

Numbers 6:22-27, "The Benediction" (*Holy Trinity C*) '16

In the Name of the LORD, dear fellow believers:

Today's First Lesson [from Numbers 6] has a familiar ring to it – and it should! Because most of us have heard these words thousands of times before – in church. In fact, we've heard Aaron's "Benediction" or 'blessing' so often that we can say it [from memory] as many of the shut-ins do. But it is possible that when words are *that* familiar they lose their meaning or importance. Therefore let's look closely at "The Benediction" so that you & I can appreciate it – more fully.

1. The First Stanza (The LORD: God the Father). "The Benediction" begins, "The LORD bless you and keep you" (v.24). When this 'blessing' was first spoken to God's people they were obviously helpless. As you recall the Israelites had escaped the Egyptian army at the Red Sea by the miraculous intervention of the Almighty. There was an enemy in back of them. There were also enemies to the left of them – the Edomites and Moabites and straight ahead were the Canaanites. Grazing land was scarce. Those who already inhabited the land didn't want a whole nation of new people in their land. To the right was more desolate land. So there they were – some two million people in the desert, no supply lines, no friends and no possibility of growing food to feed themselves and their children. It looked like the only way out was through gradual starvation. In a way it's no wonder that the Israelites shouted angrily and kept on asking Moses why *he* had brought them out of Egypt into this terrible situation.

They had only one Helper & Friend – God the Father. They were totally dependent on Him and they knew it. He gave them manna from heaven, water from the rock and quail in the air. The words of Aaron [at the end of the worship service] were, therefore, full of meaning, when lifting up his arms he intoned: "The LORD bless you and keep you" (v.24). They knew that unless God [in His grace] would continue to bless them they would all perish.

To us – it isn't that obvious. We have friends. We live in the midst of abundance. Our farms produce all manner of food and the shelves of our grocery stores are loaded. We have comfortable homes, fashionable clothes; not just water but soda water, beer, wine and all manner of fruit juices. Who needs God?

We need Him because *all* that we have comes from Him. He not only created the heavens and the earth but He still "sustains all things by his powerful word" (Hebrews 1:3b). The sun rises, the seeds grow, the rain falls, the fruits & vegetables grow, the cattle reproduce, the chickens & turkeys multiply only because God commands them to. Even though we [at times] forget it, we are just as dependent on God as the Israelites in the desert. Without Him we too would perish. Thoughtful Christians find a deep meaning and a real comfort in the words: "The LORD bless you!"

Furthermore, like the Israelites we are surrounded with danger. We also need God to "keep" us, that is, to watch & care for us as we battle cancer, struggle with arthritis, cope with family problems, face financial difficulties and deal with violence here in America & abroad. Health of mind and health of body are gifts of the LORD God. With Christians everywhere we join in singing: "I need Thee every hour/ In joy or pain..." (L#137:3). Yes, like Israel of old, our hearts are thrilled and comforted as we hear: "The LORD bless you and keep you" (Nu.6:24).

2. The Second Stanza (The LORD: Jesus Christ). "The LORD make his face to shine upon you." (v.25a). Have you ever gotten up during the night to get a glass of water and tried to do it without turning on the lights? We stumble around, stubbing our toe or banging our knee because we're blind in the darkness. Yet spiritual darkness is even more dismal & dangerous. By nature we were all spiritually blind. The ways

and things of God were “foolishness” to us (1 Corinthians 2:14). Now, however, Christ has given us “the knowledge of the glory of God” by showing us (2 Corinthians 4:6): divine compassion – in raising the widow of Nain’s son; divine power – in stilling the storm; divine wisdom – by silencing His critics; divine courage – by knowingly going to the cross; divine love – by forgiving His enemies & us. Christ has enlightened our eyes and our hearts so that we see and believe in Him “who (came) from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). When the pastor says, “The LORD make his face shine upon you” he is praying that Christ will continue to give you that inner spiritual light.

