

The *Song of the Vineyard* from Isaiah 5 contrasts the righteous will of God with the treachery of man. A vineyard is used in both the Old and New Testaments to symbolize the Nation of Israel. And God has done everything He could for his beloved Israel to prepare a fertile protected place for them to flourish. And yet, God's children in their sinfulness have produced only treachery and unrighteousness. So, God, for a time, gives them over to their own, self-destructive will. (See Is.5:1-7) Isaiah's *Song of the Vineyard*, and the calamity which has befallen the unjust Israel is echoed in Psalm 80 this morning. Although God made of the Children of Abraham a great nation (See Ps.80:8-11), yet the people rebelled. So The Lord has given his people over to the chastisement of an invading foe. (See v.12-15) And the Psalmist laments, and cries out to be restored to the protection and mercy of God.

The final verse of the Psalm is the third repetition of the same plea, *"Restore us, O Lord God of Hosts; show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved...show [us] the light of your countenance, and we will be saved."* (Ps.80:3,7,18) In a prophetic request, Asaph the Levite concludes this psalm by stating that we will indeed be saved if we can only see the light of God's "countenance..."

Now this Hebrew word which we often translate as "countenance" is used frequently in the Old Testament, and it means "face." The most familiar use of this word is in the first priestly Blessing given by God to Aaron in Numbers 6. You know the verses I'm talking about here, the one where God instructs his first Priest on how Aaron is to bless the Children of Israel. He tells Aaron to say this: *"The Lord bless you, the Lord keep you, the Lord lift up his face to shine upon you...and give you peace."* (See Num.6:24-27) And so, when Asaph wrote Psalm 80 for the courts of David he repeated three times that God's people would indeed be saved, if we could just see the light of God's face. That's what it would take to save us; Asaph knew that God's people would be saved if they were permitted to simply look upon God's loving face. How incredibly prophetic that salvation will indeed come to God's people when we are finally permitted to see the face of God! In a moment of absolute clarity, God laid upon the psalmist's heart the assurance that one day, The Father would indeed redeem His children by permitting them finally to gaze upon the light of His face, in the person of His Son.



17th Century Icon Depicting Aaron

The theme of a world divided and in chaos which is the main message of Isaiah's *Song of the ravaged vineyard* – this theme of division and calamity goes on in the Gospel passage for this morning from Luke 12. In fact, the Lord tells us that with His coming, the world for a time is destined to be even more divided than before. Jesus says, "I have come to bring fire upon the earth... [my truth] will bring division even among members of the same family." (See Lk.12:49, 52)

The coming into our lives of The Word of God cannot be a "comfortable" experience. Jeremiah, is railing against the false prophets of Israel who gave the people only the prophecies they wanted to hear. He warns them that the true Word of God is a consuming fire and a hammer that breaks apart even rocks. (See Jr. 23:29) In John's Gospel, Jesus declares when praying to The Father in Heaven that His disciples "are not of this world." (See Jn. 17:16) So, it is not only natural but actually necessary that there be a division and separation between the followers of The Christ and those who choose instead to follow the desires and goals of fallen humanity.

When he was speaking to the Athenians on Mars Hill, Paul reminds us that there was a time in the history of man when God, "winked at sin." (See Acts17:30) There was a time when because of man's ignorance, God closed an eye to some of the sinful activities of his rebellious children. There was a time when ritual sacrifices were enough to cleanse man of his sin and make him once again right with God.

But with the coming of the Christ, these half-measures of atonement no longer suffice. Now, you and I must be **truly** right with God. The sacrifice which is required of us is none other than our contrite hearts and humbled wills (See Ps.51:17); a covenant sacrifice prophesied by Jeremiah, when God will write his message of unending love no longer on tablets of stone but on the human heart (See Jer.31:33); the sacrifice of a faithful heart made possible and attainable through the mighty presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Half-measures of righteousness won't do any more, because God is no longer grading on a curve. No, we are now to be **absolutely** sanctified as faithful children of God, and that absolute redemption is now possible for anyone who has truly seen the loving light in the face of Our Sweet Lord Jesus. To see the face of God is to be saved.

There are different ways to behold the light of God's face in His Son Jesus Christ, and one of those roads to redemption is outlined in the lesson from Hebrews this morning which describes the faithful witness of the Old Testament Saints. These were the faithful who had not seen the maker; those who lived and died before his incarnation in our world. The Saints of the Old Testament saw only the **evidence** of God's handiwork. These were the faithful remnant who recognized the presence of the loving creator God in the world around them. These were the faithful men and women who saw the blessings of justice, and mercy, and righteousness. They recognized the immense grace of God in their own lives, and they knew – they absolutely **knew** that such an all-loving creator God would never abandon his children to doom. These saintly ones could not possibly envision the glory of the Resurrection, but they knew in their bones that in some way, as surely as the sun rises, one day God would send to His people their Messiah. And so they lived and died in this unshakable faith.

Though they would never see the Cross of Christ, these Old Testament saints knew that the God of all love and justice would not forever leave his people to the threat of being unloved and unjustified. They knew that one day, God would send us His Savior. And so these courageous Saints of the Old Testament remained faithful. How much more reason have we to remain faithful – we who live in a world that has experienced and can testify to the incarnation and resurrection of God's Son?!

In August of 2013, I received some email messages informing me of the activities of former classmates and teachers of mine at seminary, Episcopal Clergy who decided to go to North Africa and minister there. So, that Summer they found themselves in Cairo, during some of the most turbulent times that ancient country has experienced in a century. Mouneer Anis, the Archbishop of North Africa was emailing his contacts in the US to advise us that at that very moment, the Anglican Church of St. Savior in Suez, Egypt and the neighboring Roman Catholic Church were coming under attack from the Moslem Brotherhood rioters, and the sanctuaries were being bombed with Molotov Cocktails. He wrote that the Rector's car had just been destroyed, and that the riot's leaders were urging the demonstrators to take up weapons in order to attack the churches of Cairo, Menyia, and Suhag. People were dying in the streets at that very hour he was writing. We now know that the casualties that day surpassed the 500 mark. And my friends were right there in the very middle of it. Now what is it that gives men and women the faith and conviction to submit themselves to that kind of peril and violence? What has the strength to move the hearts of people to offer up even their very lives?

In the Old Testament, mankind was not permitted to look upon God and live. (See. Ex.33:20) But now, we need be no longer cut off from viewing the author of this world's handiwork. For you and I have His cross. We have indeed seen the face of God. (See Ps.80:18) We have been saved by the beauty and grace of that loving countenance. And in times of doubt and despair, we also have the witness of the saints, saints past and present. So, surrounded by so great a cloud of witness (See Heb.12:1), there can be no doubt that we are indeed children of the living God, saved, redeemed, and sanctified "by the means of grace and for the hope of glory."¹

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, Amen.

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¹ From the "Prayer of General Thanksgiving," Morning Prayer, Rt. 1, *Book of Common Prayer*, 1979, p. 101.
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