

Pentecost 14 – August 29, 2021

Text: Benediction

Theme: Worship Series 12 “Yahweh Blesses Us on Our Way”

After about 14 weeks, today we conclude our sermon series on the Church’s worship. If you missed a sermon along the way or want to review something, they are all in the archives on Trinity’s website. Today we take up the Benediction. We most often use what is called the Aaronic Benediction because it is the Benediction that the Lord told Moses to have Aaron use when he blessed the people in Numbers 6. Listen well to these, God’s final words to us as we prepare to depart from the Divine Service each week. Although we will often close worship with a hymn, we are left with these final words of the Benediction in which God proclaims His constant presence in our lives. Beyond just saying “the Lord be with you,” this time, we get very specific and very personal.

Each of the lines of the blessing is divided into two clauses. The first clause invokes God’s attitude toward His people and the second clause invokes His action. The first line is, “The Lord bless you and keep you.” Yahweh, the proper name of God is used in each line. “Yahweh bless you and keep you.” It is not just that God walks along side of us and watches objectively as the world goes by. He sees the speeding truck bearing down on us and says “Oh golly, that’s gonna hurt!” No, the Lord blesses us. He pours his good graces out upon us. This is not a fond wish but a declarative statement. Whatever you are feeling right now is of no import whatsoever with regard to God’s blessings. He blesses you regardless of what you might be feeling. Even in the midst of horrendous trials and tribulations, you will still be able to seek and find his

blessing. This is phenomenally important because so many people seem to think that if they suffer illness or broken relationships or loss of employment or get a F on their math test, that somehow God is withholding his blessings from them. No! Look for his blessings in the midst of the storms because he promises that they will be there. He will bless you in cancer. He will bless you in poverty. He will bless you in loss. We live in a swirling cauldron of sin and hurt and right there in the midst of the storm is our God constantly blessing us.

But there is more, "The Lord bless you AND KEEP YOU." In the midst of the storm, God is keeping you. He literally protects us from things that would be harmful to us. Note that I did not say that he protects us from everything unpleasant. Sometimes unpleasant is just what we need. I don't recall any consequence I have ever suffered being particularly pleasant. When I spanked my kids, they never turned to me and said, "Oh Father, thank you for correcting me. I so appreciate it." But God protects us from eternal harm. That means that we never have to fear anything because we know that God is keeping us. The waves will roll and the lightening will flash and we will stand firm through it all because God keeps us.

Yahweh make his face to shine upon you. This is not a lucky incantation for good times. When I am speaking these words to you from the altar, I am not saying, I hope you hit a homerun in the game, or I hope you find that perfect shade of nail polish. I'm not saying I hope your retirement check increases or even I hope you get well. I'm saying that none of that worldly stuff really matters because we know the end of the story and like Job, we

confess that in the end, when all is said and done, in our flesh, we will see God. His face shines on us and we stand continuously in that aura.

“...and be gracious to you.” Because he makes his face to shine upon us, of course he is gracious to us. What does gracious mean? In the earliest uses of the word, it meant “godly.” Graciousness is being clothed with the robes of Christ, having strong faith that grasps grace with a firm grip. That’s why “your grace” is a common title applied to clergy who had been elevated to the office of Bishop. The assumption is that they were even more bathed in God’s grace. The declaration in the benediction is that this very grace of God flows over you, encapsulates you and empowers you to live a life in congruence with who you are and thereby, not pursuing the evil paths that are not congruent with who you are. If you haven’t noticed, people don’t like being told that they are pursuing evil paths. They get all self-righteous and arrogant. Who are you to tell me I’m wrong? No one. I’m no one, but God says you are wrong, and I’m just letting you know that if you want off that evil path you’re on, His grace will pull you back onto His path.

“Yahweh lift up his countenance on you....” Note that I intentionally do not use the modern terminology, “The Lord look upon you with favor....” I decided before I had even begun being a pastor that I would not weaken the language to make it fit in better to modernity. Of course, God looks upon us with favor. He sent his Son to die on the cross for us so I cannot imagine more favor than that! The Hebrew literally says, “lift up his face on you.” Idiomatically, it carried the idea of looking upon us with favor but there is

something for more powerful about the literal face of God being lifted upon you. It is meant to convey the idea of standing before a King knowing that he owes you nothing and can easily choose to ignore your plight all together or even kill you to end your annoyance of him. But as you stand there trembling before the Almighty King, you see Him raise his head and look deeply into you with eyes the depth of which cannot be fathomed. As His countenance is upon you, you know that He sees everything inside you, everything you have done, said, even thought and would be completely justified in destroying you, in just smashing you like a cockroach. But as you stand in the merciless glare of the gaze of the Almighty you hear the final phrase of the benediction "...and give you peace."

Imagine God seated on his throne. His head rises and His eyes fall on us. These are the eyes that can turn people to pillars of salt. These are the eyes that cause human hearts to explode. These are the eyes that have killed thousands of people who dared to disobey Him. We should be terrified. But, as we look into these eyes – we see only love and acceptance because these eyes are looking at us through Jesus Christ and they see no sin, only holiness. They see the body and the blood of Jesus which courses through us and that brings us back to the beginning of worship where we stand before God and proudly proclaim that we are indeed, "In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit." Now we leave in true and complete peace. He has given us that peace as we leave this oasis and travel back into the desert to serve our master yet again until we gather once more, next week, to refill, recharge and rest in His almighty arms.