

SERMON

Isaiah 40:1-5, 11, 28-31 50:6 52:13-14 53:5-6

"The Human Face of God"

A New York Times journalist once wrote that Times Square was one of the most interesting places to observe faces. There he saw taut faces bent on picking an illusionary trail of pleasure. There he saw happy, imbecile faces of those grinning at neon arcades. There he saw life-loser faces, studying lewd movie posters. There he saw the strained, hungry faces of boys who thought that something exciting might happen this night. There he saw tourist faces, harried faces, bland faces, intoxicated faces, tired faces, betrayed faces, sad faces. There he saw successful faces caught up in merger or consolidation. There he saw famous faces, unruffled by stares though bored at being looked at all the time. There he saw Mets fan faces, smug Yankee fan faces, Mafia faces, Harlem faces, theatre faces, drug running faces. He concluded his column by saying, "People are walking the streets with the most startling confessions written from chin to hairline."

Abraham Lincoln once turned down a man for a government position, saying, "I don't like his face." But the poor man isn't responsible for his face," an advisor protested." Every man over forty is responsible for his face," said Lincoln.

Someone once told me I had a dark handsome face, only to quickly add, "When it's dark, then it's handsome." Perhaps it could be said that we are all born with the baby face of Winston Churchill, a rubbery, jowly face that fascinates and mystifies, a face that at once hides and reveals all that we will later become. Nothing evolves more than our faces, faces whose countenance records our history and our happiness, until it is cracked with wrinkles.

Wrinkles are the long-service stripes earned in the hard campaign of life, the dried up riverbeds of a lifetime of tears, the nostalgic remnants of a million smiles. A woman once remarked that her husband was obsessed with her face. "Every night he wants me to wash and scrub my face." "What's wrong with that?" a friend asked. "Well then he wants to get me to iron it."

We all have faces? But what about God. Does God have a face? Well. Yes and no. No, in the sense that God is invisible spirit, the eternal force at the core of all that is. But yes, in the sense that our faith tells us God has incarnated and enfleshed the divine self in people. We are in the image of God. Metaphorically, we might even say that the universe is God's body, but we are its face.

One of the first great prophets to capture this vision was the prophet we know as Isaiah, identified by interpreters as the Second Isaiah. First Isaiah was a prophet of Jerusalem, who preached while his people lived under the threat of enemies. At that time the Jews were exiled to Babylon. But Second Isaiah apparently lived and spoke to his people 150 years later, just as the Jewish exile was ending. Most probably he was a disciple of first Isaiah, even belonging to a school of this prophet's successors. Whatever the case, Second Isaiah's message uses a language quite different than his predecessor's message. Second Isaiah was perhaps the greatest of all Jewish prophets, writing in a flowing, song-like style.

Second Isaiah's people, who had lived in Babylonian captivity for years, saw the Babylonians themselves conquered by Persians. The Persians were much more friendly to the Jews. Second Isaiah even saw the Persian king Cyrus as God's anointed messiah, chosen to lead the Jewish exiles home. When Cyrus issued an edict allowing the Jewish people to return to Judah, Second Isaiah saw God behind this return.

In Isaiah's vision, God never tired. God was the one and only God, the majestic creator of the whole earth, the redeemer, the good shepherd of his people. God's people had suffered long enough for their sins. Now God would comfort them and lead them through the desert to a new Exodus. They would travel a straight highway. Rivers would flow, valleys would be filled, mountains would be leveled, as all the land would be made smooth for their journey. Nature itself would revive and be healed.

But God wasn't leading the Jewish people back just to live in safety. God wanted the people to be the Divine face to the world. And in chapters 40-55, Second Isaiah describes this face by referring to Israel as a suffering servant to the world, the bearer of God's love and grace. The servant would be disfigured, like a shrub in the desert. The servant would be, not just like a man of hope, but like a man of sorrows, as a bearer of others' sickness. The servant would carry the sorrows of the world, be wounded for the sins of all who had gone astray. The servant would have a face like flint, a face that would refuse to turn away from the pain and evil and suffering of the world. The servant would not give up, even in the face of beard plucking, insults, spittle, whatever. Though killed and buried with criminals, this suffering servant would shed blood, and even rise from death to take away the guilt of the world.

