

Sermon Reading: Numbers 6:22-27 (*reading printed in sermon*)

Not Just Words

Someone sneezes. Quickly someone else responds, “Bless you!” as if it’s a race to see who can say it first! And what does it do? For all intents and purposes, nothing. Sure you are wishing for good things to happen to this person. There’s a chance you made that person’s day because someone actually noticed him; even if it was just a sneeze. But, at the end of the day, it’s just a nice thought. It’s a wish in the wind. Because we hear it often enough, it’s rarely a big deal. Instead, it sounds more like empty words.

You are near the end of the church service. The pastor turns around raises his hands and begins to say, “The Lord bless you...” What does this even mean? Maybe you’ve heard the words so often they barely register. Maybe it’s been a while since you stopped and thought about them. Maybe it sounds like so many other things: empty words, happy thoughts, not much more than that. Are they? And if they aren’t, what is this Lord’s blessing?

It must mean something significant, after all, the Lord spoke to Moses and told him to tell Aaron and the priests to do it. The people of Israel are camped at the foot of Mt. Sinai. They still have a ways to go before they will reach the Promised Land of Cana. There still are many dangers along that wild desert road. There is still a lot about the future that they aren’t very sure. It already hasn’t been a very easy trip. They’ve struggled with doubts along the way. They were barely out of Egypt before they were whining and complaining to Moses because things weren’t going the way they want or expect. They were so quick to doubt God’s promises; his Word wasn’t enough. They want a god they could see and touch and more like the gods of Egypt and the countries around them. So they made one with their own hands—the golden calf. The Lord could have chosen any other people in the entire world far more powerful, successful. Instead the Lord chooses these former slaves and degenerate sinners: **“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.”**

When the Lord speaks, it is never empty words. No, his words have power and create life. He wants good things to come to the people of Israel. He wants to cause them to prosper and grow. He wants to protect them as his own.

But why them? After everything Israel had already done, Lord, you still want them? He is the all-knowing Lord with nothing surprising him so he knows what

these people would do. The Old Testament isn't so much a history of the good things about God's people but more a broken record that repeats itself of broken promises by Israel. Time and again they will cheat on the Lord with the false gods of their neighbors. Time and again they will do evil in the eyes of the Lord. Time after time they will improve a little bit only to fall deeper into sin and temptation. And still, he wants to give them this? How could he? Why them?

We could wonder the same thing for ourselves here 3500 years later. When we consider the vast heavens with their estimated 100 billion galaxies that we know about with more yet to be discovered, why do we get to have this blessing? When we consider how his fingers set in order the tiniest of molecules along with the stars in the heavens, the sun and moon he places neither too far nor too close but just right to benefit this earth, who am I? **“What is man that you are mindful of him? The son of man that you care for him”** (Psalm 8:4)?

When we consider the work of our hands, yes it is important and it is needed, but in the grand scheme of everything and everyone, it's so little, so tiny. So why me? When we consider how so often the work of our own hands is done to serve me, how when we do serve or don't serve it's because we are so wrapped up with what will I get out of it, why me? Consider all the broken promises to do better next time. Consider how quickly we grumble and complain, whine and doubt when things aren't going the way we want or expect. Think about how we form our own idols as we fear, love, and trust money, work, family, children, hobbies, especially that pet sin you turn back to again more than Lord. Why me? When we consider how we take a free gift from God and turn it around into something that we need to prove that we should have, we need to work to deserve, we need to do to keep—you realize how insolent that is? Why me when he knows how I'm going to fail again? He knows how you will struggle and fall more. So why you? He's under no obligation to do anything for us. He's a jealous God who will not stand by and ignore when his honor, his praise, his glory that only really belongs to him is given to another. So, what about me? What about you?

He doesn't turn his back and leave you. He put his name on you and claimed you his own. For Israel the priest raises his hands and speaks. For you, he brings you closer and physically pours water over your head and speaks the Word, “I baptize you in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” He didn't strike you down with holy fire as you came into his presence. Instead, he looks upon you and smiles. Not because you've done such a great work to be here, but because you are his child. Into the name of the Triune God you were baptized and God put his claim, his name, his promise and blessing on you personally and individually.

