

Numbers 6:22-27
Holy Trinity Sunday
Sermon Series: Saving Faith
We Believe in the Triune God

Shepherd of the Hills Lutheran Church
Winchester, VA
Pastor Paul Krueger
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²² The LORD said to Moses, ²³ “Tell Aaron and his sons, ‘This is how you are to bless the Israelites. Say to them:

²⁴ “ ‘The LORD bless you
and keep you;
²⁵ the LORD make his face shine on you
and be gracious to you;
²⁶ the LORD turn his face toward you
and give you peace.’ ”

²⁷ “So they will put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them.”

The other day I was in the produce section at the Martins grocery store near my house when all of a sudden I felt a slight tickle in my nose. I closed my eyes and scrunched up my face in an attempt to battle against the involuntary response that was quickly seizing control of my mind. It was no use; I let out what can only be described as a tremendous sneeze. Now, fortunately, I managed to get my arm up in time to cover my mouth. But as I looked up at the lady who was coming toward me pushing a cart with two small children in it, I braced myself for a stern look of judgment that I could be as insensitive as to sneeze in an area so abundant with unprotected fruits and vegetables. The judgment never came. Instead, she looked right at me and as she continued to pass by, she said, “God bless you.”

It’s an interesting custom when you really stop to think about it. And it isn’t unique to twenty-first century America. Because sneezes are often a symptom of sickness or illness, people have been responding to them by asking for God’s blessing on those who are sneezing for thousands of years. As a result, “God bless you,” is a rather familiar expression. And while there’s no problem with blessing someone if they happen to sneeze, we need to be cautious that we don’t start using the phrase so trivially that we don’t even think about what it means anymore. Did that lady in the grocery store think about what she was saying to me when she said God bless you after I sneezed; did I?

Our Old Testament lesson this morning comes from Numbers 6. It’s part of a long section of instruction that God gave to Moses for the Israelites as they prepared to leave Mt. Sinai and continue on from there to the promised land of Canaan. As they went along that journey, God wanted His people to know that He was with them and that He would continue to bless them. So He instructed Moses to **tell Aaron and his sons, “This is how you are to bless the Israelites. Say to them: ‘The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace.’” So they will put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them.**

It’s a pretty familiar passage, isn’t it? We hear it at the end of almost all of our worship services. As we travel along *our* journey to the Promise Land of heaven, we need that same reminder that God is with us and will continue to bless us. So that same assurance that has comforted God’s people for thousands of years, gives us the strength and comfort we need to

keep traveling towards our goal. But once again, there is a certain danger that comes with repetition. We don't want to get to the point where we blaze through it at the end of the service without even thinking about what it means. Because just as faith doesn't do us much good if it's trusting in the wrong thing or in nothing at all, faith in a blessing is only beneficial if we know who gives us the blessing and what that blessing involves.

Sometimes, we use the word benediction instead of blessing. It means roughly the same thing. Benediction comes from the Latin word for blessing. *Bene* means good, like in our word beneficial. And *dictio* means to speak or pronounce like in dictate or diction. So in a literal sense, a benediction is when you pronounce good on someone.

There are two blessings or benedictions that we regularly use in our worship services. The first one, the Aaronic Benediction, is the one we're looking at today that God had Aaron speak to His people. The other one is called the Apostolic Benediction because it was first given by the Apostle Paul at the end of his letter to the Corinthians. We're pretty familiar with that one too: **The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the Fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.**

Now at first, it might seem like the Apostle Paul's blessing would be a better one to use on Trinity Sunday since it names Jesus, God the Father, and the Holy Spirit. But when we look closely at this blessing that God spoke through Aaron, we can see our Triune God at work there as well.

Our first indication of that is the fact that God gives His name, the LORD, three times: **The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace.** But does using that name three times really point us to the Trinity or could it just be a coincidence? If that was all we had to go on, we might at least have to entertain that it could just be a coincidence. But it's when we look at the rest of what God has to say in those three statements that we really start to see those three distinct persons of the God.

In the first statement, **The LORD bless you and keep you** speaks of the providential care that God the Father promises to us as His children. Each week, we confess that we believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth. That means that we believe not only that He has created us, but that as our Creator and our loving Father, He is going to continue to bless us by providing us with the things we need for our physical welfare and protection, whether that's clothing, food, or a roof over our head. But we also know that our Father's blessings for us go well beyond our earthly needs. When He promises to bless and keep us, we know that He also has our spiritual welfare and protection in mind.

