

HOW DO I LOOK?

Psalm 123

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Tim Phillips, Seattle First Baptist Church

Psalm 123

A Song of Ascents.

- ¹ To you I lift up my eyes,
O you who are enthroned in the heavens!
- ² As the eyes of servants
look to the hand of their master,
as the eyes of a maid
to the hand of her mistress,
so our eyes look to the LORD our God,
until he has mercy upon us.
- ³ Have mercy upon us, O LORD, have mercy upon us,
for we have had more than enough of contempt.
- ⁴ Our soul has had more than its fill
of the scorn of those who are at ease,
of the contempt of the proud.

Psalm 123 *adapted by Barbara Gibson*

I lift up my eyes to you, Spirit,
who lives among us and beyond us.

As the eyes of a child
look to the face of her mother,
so my eyes look to you,
waiting for love and compassion.

Have mercy on me, Spirit,
Have mercy on us all.
My soul has suffered enough contempt.
I've had more than enough failure,
more than enough self-doubt.

I lift up my eyes to you,
Spirit who lives among us.
Come to me.

Sermon: How do I look?

*I lift up my eyes to you,
Spirit who lives among us and beyond us.
Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me ...
on us.*

Jesus says, those who worship God must do so in spirit and in truth.

And so we say, “Come, Spirit, come.”

And the truth is, with Patrick away at camp, I did not get to ask my crucial Sunday morning question: How do I look? That’s the last thing I do every Sunday morning before I leave home.

I realize this morning that asking the how-do-I-look question means that I trust Patrick to tell the truth ... in a general kind of way. I don’t need a detailed list of all the things that are wrong with how I look. I just need the truth about the general presentation in relation to a particular situation – I’m not going to a picnic; I’ll be standing in this pulpit. And I’m not asking for an evaluation of how I look up against some absolute standard of beauty. I’m only asking for a general, relative, assessment about the choices I have made with some mercy about things I cannot change.

So it turns out that the question – “how do I look?” – is a complicated social interaction that takes some trust and some discernment.

That’s all the more true in an internet culture where images can be manipulated and de-contextualized. “How do I look?” is an even bigger question if Facebook is involved.

I have a clergy colleague who has introduced me to the concept of “optics” – that how our faith communities “look” is important not as a matter of vanity but as an authentic expression of our values.

If we say, for instance, that our faith calls us to welcome the stranger and to care for the immigrant, we have to be aware of the “optics” we create. If we care, we have to *look* like we care.

And this isn't just about how other people look at us. It's about how *we look* at the world and at ourselves in the world.

So, the psalm for this morning calls us to ask the how-do-we-look question – both how we present ourselves to the world and how we see ourselves in it.

Psalm 123 is one of 14 Psalms of Ascent, the most famous of which is probably Psalm 121: “I lift up my eyes to the hills – from where will my help come? My help comes from God who made heaven and earth.”

These particular psalms are about hope and thanksgiving on the pilgrimage of life just like someone might say, if you ask them how things are going, “things are looking up!”

Barbara Gibson's version of this psalm is:

*I lift up my eyes to you, Spirit ...
As the eyes of a child
look to the face of her mother,
so my eyes look to you,
waiting for love and compassion.*

The idea is that how we look at things has an impact on how we experience the world.

You already know that.

The problem is that sometimes we get stuck in ways of looking at the world that are left over from some other time and that don't help us very much.

For instance, in the standard version of Psalm 123 in our hymnal, the psalm says:

*As the eyes of subjects
look to the hand of their ruler,
so our eyes look to the Sovereign, our God,
until God has mercy upon us.*

I have to say that when I read this, an image came to mind of our dog, Cooper. If I am sitting in my chair, Cooper comes to sit by me with those big eyes looking up at me for some treat to be dispensed from the Sovereign hand of his Master.

Now, it's true there is some question about who really has power over whom.

But, in a way, it feels like that's the image we have in the standard version of Psalm 123. We are like Cooper waiting for the Master to drop some treats from on high.

That way of looking at God and the world, in my experience, isn't very helpful anymore. And I don't think I'm alone in that. Because when Barbara Gibson does her adaptation of this psalm she says:

*As the eyes of a child – not a subject
look to the face of her mother – not a sovereign ruler
so my eyes look up to you.*

And I will point out here that while the standard version says that, “as subjects look to the *hand*,” Gibson says, “as the eyes of a child look to the *face* of her mother.” In other words, there is a way of looking at the world and ourselves in the world that can completely change the dynamics of our relationships – from trying to figure out who is in charge and hoping for some dispensation of mercy to beloved ones looking into each other's eyes with love and compassion.

Pastor Anita has arrived having graduated from Vanderbilt Divinity School. So, I thought I should mention that Sallie McFague, one of the great environmental feminists, was a professor at Vanderbilt and she wrote a book 30 years ago that is a classic, *Models of God*. McFague wrote that in this time of ecological crisis, it's time to move away from models of God that seem to contribute to unhealthy – even destructive – ways of looking at the world. From God as King, Ruler, Master to God as Mother, Lover, Friend.

