

A few notes about our psalm. Let's remember the central role of the Jerusalem temple. Believers in the seven centuries preceding Jesus connected God's presence to this particular space. God dwelled in the Temple. God's presence meant safety and prosperity for the people of the region. To be in this sanctuary was to feel good and to feel God.

Remember also, that believers throughout the diaspora were required to visit the Jerusalem temple three times yearly. And for lots of folks, the journey was a long one. In the interim spaces of being away, there was always a desire to get back to that sense of closeness and security.

There's also a ton of imagery in this psalm, and a mixing of metaphors. It's clear the writer feels assaulted, either by verbal or physical attacks from enemies, and maybe both. It's also clear that the Psalmist has an enormous sense of trust in God's presence and power. Whatever the circumstance, the psalmist longs to be in God's presence in order that his/her trust might dampen the loudness of mistrusting sources and critics.

Whether Christian, or Jewish, or of any faith, or just as human beings, we trust that, ultimately, what can and should be will be. We often call it the not-yet that will-someday-be.

We also occupy this very odd space in time. As Christians, we live in a post-Easter world. The Jesus story awakens us to God's ability to reclaim, restore, and resurrect darkness into light, death into life. But we follow a liturgical calendar that seeks to explore a pre-Easter season. We join the disciples, and maybe even the skeptics by saying, "It sure would be nice if this is true, but I won't believe it until I experience it."

Last week, just like all of us have or will at some point, Jesus wandered into an uncertain, even removed space – a wilderness of the soul. Jesus asked the internal questions. He wondered whether he should pursue the roles the world desired for him to fill, or if he should pursue the roles God called him to fill. Jesus knew the ultimate answers, but that didn't mute the questions and maybe even doubts of the present.

In a similar manner, the Psalmist trusts in the ultimate and eventual response of God, but finds himself/herself in the messiness of life. This is a psalm of waiting for the manifestation of trust. For the psalmist, trust is confirmed in the space of the temple, where God's presence is realized, and God's goodness is revealed in the neighborliness of neighbors. But the Psalmist walks in the wilderness when the temple is not yet on the horizon.

Fast forward to today. Our faith is less associated with physical space, and more associated with emotional, spiritual, and other less tangible forms of space. But whether physical, emotional, or virtual, we all long for space that connects us to the presence of God. It's in these spaces that our trust is no longer assaulted. It's in these spaces that we hear God say, "Come and seek my face!" And we hear our hearts respond, "We desire, O Lord, to look upon the face of our compassionate creator."

Easter morning, buoyed by a chorus of hallelujahs, and illumined by an impossible sunrise, and in the presence of people who love us, and who share a certain hope for goodness, and peace, and equitable abundance, it's easy to have trust. We see the face of God in one another, and we feel compelled to look upon God's face.

But what about today? It's not supposed to be twenty degrees outside. And there's really no way it can keep raining, can it? And violence that rages in Syria, and Iraq, and Afghanistan, and Ukraine, not to mention the violent effects of systemic poverty and environmental neglect on every continent, show no indication of God's good people doing and being God's goodness in the world. It's hard to find those spaces where we feel like we can see God's face.

We experience this phenomenon on a personal level, too. We know we are created in God's image, fully equipped and capable to become the people God calls us to be. We even know God's desires that potential for us, pursues and longs for our love. But the wait and the space bring doubt.

In this physical place, and in the presence of this body, we find a group of people who affirm us. God's presence feels so close. Then the work week ramps up. We get overwhelmed in letting the completion of tasks, and our coolness and collectedness in doing those tasks, define us. We are bombarded with advertisements about ideal body images, and magical elixirs, and products/services that will fulfil our longings. Unanswered texts, missed calls, unread emails, and minimal likes on social posts try to hint that we aren't valued or noticed enough. We'll connect with dozens of people for scheduled appointments, and 99% of the time they will actually happen. And yet it's not until the moment our liaisons appear that we really believe they are coming.

There's a courtroom full of voices seeking to contradict God's presence. And some days, the jury is full of our own grief, anxiety, doubt, stress, and pain. And it's hard to believe that ours are faces worth looking upon or recognizing, especially by God. And the temple, however we define it, is too far off on the horizon to connect us to trust.

Listen, I'm not trying to be a downer this morning! I'm not implying that waiting and distance are permanent. For me, there's strength in normalizing perfectly human feelings of doubt and loneliness. In both the life of Jesus and the psalms, we find expressions of lasting trust and confidence in God's presence with and connectedness to humanity. And we also find safe, authentic, vulnerable expressions of doubt and loneliness.

Ours is a God of access. God is in the land of the living – that is God resides in the hearts, minds, and spirits of all people, and especially those who experience the full range of human emotions. God is parental. God is available. God is living and breathing. God's is a face we can look upon whether we are confident or doubting, secure or insecure, encouraged or discouraged. And even better, God's is a face who looks upon us, wherever, whenever, however, and whomever we are.

So...Sardis Baptist Church, look to the Lord. Be strong and of good courage! God is our help. God is our light. We are pilgrims in a Lenten Season. Hope may be on the horizon, but God's presence is now, regardless of our place on the spectrum of doubt and belief. May we find life, abundant life in the face of a present and loving God.

Amen.