The question often asked is whether this prophecy of Second Isaiah was fulfilled. Yes it was, but not immediately. The return of the Jewish people did not fit the glorious poetry of the prophet. There was no smooth highway, no transformation of nature, no vast throng of people. The exiles returned to ruins, drought, poverty, and hostility. But years later, a baby was born in the small town of Bethlehem in Judea. That baby grew into a man, the one we know as Jesus.

This man helped bring forth a new Israel, a clear face, a compassionate face to be shared with all the world. This face was an open one, not hid in fear but shared in love. Jesus helped give a fuller face to God, a human face that fulfilled the divine self and reflected the divine image.

As Christian author and clergyman Frederick Buechner put it, "Whoever he was or was not, whoever he thought he was, whoever he has become in the memories of people since, and will go on becoming for as long as people remember him—exalted, sentimentalized, debunked, made and remade to the measure of each generation's desire, dread, indifference—he was a man once and had a man's face. Jesus had a face.

We might turn from the mystery of that face, avoid meeting his eyes, the way at certain moments we avoid meeting our own real eyes in the mirror, because, for better or worse, they threaten to tell us more than we want to know. We read Jesus' face in the faces of all the ones he touched or failed to touch; in the faces of Mary and Joseph, shepherds and wisemen, in the faces of those he healed and forgave, in Peter's face as the disciple sat at dawn by a high priests fire and heard the cock crow all the ghosts back to their rest except his own, or in the face of Judas, leaning forward to plant his kiss in the moonlight garden. You might glimpse the mark of Jesus' face in the faces of everyone who ever looked away from him, toward him, or against him. See Jesus face for what it is. See it too for what is possible that it will become; the face of Jesus as the face of our own secret and innermost destiny. The face of Jesus is our face."

The New Testament writers never describe this face in detail, for in Biblical days and before the 16th century, communication was primarily through words and deeds, not through facial expressions or bodily expressions. But Jesus had a face, the face of a newborn giving hope. That face later reflected compassion, healing, and at times even anger. In the Garden of Gethsemane, he fell on that face and prayed "not my will, God, but yours." Enemies, while calling for his crucifixion, spat on that face and struck him on that face. When Jesus set that face toward Jerusalem, toward his people, toward the world, things were never quite the same again. That face was one of a suffering love, a face like flint, a face not confounded by betrayals or spittle or blows. His face looked

out at the world from the agony of a cross, mirroring the face Second Isaiah had envisioned so many years ago. Though this face was smashed in crucifixion, a new face came forth in resurrection. We are called to reflect that face, to express God's eternal comfort, God's eternal kindness, God's eternal love to the world, no matter how tough things get. Amid the waters of Babylon, the streams of modern exiles, we are to give forth the universal face of God, the God who cries "comfort, comfort, my people."

A French priest once told of how a face saved his life. It was in the days he didn't believe in any kind of God and was unhappy. He was so unhappy and so oppressed by a lack of meaning that he seriously thought of suicide. But one day as he was walking by the Mediterranean Sea shore, his attention was riveted by the face of someone passing by. This person's face was so radiant with meaning, so full of goodness that it could have only come from years of cultivating a good heart. In a twinkling, this soon-to-be priest found his suicidal thoughts dispelled and the seed of faith sown in his heart. He began to assert to others his warm conviction that there is a branch of theology that can only be described as a theology of faces.

What is the theology of our faces? We would all do well to go home and look at our faces in the mirror. What is the word (logos) about God (theos) that our faces give off to the world? Is there the comfort of Second Isaiah or the complaint that life isn't fair? Is there the hope of a newborn in a manger or the hopelessness of a world and self gone astray? Is there the humility of Jesus, riding on a donkey of peace into Jerusalem, or is there divisiveness and persistent self-centeredness? Is there the courage to follow Jesus in suffering service, or do we resist loving our neighbors and looking out for others? Is there the love that continues to love no matter what the odds, or is there a limit to our compassion? Is there the openness of a face that reaches out to others, moment after moment, or is there a face that looks away? Would that we all had the face of the Bethlehem babe, the face of the loving servant Jesus. Would that we all could be the human face of God in this world.