

“Countenance”

Isaiah 7:10-16

December 23, 2001 (4th Advent)

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Ever since Wednesday night, I’ve been playing with this idea of the “Countenance of God.” In Psalm 80, “Show the light of your countenance, O God, that we might be saved.” What exactly is meant by the countenance of God? And what does it mean to have it shine?

Countenance means face, of course, and most translations avoid the more archaic form of the word. The well-known blessing from the book of Numbers (the Aaronic blessing) is “May the Lord bless you and keep you. May the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious unto you. May the Lord lift up his countenance upon you.” But what did the writers have in mind when they used that image?

Our Associate in Ministry, Janet Blank, tells this marvelous story about her visit to the Post Office to get some stamps for her Christmas mailings. She asked to see what religious stamps they might have left. “Here” the postal clerk said. And he showed her the Madonna and child. The postal clerk was in an unusually good mood given the busy-ness of the season and he said, “You should have been in here earlier. There was a mom and her young daughter and when the mom asked to see the religious stamps, the little girl exclaimed quite indignantly, ‘That’s not Madonna; that’s Mary!’ ”

She could tell by the countenance on the stamp who Mary was and she was definitely not Madonna!

I posted this story in our sermon discussion group on Thursday and immediately got a similar story in return. Pastor Howard Chapman wrote, “A few years ago I came in to the post office at Christmas time and got in line right behind one of the kids from my youth group. He was doing a few errands for his mother and we chatted until it was his turn. He said to the postmaster, ‘My mom needs some stamps for Christmas cards.’ ‘So you want Christmas stamps?’ the postmaster asked. ‘Yes, sir,’ the boy replied. ‘Do you want reindeer or Madonna?’ he was asked. ‘Better make them reindeer,’ he answered, ‘My mom doesn’t like Madonna.’ ”

Yet another religious term co-opted by popular culture. Like the banking words “investment” and “fidelity” and “trust.” All religious words in the first instance. But I digress.

The little girl in Janet’s marvelous story knew by the countenance on the stamp that the depicted young girl was Mary and certainly not Madonna.

So, a countenance, a face, is the primary way in which those of us who have sight, can identify those we know. Especially those we know most intimately. The face is the most intimate form of communication and identification. Thus the Countenance of God, which, when it shines, saves us. But how does it do that?

The Psalmist also writes in Psalm 4: “There are many who say: 'O that we might see some good! Let the light of your face shine on us, O Lord'” (Ps 4:6). In order to see what is good and valuable and true and worthy of our respect and admiration in troubled and confusing times, we must allow God’s face to shine upon us. Hmmm.

To the Gospel text for this morning. “The birth of Jesus happened in this wise...” Oh, wait, that’s the text I grew up with. The Bible text I was given by my Sunday School when I was 9 years old was the King James Version and, when it comes to telling the story of the Birth of Jesus, there is none better, in my view. For in almost every instance, the King James Version stays closer to the original languages of Greek and Hebrew than does the newer translations. Which means that it is a bit harder to understand, not only because King Jimmy’s Version is rendered in 17th century English, but also because it is more like the original languages than are the modern versions.

When the modern versions try to explain or clarify things, they distort them. So, it says in the translation in your “Celebrate” inserts, “When [Jesus]’ mother, Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together...” The King James has it, “Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise: When as his mother Mary was espoused to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Ghost.”

King James’ translation is a darker account of the odd circumstances of Jesus’ birth. First of all she was not just engaged to Joseph, but she was “espoused” to him. This was the first stage of marriage in 1st century Palestine, not a prelude to it, or trial period. To cheat on someone to whom you are “engaged” would be offensive, but hardly a scandal, especially in our times. But the espousal of Mary to Joseph was more like a marriage in those times than an engagement is in our own time.

The second sentence where the new translations fail is actually the next sentence: “Her husband, Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly.” The King James Version puts it, “Then Joseph her husband, being a just [man], and not willing to make her a publick example, was minded to put her away privily.” And by golly, that’s the way I’m going to read it tomorrow night!

Again, that’s exactly the way the Greek text puts it. The verb there for “not willing to make her a public example” is “paradeigmatizo” from which we get the word “paradigm.” Joseph, being a righteous man, is unwilling to make a “paradigm” of Mary, his beloved. For the light does not shine from this unfortunate happening. It comes from another direction.

In fact, Joseph, a carpenter by trade and not a philosopher, is not really sure what is going on. So he just “lets it be.” He does the right thing by not making of his beloved an example. He hopes to save her the embarrassment and send her on her way privily.

Joseph never gets a good part in the Christmas plays. Timothy Steen was our Joseph this year and he played it well for all its silence. He just goes along. He’s not too sure what’s going on here, but he’s sure that he is not going to jump to any conclusions, publicly anyway. He is not really too sure just yet from whence the light is coming. If it’s true that Mary has been unfaithful, then, fine. She will be quietly dismissed. But what if it’s not really true?

We don’t know much about Joseph; we know only that he was a righteous man. He may not have been a rocket scientist, but he was a righteous man. And righteousness demanded at this point in the story that he reserve judgment about his beloved and not make of her a “paradigm”—a publick example—for which she could have been stoned to death like women under the Taliban government in Afghanistan. She wasn’t just “engaged.” She was “espoused.” Joseph and Mary were in a very real sense, “married.”

Then along comes the angel sent from God. Whatever angels are, they seem always to be shining things, like lightning. They bring the light of God into mysteriously dark situations like the one Joseph finds himself in. They provide glimpses in the half light of where God might abide.

It’s interesting here in the Gospel of Matthew that the angel makes this astounding announcement to Joseph. In Luke, the announcement, called the “annunciation” is to Mary. But it is the same news bulletin:

“Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” (Hebrew readers then and now would have noted that the name Jesus (“Ya’ sha”) means “to save.”)

OK, now I see. “Let your countenance shine, O God, that we might be saved.” God, with us. Immanuel. This child. This babe. This one born in low estate. Look at his face. It glows. It brings light into our confusion. It gives us a sense of perspective on our own awful circumstances. It makes us see true things more clearly in the dim light of our lives.

Good thing, Joseph, that you didn’t make of Mary a paradigm; a publick example! Here’s the odd good news. The *child* she will bear, will be the paradigm. *He* will be the example. He will make us understand more clearly what it means to walk in all God’s ways. We will look into his face and see the very face of God and say, “Truly, God is with us.”

A poet friend of mine has rendered all this mystery using a Jewish prayer that I had sent him:

Invocation in a Time of War

*Days pass and years vanish, and we sleep--
walk blind
among miracles.
Love, fill our eyes all up with seeing!
Let there be never again
a moment in which
your sudden shining isn't
sudden as it rends
the dark we walk in. Make us see
no matter where
we gaze that the bush burns
unconsumed.
And we, the God-spun clay, will rise
to a receding
holiness and sing, as it recedes,
How filled with awe
this place is, and we did not know it.
Amen.*

—Alan Shapiro

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