused or clear; angry or content. More than just telling you how a person is feeling, however, the face also helps establish connection and relationship between people. In a sense, the “face” becomes a metaphor or an

¹ <https://ottawa.ctvnews.ca/it-was-absolute-shock-it-was-hard-to-process-chelsea-que-teacher-banned-for-wearing-a-hijab-speaks-out-1.5701364>

image of relationship and connection itself. To know someone “face to face” is to be deeply connected and in tune with them. There is a reason why in our distracted culture of phones and endless ways to be digitally entertained, we often have to ask each other: “Look at me, please...” when we want to start a conversation. What we really mean is, “look at me face to face” and truly hear what I am saying to you. Only when our faces are turned towards each other do we really feel like we can start communicating. Beyond just turning our faces towards each other from afar, however, we sometimes also bring our faces close through a hug or through a tender kiss; or playfully as when a parent and a child might rub their noses together.

As I was writing this sermon, a very vivid memory came to me from when Jaren was maybe 1 ½ or 2yrs old. I was putting him to bed (or rather, he was putting me to bed) and as I lay there, myself on the verge of sleep, I began to feel him touch my face. From my hair (which was still around back then) to my forehead, to my nose, to my cheeks, and my lips, to my ears. All over. I’m not sure if it was a way for him to relax, but I recall thinking that this was Jaren’s way of getting to know his father better—he had seen my face all the time, but now he was learning about it up close.

Given that the face is such an important site of communication and intimacy between people, it is also not surprising that it plays a role in our perpetration of great harm against one another and in our estrangement from one another. Think about expressions like these:

“He spit in his face.” Or “I don’t want to see your face here ever again.”

If the face is crucial for establishing relationship and connection, it is also always in danger of being the site for the breakdown and loss of relationship. This is the case in personal relationships and also with respect to our relationships with those of different social, racial, economic status—and here again we see the political dimension to the face. How many of us, for

example, find ourselves looking away, avoiding eye contact with someone begging for money on the streets? I think we have the tendency to look away because looking the other in the eye reminds us of both our common humanity *and* at the same time the inequality and social barriers that cause us to live separate existences.

Of course, personally we also know how the face takes on a role in conflicts and problems that are sometimes closer to home. Think of these expressions related to the breakdown of our face-to-face relationships:

“I can hardly look them in the eyes....”

“I can’t face them...”

“Seeing their face makes my stomach turn...” OR

“Why won’t you even look at me anymore?”

The face, such an intimate and personal part of a person that helps to establish relationship and intimacy between people, is thus very susceptible to harm and the experience of pain, loss, and the breakdown of relationship.

Now that we have spent some time reflecting on the word “face,” we need to turn to our task for today of Daring to Imagine God’s Face. I don’t know about you, but I think the very idea of “God’s face” sounds really mysterious. A face, you say? God has a face? I must confess, when I hear the words “God’s face,” I can’t help but think: What does it mean to say that God, creator of the universe, the one who was before anything was, has a face? Isn’t God, as that great hymn says, “Immortal, Invisible...In light inaccessible... Hid from our Eyes?” How can *this* God have a face? And what’s more, even if God has something that can be symbolically or metaphorically called a “face,” didn’t God tell Moses in Exodus 33 that he couldn’t see the face of God because to see it would mean certain death (Exodus 33:20)? And yet in the same chapter it describes

Moses and God as having a face-to-face relationship, like a friendship (33:11) and when Moses descended the mountain after this face-to-face with God, *his* face shone from this relationship! And, then there is Psalm 80, one of our scripture readings for today, in which the speaker longs for and desires to see “God’s face” or have God’s face “shine” upon them. While we did not read the entirety of Psalm 80, the Psalmist expresses this longing three times throughout the Psalm!

Psalm 80:3, 7, 19 Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved.

Did you notice how the salvation of the Psalmist is connected to God’s face shining upon them? For the Psalmist, it seems, the desire for God’s face or having God’s face shine upon them expresses a longing for an intimacy and relationship with God that brings with it restoration and well-being at the deepest level. In my estimation this is one of the fundamental ways that the Bible imagines “God’s face,” namely, as an image or a metaphor for “God’s presence,” “God’s love,” and “God’s blessing.” Or, put in terms of our previous discussion of the significance of faces generally, we could say that the phrase “God’s face” in scripture tries to communicate something of the intimate and personal way that God relates to us human beings as *the source and fullest expression of love itself*. To see “God’s face,” to have God’s face turned towards us, is to experience a deep connection with God that has a direct bearing upon our sense of well-being in the world.

Not surprisingly, however, given that the experiences of those in scripture is in many ways a mirror of our own experiences as human beings in this world of both joy and pain, connection and estrangement, scripture is also full of references to God’s face that express a desire and a longing for something absent, hidden, and turned away. God’s face, the presence that brings well-being on the deepest level of our humanity, is often that which we long for but do not experience with consistency. In fact, the first reference to “God’s face” in the bible

appears with reference to being estranged from God's face. In Genesis chapter 4:14, Cain responds to the punishment that he receives after the murder of Abel by saying to God: "Today you have driven me away from the soil, and I shall be hidden from your face (Genesis 4:14)." Cain recognizes that his sinful act has the natural consequence of estrangement built into it: not only has he now become irreparably estranged from his brother whom he has killed, but he now also has become estranged from the God who gave both Cain and Abel life and the possibility of relationship in the first place.

