

Jeff Paschal

“The Face We See” GPPC 12-24-18
Isaiah 9:2-7, Luke 2:1-20

The other day one of our church staff members who will not be named (Bill Allred), left his cellphone sitting on a chair in the office. And then he went to help fix the playground gate (yes, the staff here multi-task. It's in the contract). Another unnamed staff member (me) noticed the cellphone sitting unattended. I picked it up and went to another unnamed staff member (Jane Sharpe, our fearless Church Administrator). And I said, “Hey, let's take a photo of ourselves and put it on Bill's phone.” Jane liked this idea a lot, and she even upped the ante and said, “Don't just take a photo. Set it as the lock screen, so that when he turns the phone on, that's the photo he'll see.” (Mental note—do not make Jane your enemy.) I agreed with Jane's revised plan. So she and I took a selfie, and as you can imagine, very dignified. It looked like this. [Make a face with tongue out.] Eventually, Bill came back, retrieved his phone, and laughed pretty hard. Oddly enough, he did not keep our photo.

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We do spend a lot of time looking at human faces, don't we? In person. Facebook. Instagram. Snapchat. Video calls. Faces on the computer and TV screens, magazines, and in the newspaper. We cannot get enough of faces.

You may remember the movie "Castaway" with Tom Hanks marooned alone on an island. He became so desperate for the sight of another human face that he actually drew a face on a soccer ball and talked to it and called it "Wilson."

We can discern another person's emotion based on just a tiny movement of that person's face—anger, peace, sadness, happiness—we can distinguish it all in less than a second of looking.

What face do we see again and again? Our own, of course. But what other faces? And what do they tell us?

Luke tells us about a number of faces seen on that first Christmas. There was the face of Emperor Augustus. As with Roman emperors, Roman Caesars of the time, this was the face of someone who spoke and people jumped, the face of someone who commanded and who better be obeyed or heads might roll—literally. Some Roman emperors appear to

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have been certifiably insane and cruel beyond our describing in this worship service. Others were a bit more rational. But as far as I know, no Roman emperor would be described as benevolent or compassionate.

Emperor Augustus gave a decree that the population would return to their hometowns for registration, for a census. Registration meant traveling so that taxes could be levied against an already suffering people. As one scholar points out, “In occupied Palestine the census would have served especially to expand the tax system...Peasants and artisans (like the carpenter Joseph) would have found probably more than half of their income consumed by the various levels of Roman taxes, with the yearly tax due to the temple adding to the burden.” (Sharon H. Ringe, *Luke*, 41.) It’s doubtful that the face of Emperor Augustus showed much concern though.

Then there were the faces of Joseph and Mary who had to travel because of an abusive government that did not care that Mary was pregnant and travel might be miserable or dangerous. Who cared about them? They were not wealthy or powerful or popular. Mary was pregnant and engaged, not married yet. Did people snicker and tongues

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wag? Who knows? Mary and Joseph were nobodies. Just another cog in the gears of the Roman Empire machine. Move along, little people.

In fact, when the couple finally arrived in Bethlehem, Luke says there was “no room in the inn.” Scholars debate, but Luke probably means a guest room in somebody’s house. And why was there no room available? Probably because somebody else with more clout had already taken that room. So Mary and Joseph had to settle for another room attached to the house, a room where farm equipment might be stored and farm animals might stay for the night. And then, in that room their baby, their precious baby, was born and maybe his first crib was a feeding trough for animals.

Can we see the face of Mary? Sweating, exhausted, yet grateful. And Joseph? Tired, yet happy. And then the face of Jesus himself? Maybe crying at first, but then settling down as he warmed against his mother’s skin. And then finally they put Jesus in swaddling clothes for comfort and warmth. Do we see his face now, at last, the face of a newborn baby asleep?

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Luke says there were other faces around that evening. The faces of shepherds roughing it out in the fields, watching over their flock by night. Matthew, of course, recalls the faces of wealthy Magi bringing gold, frankincense, and myrrh. But Luke remembers blue collar workers, these shepherds. The biblical point is clear enough, isn't it? Rich, poor, and middle-class, even the animals, all were welcomed and all gathered for the birth of this dear baby.

And then without warning came another face, the face of angel. An angel of the Lord, a messenger from God, gave words for that which is beyond words. "Do not be afraid," said the angel, as angels are apt to say. "Do not be afraid, because I'm bringing you good news of great joy for all the people. To you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior, the Messiah, the Lord."

And the people of the time were familiar with similar pronouncements. They were made when future Roman Emperors were born. But, of course, those announcements were never truly "good news of great joy for all the people." But this time the announcement was true. And because it was true, it was a direct threat to the power of the Roman

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emperor and the Roman Empire and to every empire and dictator and would-be dictator ever since. This little baby was truly the Savior, the Messiah, the Lord of the world. And his birth meant that God had chosen to come to us not with threats, not with violence, not with arrogance but in the gentle kindness of a baby.

And so a host of angels, a holy army of angels showed their faces and sang their songs, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom God favors.”

Can we see those faces of Christmas night? Faces with all their hopes and longings revealed and also hidden? And what is it that you and I hope and long for? And what does this world hope and long for?

A writer says there was a woman who “...had rescued an abandoned, frightened young dog who had not only been abused, but also half-drowned. He desperately needed cleansing and medication for his wounds, but not until she began to lower him into the warm tub did she realize how terrified he was of water. His abusers had tried to kill him that way.

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“He screamed and fought, his whole body a solid mass of fear. ...realizing that there was only one way to reach him through his panic, [the woman] stripped to her underwear and got into the water with him along with all the fleas, dirt, and blood from them both. She held him, stroking him gently, quietly talking to him until he began slowly to relax. Then the deep cleansing could begin.” (Flora Slosson Wuellner, “Feast and Fear” in *Weavings*, Vol. XXVII, Number 3, 7.)

What is it that we long for? And what is it that the world longs for? To know that we are loved, and to have God get down into the abandonment, messiness, hurt, and fear of our lives with us. And then to hold us close, speaking mercy to us, cleansing us, healing us, loving us.

Jesus. Immanuel. God with us. The face of God saying, “I will be with you now and forever. Do not be afraid. I love you. Now go and love one another.” Amen. ©Jeff Paschal