“...And be gracious to you” (v.25b). Why are we sometimes nostalgic? Perhaps it’s caused by seeing a photo of a departed loved one or the discovery of some old love letters or the realization that a calendar date has a special significance and suddenly we’re reminiscing about the ‘good old days.’ However most of the time we would rather not look back. Looking back reminds us of too many failures, too many incomplete jobs, too many broken promises. Looking back makes us feel guilty, disappointed even depressed. If you feel that way [right now] you’re in good company. St. Paul felt the same way when he wrote to the Christians in Rome: “For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do – this I keep on doing...What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?” (Romans 7:19, 24).

Feeling the weight of our sins is not all together bad. The 19th century, Evangelist Dwight L. Moody was preaching to a large audience [on the weight and guilt of sin] when suddenly he was interrupted by an inebriated man in the third row: “Mr. Moody, I feel no weight on me.” To which Moody replied, “Dead men feel no weight, no matter how large. Your problem is that you are spiritually dead.” Thank God, you & I are spiritually alive. That’s precisely why we’re sensitive to sin and feel the weight of sin on us and a deep need for God’s grace. Our hearts yearn for and are deeply comforted with the words of “the Benediction:” “The LORD...be gracious to you.” (Numbers 6:25).

Grace is one of those glorious attributes of God which defies definition. Grace reminds us of what Christ has won for us: forgiveness instead of punishment; life instead of death; salvation instead of damnation; glory instead of hellish gory. What a tremendous blessing it is that “The LORD...is gracious to you” (v.25). Humbly receive it; it is yours by faith in the LORD Jesus Christ.

3. The Third Stanza (The LORD: the Holy Spirit). “The Benediction” concludes: “The LORD turn his face towards you...” literally means “to turn a frown into a smile.”(v.26a). In other words, Aaron is saying, “May God smile on you!” “The Christ of the Andes,” a statue on the Chile-Argentina border, stands as a symbol of peace between the two countries. When it was first completed, however, the Chileans felt slighted because the back of Christ was turned toward their nation. A diplomatic newspaperman then wrote an editorial suggesting that Argentineans might need to be watched more closely. The people of Chile had a good laugh and withdrew their protest.

Which side of God do we believe is turned toward us? Do we sometimes feel His back is turned in a seemingly cold, uncaring posture? Or do we envision God with His “face towards (us)” – smiling and poised to bless? God *HAS* a great big smile on His “face” because of His ongoing relationship with us through the indwelling of Holy Spirit. It is the LORD’s Spirit who assures us that God is smiling and “looking on (us) – with favor” (C. W. p.25).

“...And give you peace.”(v.26b). You & I have “peace” because the Holy Spirit enables us to see all God does [for Jesus’ sake]. He loves us – unconditionally; He forgives us – completely; He cares for us – daily;

He guides us – continually; He protects us – ceaselessly; He helps us – steadily; He promises us that all is well – no matter what external appearances might be.

An artist was asked to paint a picture symbolizing this “peace” we have in Christ. The patron was amazed when he uncovered the finished work. He expected a painting of a quiet lake, a flower-covered meadow or a butterfly in flight. The painting had none of these. Instead there was a turbulent sea, black foreboding clouds, waves furiously beating against the rocky shore. A wind-damaged tree stood on the bank leaning outward. But in the fork of two branches, above the spray of the waves, the artist had painted a nest [in which] were two small doves and the mother calmly covering them with her wings. That’s not a bad picture of our “peace.” Storms may blow from every direction, dark clouds may hover over us, death and decay surround us, yet we are forever safe in Christ. The psalmist promises, “He will cover you with his feathers and under his wings you will find refuge” (Psalm 91:4a).

“The Benediction” is more than a signal for parents to pick up their children’s toys. “The Benediction” is more than a device for holding the congregation [in place] until everyone can get a fair start to the parking lot. “The Benediction” is more than a promise that the service is almost over and that dinner is coming *soon*. “The Benediction” is a divine ‘blessing’ which should create joy and thanksgiving. Because through it the LORD “puts (His) name on (us)” (Numbers 6:27). Thus claiming you & me as His children and making us the beneficiaries of His ongoing acts of love. Amen.