

Is your face towards us?

Immediacy: Have you ever had a song ruminating inside you for a period of time. For the past couple of weeks Michael Card's song "Barocha" has been playing over and over in my head and heart and once in a while it spins off my tongue like this: (Mark sings Barocha)

The Lord bless you and keep you
The Lord make his face shine upon you
and give you peace
and give you peace
and give you peace forever

These are the words that filled my heart when Briana and Chris were married this past year, words that echoed with Melissa and Brian after their child Blake died, words that were said before Adam Raymond began his tedious treatment, words that framed a moment in conversation with another who was facing some dark times in their life, words that were articulated over a newborn child being held by Amy one of our ushers last week after worship; it seems that loving another is reminding them of God's face time.

Image: Growing up my brothers and I enjoyed the cartoon called *The Jetsons*; on Sunday evenings as Hanna Barbara's Space Age counterpart to the Flintstones. It was the first time we saw a program in color on ABC. It was filled with elaborate robotic contraptions, aliens, holograms and whimsical inventions like talking on the phone while seeing the face of the person you were talking too. Imagine that? We wondered would there ever be a time when we could see the one we were talking too on the phone? That day has arrived; people who have Skype can see and talk to friends and families around the world. My Smartphone has this function called Face Time so on Thanksgiving Day; our kids Briana and Chris in Portland Oregon had some Face Time with all of us at our gathering here in Stoughton. At the surprise birthday party for Jocelyn; her sister could participate and see her face as she came through the door with a loud "Surprise!" For brief moment Jocelyn thought we flew Briana home for the surprise hearing her greeting over the phone. And for another brief moment there was a bit of disappointment in not seeing her in the flesh.

Sitting inside the airport waiting for our kids to arrive from Portland this week I watched everybody working on texts, email, talking on the phone waiting for someone to arrive. Then they come down that escalator and spring off into the arms of their loved ones. For months they have been away from one another and now for the first time they have space for a "heart-to-heart" talk where there is real give and take. We're hard-wired to be in community with one another; we yearn to be in the company of others. The irony of our modern, cyber-connected world is that we're becoming physically

insulated. Endless "conversations" can take place in the seclusion of one's home. In this society where the word "friend" has become a verb, too many people are feeling alone and isolated. It turns out that seeing words appear on a screen may not be as emotionally satisfying as face-to-face time with another person. (Mark, sings Barocha)

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Indwelling: Advent is about Face Time with God.

Our busy world with endless to-do lists challenges the notion of the importance of quiet time with our Creator. Advent invites us to turn that life-draining pattern upside down. Advent celebrates the Word-becomes-flesh God. Advent announces that God was not willing to have a distant, arms-length relationship with us -- God's beloved creatures formed in God's image. Advent is all about God's willingness -- even insistence -- to be vulnerable, accessible, reachable, and attainable.

God does begin the process with a sky text message. There's the silent, distant memorandum of the star in the sky; it's not clearly understood by everyone and is open to misinterpretation (just ask Herod). Yet there it is an open invitation to anyone who will receive it.

God does not stop there; God *also sends messengers* to deliver this urgent, good news. Gabriel and company announce the upcoming birth and sing their alleluias for the shepherds and anyone else who will listen.

But messaging was not enough. God did not choose to communicate through a third person. God's desire was to deliver the Good News of mercy, love and hope *in person*. God chose face time in a way that would change the world. God spoke to the hearts of the people through Jesus, God's son.

Last Sunday two young moms visited our worship for the first time. One of the mothers we assisted this past year through some difficult transitions and she invited a friend (with her two children) to join her at worship. One of our ushers took the newborn child into her arms and began to marvel at the gift of life; face to face with a baby. While standing nearby I was reminded not only does God yearn to communicate deeply and intimately with God's people, God chooses the perfect way to slide into our lives. While anyone might reasonably be intimidated by the idea of approaching the most powerful Creator of the Universe and speaking up, even the most hesitant among us can be drawn into a

conversation with a child. Place a baby in meager circumstances -- like, for example, in a manger -- and even the hardest of hearts will begin to coo or at least grudgingly smile.

Invite passersby to come, worship and adore and lo -- a relationship is born.

Invitation: The opening clip from the **Work of the People** reminds us how we long for God's intervention. Psalm 80 invites us to be honest in Advent and reveal our need for God's intervention. The psalmist repeats the heartfelt need of God's children throughout this prayerful song: "Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved" (v. 3). This writer isn't asking for a message or a brief assurance. These are people without hope. They fear being utterly consumed and lost. They feel alienated and alone. They need a word of hope and assurance. Without hope, they are not delivered and saved; they're doomed to utter despair.

This is a cry for a relationship, for personal interaction, for "face time" with God. This is the memorable cry for a God with skin on. The prayer of the psalmist echoes the hopeful yearning of God's people today. "Let your face shine that we may be saved," is the call of people *who are surrounded by technology but are still lonely for meaningful communication*. It's the cry of people who may receive hundreds of texts every day but who still feel unheard. It is the yearning of the human heart which does not want simply to be told of love but needs to be transformed by love and hope. (Mark sings Barocha)

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In the end: Hope is found in the shining face of God. (Hold up Samantha's picture)

Samantha Weber drew this picture two Sundays ago and gave it to me while eating a piece of pizza in the fellowship hall; it is a wonderful picture. I asked her who it was and she said, "Jesus," and I responded "thank you, now I know what Jesus looks like!"

We hear God's message but where do we see the face of God today; God says -

- Yes, I will give ear to your cry. Then, I saw the face of God in the family and friends who held Brian and Melissa. God says -

- Yes, I will come and save you. Then, I saw the face of God in a kitchen on Roby Road and God looked like Adam. God says -

- Yes, I will restore our relationship fractured by your faithlessness and sin. Then, I saw the face of God and she looked like one of our ushers. God says -

- Yes, my hand will be upon you. Then, I saw the face of God and she was being a peer minister to one of our confirmation students. God says -

- Yes, you will know the strength of the living God. Then, I saw the face of God last week in Nashville Tennessee working on a home and God looked like Dick Shilts.

This is the promise of Advent -- that God's strength meets us in the midst of our weakness. Last year a young man took his life at UW in Madison. A couple of weeks ago his mother told me, "When you teach young adults remind them what I wish my son would have heard; *THERE IS NOTHING YOU COULD DO WRONG THAT CANNOT BE FIXED!*" When she told me those words I carried them to a room full of students and adults at St. Ann's and made sure each of them heard this mom. I saw the face of God in the depths of grief in that mother whose words were from God that there is no place too dismal, no sin too egregious, and no transgression too dire to separate us from the love of God who now comes to us in Christ.

The insistent message of Advent is -- don't settle for less than the full power of God Immanuel, God always with us. It is the God with skin on! Ask for God on Face Time – cry out: "Come to save us!"

Now I invite you to turn to the handout out rise and sing with me "Barocha!" The same song Mark has been singing during this message. We will use this song to close every worship service in Advent. May God face shine on you today!