The idea of God's face being turned away from his people due to sin is a re-occurring motif in the Hebrew Scriptures. Take Deuteronomy 31:17, for example, where God tells Moses that the people are about to worship foreign gods. God responds by saying:

Deuteronomy 31:17 My anger will be kindled against them in that day. I will forsake them and hide my face from them; they will become easy prey, and many terrible troubles will come upon them. In that day they will say, 'Have not these troubles come upon us because our God is not in our midst?'

Notice here, again, that God's presence in the midst of Israel is linked to this idea of God's face shining upon them. When God hides God's face due to Israel's sin, then God's presence is withdrawn, and Israel feels the impact—they are "easy prey" and susceptible to trouble.

Sometimes scripture also mentions God's face within the context of God's judgment. In Leviticus, as well as in the Prophets and the Psalms, for example, sometimes God's face is set "against" the people whenever they break God's law (Lev. 20:3, 5, 6; Ps. 34:16; Jer. 21:10).

Speaking in judgment against Jerusalem, Jeremiah declares on behalf of God:

I have set my face against this city for evil and not for good, says the LORD: it shall be given into the hands of the king of Babylon, and he shall burn it with fire. (Jeremiah 21:10)

While I suspect that many of us might rightly have misgivings about images of God as angrily turning his face away or against God's people, we probably also understand something of the

basic sentiment at play here. When something offensive and bothersome happens in our view, we might well be repulsed and want to look away. Conversely, when we see injustice or wrong happening, we might well want to set our face against the wrong we see and against those perpetrating injustice in order to communicate to them that what is happening is not right and that such actions carry with them consequences.

Here it also helps to highlight the fact that scripture suggests that the estrangement from God that Israel experiences due to sin is often more a consequence of Israel's choice and not a reflection of God as vindictive and petty. In other words, it is often not the case that God has turned God's face away, but rather that we have turned our faces away from God and those that God calls us to love. And so, in 2 Chronicles 7:14 we have God tell Solomon:

if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, **seek my face**, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land.

In this verse from Chronicles, it is Israel that has turned away from God's presence and the covenant, not God that has turned away from Israel. The solution to the problem here is to turn away from wickedness and turn towards God's face—a great image of repentance and one that Israel will hear again and again from the Prophets.

One of those Prophets is the prophet Micah, who we heard from in our scripture reading for today. Micah prophesied in the days of Kings Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah of Judah—so somewhere beginning around the early 730's BC. During this time the prophet Micah saw all manner of injustice and falsehood around him in Jerusalem, and he too spoke of God "hiding his face" (Micah 3:4) from this evil and falsehood. This was to come with dire consequences for the Northern Kingdom of Israel and for Jerusalem (Micah 3:12)—namely the onslaught of Assyria's armies. The problem, as Micah saw it, was that false prophets and unjust political rulers in Israel

were turning Israel away from God and failing to take care of the most vulnerable in their society. Later in his prophecies, Micah foretold a time when God would turn this all around – when God would again draw God’s people towards a Jerusalem built in justice by a ruler coming out of Bethlehem who would truly be “the one of peace” (5:5). God’s face, it would seem, was set to shine out from Bethlehem in the future.

And this brings us to our New Testament text for today, to yet another prophet, namely Mary, and her revolutionary song that we sang earlier.

"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for [God] has **looked with favor** [here is that image again of the face shining] on the lowliness of his servant....He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty."

God’s face has turned towards Mary with favor and through Mary to all Israel. In fact, in this song Mary speaks, just as the prophets before her, on behalf of or *as* Israel. She magnifies the Lord and rejoices in the God whose face brings salvation. Here, isn’t it interesting to note that the face of God turned towards Mary brings intimacy and proclaims a coming salvation on a personal, inter-personal, and on a political level! As God turns God’s face to Mary, Mary turns her face to God, and she personally makes space for God to inhabit her. As God’s face turns towards Mary and Elizabeth, they both turn together in joy to the God of blessing (Lk. 1:41-45). And, as God turns God’s face towards Israel through Mary, Mary turns her face to Israel, calling her people to magnify the God of mercy and justice, and Mary turns her face against the powerful, the proud, and the rich—warning them that a new world is coming.

As *we* wait for Christ’s birth, the one who brings true peace, on this final Sunday of Advent, we are called, like Mary, to turn our face to God, to make space for God to inhabit us, and to magnify God’s justice and mercy. I suspect that many of us find ourselves in need of the

light of God's face right now. While we cannot compare ourselves to a pregnant, socially ostracized first-century teenage Israelite girl living under imperial occupation, Mary's prophet song is nonetheless also for us and directed at us today too! As adoptees into Israel's covenant with God, we Gentiles can, and in fact we must, join Mary in magnifying the God who looks with favor on the lowly; the one who shows mercy; who scatters the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; who brings down the powerful from their thrones, who fills the hungry with good things, and who sends the rich away empty. Sometimes magnifying God in this way might rightly feel uncomfortable because *we might be* the proud, the powerful, and the rich. But perhaps even here we can find comfort in the knowledge that God's face shining upon us aims not to destroy but to set right what is wrong in all aspects of our lives; to bring justice and peace to lives and to a world that so needs it. So, joined together in longing for all that is wrong to be set right, we wait this advent season. But let us not forget that this is an active waiting—in fact, it is a waiting that is also a seeking, seeking God's face amidst a world that is about to turn.

Psalm 27:7-8 Hear, O LORD, when [we] cry aloud, be gracious to [us] and answer [us]!
"Come," [our] heart[s] say, "seek his face!" Your face, LORD, do [we] seek.

Come, O Come, Immanuel. AMEN.