The Triune God, what does that even mean? The word is simply three—tri—one—une. It describes who God is but hardly explains him. It's how he clearly has revealed himself to us in his Word. At the same time, it's a drop in the infinite ocean of the I AM LORD. It's impossible for our minds to understand, but that's a good thing. Why would we want a God that we could understand fully and completely? That would make him such a tiny God. That makes him a God we could package away and easily confine. We would have every reason to doubt and to question Him. No, he is Lord whose judgments are unsearchable and whose paths are beyond tracing out (Romans 11:33). It is this Lord who says: **“I will bless them.”** This is his blessing. This is his work. I will bless them. And what he says, he does.

“The Lord bless and keep you.” It's not an empty wish that he may or may not do. The Lord will and does. He opens his hands and satisfies the desires of every living being. But how much more he does for you! After all, you are his son, his daughter. Even sinful fathers know how to give their children good gifts. How much more the Lord? And because you are his child he protects and guards you. You have no idea what types of dangers and disasters he protects you from day after day and as you put your head down to sleep at night after night. He guards you against the hounds of Satan that wish to devour you. He guards you from the fiery arrows of temptation that might steal you from him. And when you have fallen, he leads you through and keeps you with Word and Sacrament in the one true faith that he creates and sustains.

“The Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you.” He has every right to give me the darkness of his face. Look at the darkness of this world. Look at the grime of sin that is disgusting even for us to look back at and see what we have done. The stench of death that hangs over us as the consequence for our sin is appalling. But instead of leaving us in the dark, the Father sends his Son who is the Light. Jesus says, “Those sins are not yours. They are mine. That death won't be yours. It's mine. The hell you deserve I suffer for you.”

Instead of turning his face on you, the Father leaves his own Son in the dark. We hear Him cry out, “Why have you forsaken me?” He's buried in the darkness of the tomb when he gives up his life and dies. But on Easter morning the Son rises. Death is defeated. Payment for sin is made and accepted. The Lord does not treat you as you deserve. Jesus already suffered for you. He will not punish you for what you've done. He's already crushed Jesus. You have been justified through faith—that means you stand before God not guilty. Your sins are forgiven so the Lord's face shines on you! We could never prove that we deserve it; he doesn't want you to try either. This is grace—love we don't deserve he freely gives. When he looks

on you he sees the work that you are doing—changing the diapers, mowing the lawn, your place of employment, loving your neighbor, serving your spouse, hands folded in prayer—to the world and the grand scheme it looks so small, so tiny, so insignificant. But not to the Lord. How could the Lord not smile at you as he sees you, his child? Though it's not perfect it's been washed in Jesus' blood and made clean; therefore, it is good and pleasing and the greatest work in the Lord's eyes. Think of how a parent sees the simple painting of their child; hardly ever will it make it into the museum of art. But to mom and dad, it's beautiful and their faces light up when they see it. How much more the Lord when he sees the work that he has set out for you to do?

“The Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace.” In Old Testament times when the king would turn his face away from someone coming into his court that meant death. If he raised his face to look at the individual, that meant life. The Lord lifts his face to you, stares you right in the eye and welcomes you with open arms. He does not see the sinner; he sees his daughter with whom he is well-pleased. He doesn't see the screw up and failure; he sees you, his son, wearing your brother Jesus' robes of perfection. And he gives you peace. It doesn't mean that all the bad stuff is going away. It doesn't mean that all the problems will disappear. This *shalom* peace is a wholeness. It's a balance. It's the peace knowing that everything is going to be okay because the Lord says so. It's peace that comes through faith that the Lord will do everything that he promises. It's peace that even when suffering we can rejoice because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us (Romans 5:5).

I will bless them, the Lord says. This isn't just wishful thinking. This isn't just the churchy good-bye to let you know it's almost time to go home. The Lord gives himself to you. These are not empty words. You walk out of here with the Lord giving himself to you, bearing his majestic name, and what the Lord says, he does. Amen.