That's not to say that those other models didn't serve some purpose for those who needed to claim loyalty to a power above the oppressive powers that be. For the Hebrew Bible to say that only God is King – Ruler of the Universe - was to say that Pharaoh was not. For the early Christians to say "Jesus is Lord" was to say Caesar is not!

I'm not saying that those ways of looking at God and the world don't serve some important purpose. But it is to say that those models alone may not help us see the world with the kind of eyes that are necessary to create other dynamics and other relationships that can heal ourselves and the world.

... we need to imagine new models for the relationship between ourselves and our earth, McFague writes. We can no longer see ourselves as namers of and rulers over nature but must think of ourselves as gardeners, caretakers, mothers and fathers, stewards, trustees, lovers, priests, co-creators, and friends of a world, that while giving us life and sustenance, also depends increasingly on us ...

The models we use to look at the world matter.

I lift up my eyes to you ...

As the eyes of a child

look to the face of her mother...

I lift my eyes to you.

One writer pointed out that this psalm should make us not underestimate not only the power of showing up but of making eye-contact.

And then I happened to be reading an article by a Harvard scholar about Timothy Snyder's book *On Tyranny* and the ways history teaches us to resist authoritarian regimes.

I was brought up short when the article moved from public action to more private forms of resistance.

What people who were vulnerable under repressive regimes remembered later, [Snyder] says, is how their neighbors treated them. During the purges in Eastern Europe and Nazi Germany, a greeting or a handshake meant a great deal. Such gestures made those who were vulnerable to the violence of the regime feel safer. But when their neighbors averted their eyes when they met, or crossed the street to avoid them, those same people felt more fearful. And with good reason. People who are isolated in society are much easier for authoritarian regimes to harm than those who are held, seen, and remembered in community. Making eye contact and exchanging greetings are practices by which we recognize each other's humanity and knit each other into a shared life.

I had never thought of eye-contact as an act of resistance – as a model for a spiritual practice of how we look at ourselves in the world. But there it is.

And I shouldn't be surprised because, if "eyes are the window to the soul," then they do not simply receive information from the world. They reveal it.

In this psalm, both the standard version and Barbara Gibson's version talk about suffering "enough contempt ... more than enough failure ... more than enough self-doubt." We can see these things in people's eyes.

I have seen contempt in people's eyes. And I have seen compassion.
I have seen failure in people's eyes. And I have seen forgiveness.
I have seen self-doubt in people's eyes. And I have seen courage.

Our eyes give us away.

When I ask Patrick, “How do I look?” on a Sunday morning, I trust he will tell me the truth in a big picture kind of way – not giving me a detailed list of all the things that are wrong with how I look.

And I think how we look at the world is about the truth of a bigger picture – not a detailed list of all that is wrong. I grew up with fundamentalist folks who kept a detailed list of all that was wrong with the world and that didn’t help me very much. And, truthfully, some of the liberal prophetic voices don’t help me very much either. Their detailed list of what’s wrong with the world is a different list but it has the same effect. The how-do-I-look question is about a bigger picture.

When I ask Patrick, “How do I look?” I don’t need to be judged against some absolute standard of beauty because I’m just asking how appropriate I am relative to the situation I’m about to enter.

And I think how we look at ourselves in the world is not trying to measure up to some absolute standard of perfection. It’s about the best we can do to present ourselves for the circumstance at hand.

When I ask Patrick the how-do-I-look question I’m asking for a big-picture and relative assessment of the choices I’ve made with some mercy about the things I cannot change. Perhaps that’s why I love that chorus from “Great Is Your Faithfulness: Morning my mornings new mercies I see.” If we are on the lookout every morning for new mercies I think the world looks a lot different.

The point is, I trust Patrick with that complicated question, “How do I look?” because of what I see in his eyes. What I see in his eyes is love and compassion and hope and wanting the best for me.

What does the world see in our eyes? What kind of eye-contact are we making?

*I lift up my eyes to you, Spirit ...
As the eyes of a child
look to the face of her mother
so my eyes look up to you
waiting for – looking to be met with those eyes of love and compassion.*

Several years ago, Rod Romney wrote words to a familiar old Scottish ballad:

*We lift our hearts, we bring our lives,
Just as we are, without disguise ...*

The how-do-I-look question isn't about how good a disguise you are wearing or how colorful the mask that hides your identity.

“How do I look?” is an invitation to take down those disguises – to put away those masks - so you can be seen with the eyes of love and compassion and mercy. And if you do that, the world may look like a very different place.

So, today, if you hear that voice calling you to take down those disguises and to lift up your eyes, do not harden your hearts.

NOTES

Barbara Gibson, *Psalms for Troubled Times* (Crestline Press, 2003), 93. Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Fortress Press, 1987), see pp.13 and 19. Stephen Breck Reid, Psalm 123, in *Psalms for Preaching and Worship*, eds. Roger E. Van Harn and Brent A. Strawn (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), pp.318-321. Stephanie Paulsell, “Practicing for the society we want,” *Christian Century*, July 4, 2018 , p.35.