

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 upon 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.” (Numbers 6:22-27)*

What does this Threefold Blessing Mean?

When you heard the text for this morning’s sermon, did you think that maybe you’d been daydreaming and we were already at the end of the service? Or maybe I got lost? I’m joking of course. But most of you probably recognized that the words before us this morning are words that we hear almost every Sunday at the end of the service. We call them the Aaronic benediction, which means the blessing that Aaron spoke. The Christian Church has always loved these words because in them we hear an Old Testament echo of a teaching that God makes clear only in the New Testament. What is that teaching? Well, consider the threefold repetition of the blessing, “The LORD bless you, the LORD make his face shine upon you, the LORD turn his face toward you.” What does that three remind you of? Of the doctrine we call the Trinity – the teaching that God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, three persons in one Godhead. Since today is Trinity Sunday, it’s natural that we would stop and consider this ancient blessing today. **What does this threefold blessing mean?**

I.

It means that you belong to God in here. God originally gave these words to Aaron, the first high priest of Israel. Like us, God’s Old Testament people heard these words again and again as a part of their worship services. God said, **“So [the priests] will put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them.”** For the last couple of weeks, the kids have been playing softball in phy. ed. at school. They were supposed to bring their own gloves, if they had them. So my youngest son dug out his glove and put it with his backpack. Just before he left, my wife scooped it up and wrote “Kieta” on it with a permanent marker. Why did she do that? Because some other fourth grader might have a glove just like his and she didn’t want any confusion about which one belonged to whom.

That’s what this blessing did for Old Testament Israel and that’s what it does every time we hear it. God writes his name on you. Of course, you can’t see it. We’re not talking about a physical sharpie coming down from heaven and writing on your forehead. We’re talking about something spiritual, something we can’t see with our physical eyes so we have to accept it by faith. But when God lays this blessing on us, he claims us as his very own. Just like my son glances at the name before he throws his baseball glove in his backpack and brings it home from school, God looks at the name he has written on us and he knows who to throw into his spiritual backpack and bring home to heaven.

What is the name that he lays on us? You see the answer in that threefold blessing. I called that an Old Testament echo of the doctrine of the Trinity because the teaching of the Trinity is not as explicit in the Old Testament as it is in the New Testament. But it is there in the Old Testament. And this is one of those places where God prepared his people to see the teaching he would lay out more clearly in the future. God planned for them to have an “Aha! That’s what he meant!” moment when he made it more clear later. God lays the name of the Triune God on us, the one name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, which he calls the LORD here, written with all capital letters. That name, the LORD, means the God who moved heaven and earth to save us.

In the gospel God puts that name on us. And we needed him to do that, because any honest look at us shows that we really aren’t any different from everyone else in this world, at least not by ourselves. We Christians like to believe we’re the good people of this earth. We like to tell ourselves that if everyone were a

Christian, the crime rate would be lower and families would be stronger and we'd all just get along better. And I'd like to believe that's true. But if it is true, it's only because God would be working through the gospel to change us.

I've been a Christian for as long as I can remember. I've been a pastor for almost 17 years now. I spent twelve years before that training to be a pastor in schools where every student was supposed to be a Christian. And you know what? Every single day of that time I've come face to face with sin. In every Christian school I know of, sometimes kids are mean to each other and some kids get singled out for bad treatment. When I was one of those students, sometimes I participated in that behavior. In every congregation that I've served, I've had to confront young people who don't want to get married, but do want to live together and have sexual relations. I've had to talk with members whose feelings are hurt and who are angry about bad treatment. I've had to teach couples how to apologize for their sins against each other and then how to forgive one another.

I don't think that I've served particularly bad congregations. I've served real congregations – every one was made up of sinners. The truth is, all too often, we Christians look just like the people around us. Sad to say, most of us can probably think of a married couple who are not Christians but who seem to have a better marriage than many Christian couples we know. I certainly have had friends who were unbelievers who I trusted more than some Christians I've known. I've had members – and even some fellow pastors – who thought I was a pretty poor excuse for a servant of God. The Lord did not put his name on us because he was picking out the best people in the world. God did not put his name on us because he could tell that we'd always get along. God did not put his name on us because we deserved it. The truth is, before he put his name on any of us we looked just like all the other unbelievers in the world. We looked like sinners who deserved nothing but hell because that is what we were.

