That We May Be Saved
Psalm 80
A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on December 22, 2019 by the Rev. Bruce Puckett

Maybe you’ve noticed that it’s been getting darker outside. For the past 6 months, the daylight has been growing shorter and the night longer. Yesterday, December 21, was the winter solstice—the day with the shortest amount of daylight all year for people in the Northern Hemisphere and the day that marks the beginning of winter. On the winter solstice, people all over the world gather for festivities on the longest night of the year. People from Stonehenge to Vancouver participate in celebrations connected to the change in the season and the coming of more light.¹

In Durham each year, near the solstice, there is another kind of marking of this shortest day and longest night. On or near December 21, Durham Congregations in Action—an organization that gathers people of faith from various congregations to work together for good—hosts its annual vigil for people who died unhoused during the past year. Last night, a medium-sized group of people gathered to remember the approximately 30 individuals who died over the last year either living out of doors or in supportive housing after recently being homeless. During the vigil, people remembered these individuals for the gifts they were to our community in spite of their state of housing. The people who gathered across faith traditions were not there to celebrate and party but to mourn and lament the tragedy that is the reality of homelessness in our city. One young child who attended the service said that the candle he lit in remembrance of those who had died looked like it was crying as the wax melted down it. The long, dark night that is the winter solstice reminded the gathered people that all is not well in Durham when it comes to our most needy neighbors. It reminded us that our community needs restoration, redemption, salvation.

On this Fourth Sunday of Advent, the season where we have been watching, waiting, and preparing ourselves for the coming of the Lord, we may desire to make the full turn to the celebration of Christmas already. Why wait any longer? Perhaps we can join the parties of the winter solstice celebrations remembering that the coming of the Son of God brightens the world more than longer days and more sunlight ever will. And the truth is, there is reason for leaning into the hope of the coming gift of the Christ child.

Yet there is wisdom and truth in waiting a little longer and sitting in the darkness of the long nights a little more, even as we look toward Christmas. Dean Powery reminded us last week of the call to patience, and perhaps it is patience that will allow us to persist in the places of our lives where the darkness of these long nights seems to prevail. In this season the messy mix of celebration and sorrow, laughter and lament, hope and hurt is sometimes masked by endless shopping, cheerful gathering, and holiday hurry. So we are invited today to take note of the darkness and to tell the truth that not all is well.

The assigned Psalm for today invites us to do this very thing and to do it as a prayer. Psalm 80 is a communal lament Psalm. Perhaps those who assembled the revised common lectionary—that list of readings that guide us through the Christian year—were relatives of Scrooge. Afterall, we have made it to 3 days before Christmas, and we are reading a lament, a prayer of crying out in grief and sorrow by God’s people. Or perhaps they simply recognized something of the truth of

our world and our lives that we don’t always desire to see, especially as we get close to Christmas. So they assigned Psalm 80 for our reading today.

In the Psalm, God’s people cry out in their desperation and need for restoration and salvation from God. The prayer of Psalm 80 begins by pleading with God, the people’s true royal caretaker and provider, to hear them and to come in God’s might to save them. While the historical context for the writing of Psalm 80 is not entirely certain, its likely life-setting was the Northern Kingdom of Israel’s fall to the Assyrians. The people of God were exiled, deported, and made captives in their own land by the Assyrian overlords. In the loss of their land and in God’s judgment on them, the night had grown long for the people. And in the darkness of their situation, they recognized their need for God’s saving help. God’s people were in a place of disillusionment and great darkness, so they called out to God in prayer.

God’s people who prayed Psalm 80 recognized that the night they were in had grown long. And it was made longer still not only by their need for salvation but by God’s anger and apparent lack of presence in the midst of their trial. “How long will you be angry with your people’s prayers?” The people perceived that God was burning hot, fuming at them, so much that they wonder if their prayers were even being heard. It’s one thing to be going through trial and struggle, and it is another thing all together to wonder if God is anywhere to be seen or heard. To the people in their state of dismay, God seemed to have disappeared, making them the scorn of their neighbors and enemies. Instead of being fed with the bread of God’s presence, the people were stuffed with their tears and stuck in the misery of their lost hope and lost future. The people were surely in the longest night, and the darkness had surrounded them. Out of this darkness, the prayer of Psalm 80 speaks with a piercing honesty related to the people’s need and their perceived lack of God’s attentive presence. Out of this place of desperation and need, the people recognized that no amount of their own work, or their own turning, or their own repentance would do. Only God changing God’s mind toward them, only God turning to them in their brokenness and need would be enough. So out of their darkness, they called to God, saying together:

