

The Lord Bless You and Keep You

preached by Rev. Paul Sakasov on December 30, 2018

Numbers 6:22-27

22 The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: 23 Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, Thus you shall bless the Israelites: You shall say to them, 24 The Lord bless you and keep you; 25 the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; 26 the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace. 27 So they shall put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them.

Several years ago I read book called, “The Power of Blessing,” which describes the incredible impact that speaking words of blessing can have on others. In building their argument, the authors began by stating that the Bible says that all creation came into being when God spoke. Thus, it was words of blessing that gave birth to the universe. Later in the Bible we are told that when God came to live among us in human flesh, he was known as, “the Word of God.” Thus, it was through the living Word that salvation, and eternal life were introduced to a dying world.

From there, the book’s argument proceeded by stating that God made us in his image. This means that as image bearers of the living God, we bring life or death into our world through the words that we speak. While this statement may seem like it is a little over the top, it is true. And if you aren’t sure, then just ask a child who has been told all their life that they are stupid, that they are good for nothing, and that they will never amount to anything. Just ask a wife whose husband tells her she is ugly, that she is a nag, and that she can’t do anything right. Just ask an employee whose employer criticizes everything that they do. Then compare their lives to the children who have been affirmed by their parents all their lives, the spouses who have always heard words of endearment, and the employees who were constantly praised and it will be clear. Our words have power. And through them, we bring either life or death into our world.

Even at the most basic levels of life this principle is true. As an example of this reality, consider the results of a study I heard about in my introduction to psychology course in first year university. In this amazing study, researchers grew plants under identical conditions with the exception that a third of the plants in the study had people speak encouraging words to them for a certain duration of time each day, a third had nothing spoken over them, and the other third of the plants had people speak negative words to them, each day for same time. And the results? As bizarre as it may sound, the plants that received words of blessing and affirmation grew most, and the plants that were cursed grew the least.

As an aside, I hope this insight will be helpful for the many garden enthusiasts in the congregation. May God bless you and your garden this summer as you sing to your plants and tell them how much you love them and admire them.

All kidding aside, isn't this an incredible finding. Indeed it is a powerful testimony to the weight that words carry. This is the power of speaking words of blessing. To plants. To pets. To people. All creation is shaped by words.

Given this power that the spoken word wields over all creation, it is my hope that we will receive new life within us, and that we will be empowered to breath new life into the world around us as we take time to consider one of the most well known words of blessing in Scripture, commonly referred to as, "the Aaronic Blessing." Let me read it again. "The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace."

As we seek to receive God's blessing from these words so that we may be a blessing to others, it will be helpful for us to start by looking at the context in which these words were given. Turning to the book of Exodus for this necessary background we find that these words of blessing were given to the people of Israel just after they had been freed from slavery in Egypt and just before they were about to enter the promised land.

In both these illustrations it is clear that it was only through the power of God that the Israelites were delivered from bondage in Egypt and that they were able to enter the promised land. Thus, the blessing of God brought them freedom from oppression, a land to call home, and prosperity once they were settled in. All this to say that the blessing of God was not a mere token blessing. In fact, what we learn when we consider this story, and when we consider all the other stories found in Scripture is that the best blessings in life are the blessings that come from God. That is why each Sunday when we take up the offering, we sing, "Praise God from whom all blessings flow." For what was true for the nation of Israel thousands of years ago is as true for us today. And that is, the biggest blessings we receive in life are the blessings we receive from God.

Closely connected to this truth is a revelation of God's character. And the trait that is revealed through counting our blessings is that it is in God's nature to bless his children. This character trait of God is also clearly demonstrated throughout Scripture when God blesses Adam and Eve in the garden, and when God establishes his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

God's goodness to his children is further demonstrated when he raises Moses to lead them to Mount Sinai where they were officially declared to be the people of God through a fiery mountain top ceremony that produced the Ten Commandments. Later on, God blessed Israel with the judges who kept them connected to their God and brought justice and peace to the land. Then God blessed his people with a righteous king, David. Finally God, blessed his children, and the world, by sending his only begotten Son, Jesus Christ.

In other words, by sending Christ into the world, God blessed his children by giving them the very best thing he had to offer. In sending Christ into the world to die for our sins, God demonstrated once and for all that it is God's desire to bless his children. And how does God bless his children?

Looking at today's reading a couple of things come to mind.

The first way God blesses us is with the gift of salvation. In the case of Israel, God saved them from a life of slavery in Egypt. In our case, God saves us from the torment of slavery to sin in this world, and the torment of judgement in the life to come. This understanding of salvation is clearly laid out in the New Testament, starting in the gospels with verses like John 3:16 and explained in greater detail in Paul's Epistles, of which Romans chapter three is a prime example.

A second blessing that God desires to give us is the gift of his presence. Hence the refrain in today's reading, "the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you." While we may not catch the significance of this blessing on a first read, let us again take a walk through Scripture in order that we may better understand the importance of this blessing.

Returning to the beginning, God blessed Adam and Eve by walking with them in the garden. God also blessed Abraham and Israel by appearing to them. God blessed Moses by appearing to him in a burning bush. God blessed the Israelites by revealing himself as a pillar of fire by night and a smoke cloud by day during the exodus. The bottom line is, when God's presence is visibly near, good things happen for his children.

But, even more inspiring than this is the reality of what it means to look upon the face of God. To make my point, consider the following. Think of the most beautiful thing you have ever seen in your life. Consider the beauty of a sunrise over a mountainous coastal shoreline. Consider the beauty of the face of a loved one. Consider the beauty of a first born child and the awe and wonder that filled

your heart when you held them for the first time. Think of everything beautiful that you have ever seen in your life, add them all together, and multiply them a million times over, and that is what it is like to look into the face of God.

Truly it is an awe inspiring experience. In fact, it is so overwhelming that whenever God revealed his glory to Isaiah, and Peter, James, and John they were totally incapacitated. In much the same way as a small wire gets fried when a current well beyond its capacity gets sent through it, all the saints who have caught a glimpse of the glory of God have been brought to their knees by the sight.

But, oh, what a glorious sight! Oh what a blessing to receive! What better gift can God give us than that? To see the source of all beauty. To behold the radiant face of love itself. That is a priceless gift that exceeds heaven itself. For heaven is merely the box in which the true prize is revealed. Thus, the ultimate source of joy for the Christian is not walking the streets of gold in the New Jerusalem, it is not being re-united with loved ones; as wonderful as these things will be. Rather, the ultimate source of joy for a Christian is beholding the face of God. And the good news is, that it is God's desire that we should see his face.

This is why God commands Moses to instruct Aaron, the high priest, to bless the people with these words. For God wants to bless his people. He wants them to experience full salvation. He wants them to experience being alive in the fullest sense possible as they look on the radiant face of the living God.

In a similar manner, I believe God would also have us speak these words of blessing over each other. For we are image bearers of the living God, and our calling is to speak the words that God is speaking. And if God speaks words of blessing over his people and over his creation, then we should too.

So, as we wind down another year, and as we prepare to begin 2019, may we seek the blessings of the Lord our God in full confidence that it is God's desire to bless us. As we wind down another year, and as we prepare to begin 2019, may we seek the blessing of God's salvation and the blessing of God's presence. Furthermore, as we walk with God in faith, may we speak the words of blessing that God has spoken over us to all we meet. May we confidently proclaim the gospel of salvation fully assured that there is power in our words, for they are the words of God. May we speak words of life to thirsty souls as we echo the Aaronic blessing and invite people to turn their eyes upon Jesus and look full in his wonderful face, so that the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of his wonder and grace.