That's why, in the Lord's Prayer, we don't just pray for our Father in Heaven to give us our daily bread—our physical needs—we also ask Him to deliver us from evil and to help us battle against temptation, keep His name holy, and carry out His will. We can ask our Father to fill those spiritual needs confidently because we know that He has promised to do all of that and more, and because He reminds of those promises every time we hear the words, **the LORD bless you and keep you.** Saving faith trusts that God the Father will bless us and protect us both physically and spiritually.

In addition to that, we pray to the Father that His kingdom would come. Jesus teaches us that God's kingdom is His eternal and unceasing rule, in which He pursues specific purposes with specific means and toward a foreordained goal. That goal is the salvation for the human race. And that's what we see in the second statement of this blessing: **The LORD make His face shine on you and be gracious to you.**

In the Bible, we have a full history of God's gracious, saving activity among us here on earth. The main character of that history is God the Son, Jesus, who came into the world to save us from sin. When we hear God tell us that He has been, is, and will continue to be gracious to us, there is an underlying understanding that we are sinful people. We have rebelled against God; we have broken His commandments; we have lived in a manner that contradicts His will. And so the only hope for sinners like you and me is that God would be gracious to us and turn His face on us not in anger or displeasure, but with the sunshine of salvation.

We see that salvation and grace personified in Jesus. Lost and condemned as we were, He redeemed us. He purchased and won us from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver, but with His holy precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death. And He did all that so we could live under Him in His kingdom, glorifying and serving Him in righteous, innocence, and blessedness forever. It's that saving activity of Jesus—God's kingdom—that is present in us right now, and the fullness of which we will see one day in heaven, that God is reminding us of with those words, **The LORD make His face shine on you and be gracious to you.** Saving faith trusts that Jesus will bring us safely home to heaven by the merit of the sacrifice He made for us on the cross.

A weekly reminder of the loving care and protection that God the Father gives us, and the perfect and complete redemption that God the Son has won for us, is indeed a blessing. But our God is not content to give us that reminder only as we gather together each week with our brothers and sisters in Christ. He wants us to walk in the peace of that love and redemption every step of the way as we journey toward our promised home in heaven. So finally, we hear the words, **The Lord turn His face to you and give you peace.**

You see, the opposite of God turning His face toward you would be if instead, He turned His back on you. And if He did that, if He turned away from us because of our sins, forsook us because we had forsaken Him, it would be no less than we deserve. But that isn't what He's done. He has turned His face to you. The Holy Spirit came to you, called you by the gospel, enlightened you with His gifts, and He has sanctified you and kept you in the true faith in the same way that calls, gathers, enlightens and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus in the one true faith.

Every one of you is a miracle of the Holy Spirit. In a manner that only God can fully understand, the Holy Spirit has come to you through Word and Sacrament to fill you with the peace that comes with knowing that in Jesus your sins have been forgiven. A peace that assures you that no matter what, living or dying, you are your heavenly Father's child and nothing can take that away. Saving faith trusts that the Holy Spirit has turned His face toward you and that He will fill you with peace.

I never knew this before this week, but I found something very interesting when I was looking at these in the original Hebrew. You see in English, we have just the one word "you" which could mean all y'all or it could mean one of you specifically. Now Hebrew, on the other hand, has a different word for you singular and you plural. And all six times the word "you" occurs over these three verses, it's singular. So while God wanted the whole assembly of Israel to know that He wished these blessings for them, and while He wants our whole congregation to know that He is blessing us, He also wants each of the individual members of His Church—wants *you* personally, singularly to know that He loves and is blessing *you*, He is guarding and keeping *you*, the gracious forgiveness which He pours out through Jesus is for *you*, and the peace which that salvation brings is meant for *you*.

When I was growing up, I used to watch a show called *The Reading Rainbow*. At the end of the show, the host, Lavar Burton, would recommend some great books to all of the kids who were watching. “This book is fantastic,” he might say, or, “you’re going to love this one.” And he’d always follow that up by saying “But don’t take my word for it, read it yourself!” At the end of each episode of Shepherd of the Hills worship, I’m going to share the Lord’s blessing with you. But don’t just take my word for it. These aren’t just some ‘well-wishes’ I’m leaving you with that you can hope will prove to be true. Take a look at those first and last verses of our text again: **The LORD said to Moses, “Tell Aaron and his sons, ‘This is how you are to bless the Israelites.** God has human people like you and me, deliver the message of His blessing. But what makes that blessing more than just wishful thinking or a fool’s hope is the promise our Triune God attaches to it: So, He says, in this way, My servants will put My name and My people and I *will* bless them.

The love of God the Father our Creator and Preserver, the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ our Redeemer, and the fellowship, communion, and peace of the Holy Spirit our Comforter and Friend be with you all. Amen.