But God loved us anyway. He chose us and he wrote his name on us. He sent his Son to die and pay for all that sin – for all the selfishness and cruelty and lack of love that we show in our marriages and in our relationships with other people, for all the times that we didn't want to listen to his word because we liked our sins, for all the ways that we followed this world instead of following him. Jesus died and he paid for all that sin. Then Jesus rose. When he rose, God declared that all that sin was gone forever. It's like we never did it! When God came to us in baptism and in the word and he gave us faith, God wrote his name on us. That name is like a blazing light bulb that blinds God to all our sin. When he looks at us, all he sees is that name of Christ shining on us and he calls us holy.

Every Sunday at the end of our service, God again puts that name on us – really he does that all the way through the service. Every proclamation of the gospel re-ignites the light of that name on us. That's the reason we come here – to hear that gospel so that we know that we belong to him.

II.

But it isn't just for here that God does that. My son owned his baseball glove for a year or two before the phy. ed. classes of the last few weeks. My wife didn't bother writing his name on it until he was leaving the house with it. At home, writing "Kietas" on that glove wouldn't serve any purpose. All our baseball gloves belong to Kietas. But here at school, at the park down the street, any time we're away from home – that's when you need to know whose glove it is. And it's the same with us and this blessing that puts the name of the holy Trinity on us. **What does this threefold blessing mean? It means that we belong to God out there.**

God told Moses, **"Tell Aaron and his sons, 'This is how you are to bless the Israelites.'"** At the end of the reading, God said that he would bless them. When a minister says these words, they're really a prayer asking God to bless us. God says that he will answer that prayer. God's blessing follows us out of these doors and into our lives out there.

What blessing are we praying for and receiving from God? **"The LORD bless you and keep you,"** the benediction says. These words speak of God's care for our lives. Quite often I remind you that God gives us everything we need, but not everything we want. That is true. But it could be misunderstood. God showers blessings down on us. Every one of us has much more than what we need. To call the many ways God shows his love just the minimum that we need borders on blasphemy. Over this Memorial Day weekend – just to give one example – I hope we're all going to take a moment to reflect on how God has used the sacrifice of countless men and women in uniform to bless us, to give us the good lives we have here. God "keeping" us means that God protects us from all harm and danger. The devil is a roaring lion who would love nothing better than to drag us off to hell. Even though sometimes, that roar seems pretty close, God protects us. We don't know how

many dangers he has spared us. And when we do have to suffer illness and hardship, God promises that these things last only as long as this life lasts. In the end, we will be free. We will be with him.

The blessing says, **“The LORD make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you.”** Every year, I tell my catechism class that they have to know the definition of grace or they won’t be confirmed. They’ve never disappointed me. I bet I could ask any of them today what grace means and without missing a beat they would say, “God’s undeserved love.” And they would be right.

This blessing promises us God’s undeserved love. We don’t deserve to have his name written on us. But the highest measure of God’s grace is Jesus. He went to the cross for us. He did it before we even knew about it. He paid for us without one single human being earning it. Day after day and week after week, that forgiveness that he won is ours. It’s ours in the face of all our sin and rebellion. It’s ours even though we still have a sinner in our heart who doesn’t want it. It is ours.

And it gives us what this blessing promises: **“The LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace.”** Have you ever seen the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*? There’s a famous scene when Tevye, who is Jewish, learns that his favorite daughter, Khava, has married outside the Jewish faith. And he disowns her. She comes to him and she cries out “Papa! Papa!” and he won’t even look at her. That idea of refusing even to look at someone who has so offended you is behind this statement. God doesn’t treat us like that, even though we deserve it. Instead, he turns his face to us. He looks at us with love. And he gives us peace.

We live with the memory of our own sins. And sometimes, that hurts. We live in a world that’s full of hardship, full of loss and pain and illness. And sometimes it drags our hearts so low that we don’t even want to get out of bed. But God turns his face to us in love. He comes to us here in church through the word and the sacraments and he gives us peace that we can take out there into our lives. The peace of knowing that our sin is paid for. The peace of knowing that God hears all our prayers and even when he says that we have to live with hurt and sorrow and illness, he still loves us and will give us the strength to endure our hardships. The peace of knowing that we have a better life coming.

All that is what it means to have God’s name on you. God’s name, written on you with the blood of Christ, written on you through the power of the gospel, is the cure to all that ails you here. It is the cure to the hurt and the sickness in our hearts. It is the reason that we conclude almost every service with these words. The last things that we want to hear is that God loves us. He will bless us and keep us. He will make his face shine upon us with the light of his grace, his undeserved love. He will turn to us in love every day of our lives and that love gives us peace in a world that knows no peace. My friends, you will hear that blessing again today in just a few minutes. May God remind you of his love and his blessings when you do. Amen.