

Psalm 80 It All Begins with a Prayer
December 3, 2023

It is a modern solution to the problem of pain and suffering to conclude that there is no God to save, and thus no reason for prayer, or for humility, or for faith. My suspicion is that even in the past many were inclined towards such a conclusion, even if they did not speak of it, nor write it down for posterity to read. There are de facto atheists among believers.

It is at best cynical, but understandable enough. As a matter of fact, it is completely understandable and makes a *great deal* of sense from a certain point of view. If there is an almighty, and perfectly good God, why does the world stumble into such tragedies of suffering as it does? Why is life characterized by trouble?

Advent is the beginning of the liturgical year, which *could* begin with Christmas, which roughly corresponds with the winter solstice when the daylight begins to get longer. Instead it begins four Sundays earlier. It gives a chance to reflect upon the world into which the savior came, and that from which the Savior came into the world to save, a reflection that involves the willingness to contend with the question of pain and suffering.

Often, but not exclusively, Advent themes center on the message of the biblical prophets, people like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, and the rest. That message has in it

some harsh judgments, “terrible denunciations,” as it were. It includes the proclamation of the darkness.

In some traditions, the first Sunday in Advent is hope Sunday, and that is the way it is for us this year. Part of the prophetic message was remarkably hopeful. In the face of despair; they proclaimed the goodness of creation, life emerging from death, light shining in the darkness.

We find similar themes in the psalms, and the 80th psalm is a part of that tradition. It had arisen out of the Assyrian crisis about 2,700 years ago. Israel had been divided between between north and south; Israel, or Ephraim in the north, Judah in the south. The northern tribes were conquered. The Kingdom of Judah was surrounded and threatened, and would become a vassal state, and follow in being completely defeated only a little more than a 100 years later, when came the Babylonians.

Everything that happens when conquering happens, happened to them. In the context of that despair the psalm was written, and it began to be a part of the liturgical life of the nation, on its journey to being in the collection of psalms, and thus the Bible.

I doubt that it is very easy to imagine it, even though after all these years we still have wars that do great harm, take a toll on the world, threaten us both materially and spiritually. It is difficult to see what getting conquered looks like, unless one has been through it. We use words like, “unimaginable,”

“horrible,” and “terrible,” to describe it, and feel very keenly the weakness of human language to convey its horror.

For those who have not experienced being conquered, humility is required because we can't possibly know what it feels like unless we have experienced it. It is, however, the context of the psalm, The Old Testament, and the Bible. It is right for us, with humility, to try to slip our feet into their shoes, and walk a mile or two, with those who have suffered such defeat.

That is not as difficult as it sounds, because we have all known trouble enough to give us a “qualified” knowledge by way of analogy. They had reached the end of their rope; they had done all they could do. At one time or another, each of us have felt that way.

It begins with a prayer. And the prayer is the refrain . . .

“Restore us, O Lord God Almighty,
Make your face *shine* upon us,
that we may be *saved*.”

There's a real truth involved, that no matter how much we try to make it seem otherwise, and how humble we must be in the face of others who have seen more darkness than we have seen; we, along with everyone else, are also at the end of our rope. We are all vulnerable, powerless, in need of help.

Everyone sins, everyone dies, no one gave themselves life, no one can procure for themselves eternal life. Sometimes we fool ourselves into believing we have made provision for our own security. We should know better . . . The point is that this state of things, being at the end of our ropes, as it were, is always true for everyone in some broad, general way, and not merely in specific, historical circumstances, but in every situation, even when in every measurable way things seem to be going well.

The general tendency is for people to be *more* aware of the “human condition” when things are *not* going well. Part of the gospel message is to keep this uncomfortable truth in the center of our awareness when things are good, because its acknowledgment is as necessary when we *can* fool ourselves into believing it is not true, as when we run into a stretch where it is impossible to indulge in that kind self-deception.

“Restore us, O Lord God Almighty,
Make your face *shine* upon us,
that we may be *saved*.”

It is from the humble perspective of this psalm that the life of faith finds its genesis. It begins with a prayer. The prayer is hopeful before it is anything else, because one would surely would not pray, if there was no God to save.

We have spoken of the problem of pain and suffering, of terrible denunciations and the proclamation of the

darkness. This message is a part of life and a part of the gospel message.

But it also has beautiful promises, for it proclaims also the coming of light into that darkness. Pain and suffering, goodness and wonder, terrible denunciations and beautiful promises; darkness and light; the two encapsulate the prophetic message, and also the message of Advent.

Advent begins with hope because it begins with the promise of Christ's birth, which makes concrete the incarnate presence of God in the world. The presence of God is the power that brings the prayer to life in us. It is the likelihood that such a prayer is heard and answered. It is the beginning of our faith.

Presently, the spirit of the times reveal the vulnerability, once again, of the predicament inherent in the human situation. People can come up with several ways in which the world is in trouble, but are not very good at solving the persistent problems, much less the eternal one. It is natural for us to want to trust in human solutions, and we must faithfully seek them, but in view of our humble state, it is best to hope in the Lord, and to trust in God's providential care.

We could say it another way. If there is a just God, and everyone is guilty, then why is life also characterized by such goodness as it is, by rapturous moments of joy and pleasure? One might call it the problem of

goodness and wonder. There are de facto believers among atheists. This is the hope of Advent.

It all begins with a prayer, pray it with me:
"Restore us, O Lord God Almighty,
Make your face shine upon us,
that we may be saved."

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