“Restore us, O God of hosts; \* show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved.”

The psalmist liked that line so much that he repeated it three times in the space of 10 verses.

Here’s what it sounded like in the 1928 and previous editions of the Book of Common Prayer—from the Coverdale Bible, published in 1535.

“Turn us again, O God; show us the light of thy countenance, and we shall be whole.”

That older version (maybe minus the “thy”) sounds more modern to my ears than the present one—wholeness in place of salvation.

Biblical scholars classify Psalm 80 as a “communal lament,” Israel’s collective longing for re-unification. It was written during a time of challenge and difficulty for Israel—perhaps the end of the northern kingdom around 725 BCE, perhaps after the sacking of Jerusalem some 150 years later. Such pleas were made on the basis of Israel’s repenting over its own bad behavior and its sorrow during times of suffering at the hands of others.

But for the moment what interests me is how this simple line, in both its incarnations, and doubtless many others, has power to speak to us in our time, communally (read, globally), and individually.

“Restore us” sounds like something we need to hear in these days of instant bad news about our planet and the humans who inhabit it. It is a corrective to thinking that we are inherently bad and given to exploitation (despite considerable evidence to the contrary). We need reminding that we are created in the image of God, that as God’s children we have within us the boundless love out of which we were created. “Restore us,” we pray to God, to that state of compassion and love for each other. Better yet, since that is our nature, we pray to be restored to recognition of that in ourselves and in each other, including in those whose fear and desperation and anger would all but obscure that truth. To oneness with each other and God.

“Turn us again,” was Coverdale’s take on the original Hebrew. It is a compelling phrase, as it implies that God has done this restoring business before and will continue to do so, with the patience only God can show to God’s own creation and creatures. Turn us again. I’m glad Coverdale chose that rather than “return us,” as carries that implication of repetition, multiple course corrections: “Oh, you’ve strayed here. You mistaken this path for the correct one. Let me just show you that less-traveled path to get you where you want to (where I want you to) go.” Turn us yet again, the psalmist might be praying to God. And in more intimate human terms, that gentle turning might be prompted by pangs of our conscience or by some trusted person’s suggestion or mere observation.

Even though the “Lord God of hosts” might better fit that original Hebrew text, I am grateful for Coverdale’s straightforward “God,” as that holy name strikes me as more inviting and accessible, less laden with onerous overtones

A side note here: Having identified the source of the translation of psalms in earlier prayer books, I feel it necessary to say that the current, excellent, translation is the work of scholars, writers, and poets (including W. H. Auden) who paid close attention to the Hebrew language and the meter and phrasing of poetic expression. And I have great love, respect, and admiration for the results of their hard work.

Back to Psalm 80—okay, one line in Psalm 80: “Show us the light of your countenance,” in both translations. We are asking God to shine a light—the light of God’s own radiance, such as the star at Epiphany, the light of the Transfiguration, the voice and flash that knocked Paul off his donkey, the light of God’s own being—on the path before us, showing us which way we need to go in following God’s will.

“And we shall be saved,” or Coverdale’s “we shall be whole.” Again, that earlier translation speaks so loudly to me. I love even the omission of “made.” Not, we shall be *made* whole, but we shall *be* whole. To my ear, at least, it holds the notion that we *are* whole, perfect, having been made in the image of God. Our fighting over territory that doesn’t belong to us, our desire to impose our will on others in so many different ways, our greed to dominate, rather than cooperate with, nature—all of that, and so much more, is not proof of essentially bad character, but of a people who, ignoring or neglecting, or shielding themselves from the light of God’s face, cannot see who we truly are. Creatures made wholly of God’s nature.

Here’s something I discovered while comparing being “saved” from our current translation and the being “whole” in Coverdale. Briefly stated (too briefly, undoubtedly): if an insurance company advances a payment to a policy holder for, say, hospital expenses, and the injuring party, the one at fault, cannot cover those expenses, the insurance company cannot ask its client to seek reimbursement from its client, because the client has not been “made whole.”

Made whole. The good news for us is that God’s grace is boundless and not meted out according to any circumstance. God, it seems, wants only for us to be whole, always.

Sounds so much more significant to most of us, in most of our lives, than being “saved,” from . . . from what? Hellfire? Damnation? Eternal punishment for bad—even really bad—behavior? I simply cannot wrap my head nor my heart around such a view of God.

Instead, I believe in this loving God: “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us.” And the birth of Jesus, which we are on the verge of celebrating, is the palpable, flesh-and-blood incarnation, embodiment of “Turn us again, O God; show us the light of [your] countenance, and we shall be whole.”

May we accept and know that God has been, is, and always will be, with us, loving us, lighting the way, withholding nothing, even being born into this world and experiencing all that we humans experience in order to accomplish that.

+ + +