Restore us, O God of hosts, let your face shine upon us and we shall be saved. (Sung by choir)

In our world today, daylight seems to have grown sparse for us as well. We are surely in the long night, darkness has surrounded us, and things are not well. You recognize the night around us, don’t you? We’ve heard the stories of ethnic and tribal wars throughout the world. Perhaps you know how over 3 million people have fled their homes throughout Ethiopia because of warring and inter-ethnic conflict. Or you know of the humanitarian crises in Yemen, Myanmar, and Haiti, just to name a few. Each of these places, whether they are near or far from home remind us that our world is not at peace, that the bread of tears fills the bellies of so many, and that our world needs the Lord to come and save us. The night is surely long. And darkness has surrounded us.

Yet we don’t have to look past the boarders of our country or even our own communities to know that the night has grown long. The humanitarian crisis at our southern border, the prescription drug epidemic, the historic vote of this week, are just a few signs that things are not well. And closer to home, if you’ve paid attention to the news in Durham this year, you’ll surely know that we are trending in the wrong direction related to violent crime in our city. In 2018, there were 29 homicides in Durham, and this year we have had over 40 of our neighbors killed by another of our neighbors in our city, and many of these neighbors who have died have been

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younger than 25. The night has grown long. And here we are, in this season of waiting, watching to see if God has seen the candlelight of our vigils or heard the prayers of our gatherings. It’s one thing to be going through trial and struggle, and it is another thing all together to wonder if God is anywhere to be seen or heard. I wonder if this long night has pressed you to pray Psalm 80 in all its honest lament? Perhaps out of the depths of this long night in our world and in our city, we need to call out to God, and together cry:

 Restore us, O God of hosts, let your face shine upon us and we shall be saved. (Sung by choir)

The long night is yet more personal still for some of us here. In fact, maybe many of us have had experiences where we have recognized our own desperation, our own brokenness, and our own absolute need for rescue and redemption, and therefore have called out to God in prayer seeking help. Perhaps your heart has been pierced by your own shortfalls, your own personal losses, your own devastated relationships, your own failings and faults, your own physical, emotional, or spiritual needs. And for you the night of waiting has grown long, and the darkness is great. Perhaps what is worse still for you is that as you’ve cried out to God, as you’ve waited for relief or healing or reconciliation, you have wondered if God is even listening to your prayers or is present to hear them at all. I suspect for some it is hard to imagine questioning God’s presence in the midst of trial and hardship—it is simply a given for you. Yet, I imagine for others, you find great relief that the Psalms, our biblical prayer book, includes this prayer where people are questioning God’s attentiveness to their desperate situation—even if it was their own unfaithfulness that was to blame.

Maybe today you recognize the night has grown long in your life and all is not well. Out of this place of desperation and need, you are coming to recognize that no amount of your own work or your own turning or your own repentance will do, as important as those are. Only God turning to you in your brokenness and need will be enough. So out of your long night, out of the depths of your own darkness, you decide to join God’s people in calling on God today saying:

 Restore us, O God of hosts, let your face shine upon us and we shall be saved. (Sung by choir)

Let the light of your face shine that we may be saved. When God’s face shines on us, we know God is present. And when God’s face shines, the longest nights of darkness and despair will be illuminated by God’s presence. Near the end of Psalm 80, the people pray, “But let your hand be upon the one at your right hand, the one whom you made strong for yourself. Then we will never turn back from you; give us life, and we will call on your name.” While the Psalm does not specify who this person is at God’s right hand, for Christians, we recognize the one at God’s right hand is Jesus. In this prayer, at the last, we are reminded of the light of God’s presence that has come and will come again in Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us.

In this season of waiting, we are reminded in the middle of the longest nights and the greatest darkness of the God who comes to us in Jesus. We are reminded even in our desperate longing for our world to be made right and our lives to be made new of the one at God’s right hand of power and might, Jesus the Christ. We are reminded of the God who came to be with us and who is coming again to restore and redeem and give life anew. So no matter how long the night has been or how deep the darkness seems, let us call on God today to shine on us with the light of Jesus that we may be saved.
“Lord, let your light, light of your face, shine on us that we may be saved, that we may have life, to find our way in the darkest night. Let your light shine on us.” Amen.

*Restore us, O God of hosts, let your face shine upon us and we shall be saved.*

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3 Lyrics from “Shine on Us” by Phillips, Craig and Dean.