

January 3, 2021 Rev. Pat Weatherwax
 Numbers 6:22-27 “Not Just a Benediction” (Starting out on the wrong foot)

The text today is very familiar, even though we rarely get into the book of Numbers. Reading from the NRSV, Numbers 6:22-27. Hear what the LORD is saying to us:

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, Thus you shall bless the Israelites: You shall say to them, The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace. So they shall put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them.
 Holy words, holy wisdom, thanks be to God.

INTRODUCTION

The title for this sermon is “More than a Benediction”. The alternative title is “I’m already starting off on the wrong foot”. Why? And where does that saying come from? According to a web search (website: theidioms.com):

The origin of the phrase (“the wrong foot”) is unclear. There are theories which say that the wrong foot refers to the left foot, since there is an age old bias for the right side. Since we have "right and left" and "right and wrong", left tends to get associated with wrong. Another theory suggests that the phrase comes from the military, where in a march, all have to start with the same foot, which is usually the left foot. So in this case the right foot is the wrong foot.

And this sermon, on a beautiful text, for me, is starting off on the wrong foot! One resolution I’d made for this new year was to be more detail oriented and careful, more mindful of what I’m doing. To improve my accuracy. I often don’t pay close enough attention to details, and I want to be better at that. And

When I was thinking about how to approach this, another year of sporadic preaching I decided to focus on texts from the Revised Common Lectionary, especially the Old Testament lessons, since I had been using the gospel texts this summer and fall. I knew I was going to preach today, so... I looked up January, year B, in Christmas time and saw and chose this passage from Numbers 6. Neat!

Except I misread that fine print, the small font of the Lectionary website. I think I need new glasses, the fine print seems so much smaller lately. This text

was actually a passage listed for services to be held on January 1, not January 3. Oops.

So not preaching from the assigned text, *and* not careful to the details. This is the way life is. Resolutions are broken before they can even be fully started. However, this passage is a great assurance of Emmanuel, God with us for a fresh start for a new year.

This is called the Aaronic or priestly blessing. Let's look at the details.

VERSE 22-23 "The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to **Aaron** and his sons, saying, Thus you shall bless the Israelites: You shall say to them," ...

God used an unlikely person to serve in the important role of worship coordinator- leader. Aaron, Moses's brother, the man who led the Israelites astray to worship his golden calf, was the very man God chose to lead Israel in worship. This gracious way of God, and the way God's purposes are completed, is often observed in Scripture, *and* in our current reality by unexpected people and circumstances. Many times, God used and uses, the least likely and most flawed leaders- to lead people toward God's care and love.

Aaron's history is pretty tainted, so we remember: Forgiveness and opportunities of continued use in God's service always come to us, even if and even *after* we spectacularly mess things up. People and specifically worship leaders aren't perfect and we need to be surrounded by grace.

Next Sunday you will hear from a new church leader, a gift from God to Battle Creek First Pres. And you will be gracious, especially when he doesn't do things the way we've *always* done, because you have been given grace and you are gracious people! Rev. Mike Wicks is the minister of word and sacrament, leading us for a time, and I think God is smiling on us this way! Back to the blessing:

VERSE 24 "The Lord bless you and keep you;"

Although we can't really tell in English, this is phrased in the singular "you", rather than plural "you all". It's meant to have personal application, not to be a general benediction over a crowd of people, even though we usually do hear it given over a crowd. A promise of God, a covenant with us.

What does it mean for God to keep you? That: "Nothing can separate us from God's love and God is faithful, Emmanuel, God's with us, and won't let go".

Affirming that God's got you, taking care and holding you, forever. We heard it last week from "A BRIEF STATEMENT OF FAITH:

“In life and in death we belong to God.
 Through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
 the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit,
 we trust in the one triune God, the Holy One of Israel,
 whom alone we worship and serve.”

We belong. God keeps us. The newer NLT reads: “bless and protect”. But God’s protection of us is complicated by our free will and the decisions of others, too. What matters is that nothing in life or death separates you from God. You are *kept* in God’s embrace.

VERSE 25 “the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;”

Here’s a fun word: God, to us, is Anthropomorphic. That means we describe and think of God as having a human form and human attributes, like ours. Does God have a face? (Shrug) It’s how we can relate- God’s like us, with all our physical part: arms, shoulders, eyes, a heart, breath, etc.

Just don’t ever try to convince me that God looks like an old white grandpa. All people are made in the image of God!, We are warned in the Ten Commandments, not to establish images of God, they are idolatrous and probably inaccurate, anyway!

And what about seeing God’s face? Is that really ok? Isn’t there something that says if we “see God we will die”? That’s what Jacob thought would happen when he wrestled with God in angel form at a place he named Peniel, which means God’s face (Genesis 32:30). That’s what Moses thought, at the burning bush (Exodus 3:6). There’s significant warning in other passages in the Bible about it not being good to see God’s face.

On the other hand it also says (Exodus 33:11) that God spoke to Moses “face to face, as a man speaks with his friend.” That’s inviting and relational! We want to say to God: “hide your face from my sins and blot out my iniquity”, like David did in Psalm 51:9, but we want God’s face to shine onto us! Our desire is to please God. God’s face shining on us: it signifies God’s pleasure in us.

Similarly

VERSE 26: “the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.” The NLT= “May the Lord show you his favor and give you his peace”.

This week we celebrate Epiphany: that God in the human form of Jesus was revealed to people, and uniquely drew in “others”, non-Jewish people, known to us as the Magi. You can't understand the Nativity without Theophany- knowing the babe was God, revealed in human form. You can't understand the Nativity without Epiphany, that God's desire is to be revealed to all people. The revelation of Christ as the Son of God, as an infant, at his baptism and his whole human existence, continues the mystery of the Christmas season. Emmanuel, God with us, on earth as in heaven. Our humanity limits our ability to see God fully. But picture this: God's compassion flows outward to us, the children of God, in loving grace.

Second Corinthians 4 says it this way: God said “Let light shine out of darkness, (and made) light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God, in the face of Christ.” (2 Cor 4:6).

As we begin a new year with hope for good days yet to come, picture this, God is lifting God's face up to us. So where are we, if God's face is raised up toward us? We are held up, elevated, lifted, brought by God to new paces and new heights.

I've always called this picture, “Flyin” Ryan”, my great-nephew Ryan, so loved by his grandpa. That's how God lifts you to joy.



God's face goes up, lights up when we are lifted up in God's strength, and soaring in God-given joy. Come to God like a child, with trust and confidence that God will always catch you! Don't be afraid to soar in new ways, try new things, serve others in new ways, this year. The peace will come from God's promise: "Do not be afraid I am with you". The strength will come from God's mighty arms and power.

CONCLUSION

The blessing instructions passage ends this way, God says: "So they shall put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them". God blesses you. Priests and pastors *convey* God's blessings to you. The blessing come from the love and presence of God.

And this formula continues on: the Aaronic/ priestly blessing speaks to the Peace of God and Grace of God. The writers of most of the Epistles used this combination "Grace and Peace". (usually as the opening of their letters, not so much as a benediction.)

If you've received an email from me in the past few years you know that's part of my signature Email closing: Grace and peace. And for all of us, my desire for 2021

Give grace, get grace. Be at peace and promote the peace of Christ in our world. Soar high, raised to face old and new challenges in this new year, in a new way. Grace and peace...

Amen

Oh God, You raise me up.