

*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)*

How Does God Bless Us?

A few years ago, when Dan Schultz, the former principal at HVL, took a call to Minnesota, my wife and I considered buying his house. We walked through it with the realtor and you know what? Dan had worked on that house for years. And the work he did was beautiful. I could spend the rest of my life working on a house and never get it close to the way Dan left that one. In fact, as I walked around and looked at the things he did, a number of times I asked myself, “How did he do that?” I don’t think I’m alone in asking that question. Not everybody has gotten to see that particular house, but the TV show *This Old House* exists because people want to know how to do stuff like that. Places like Home Depot stock books on all kinds of home repairs and projects and they hire people who can give you advice. There are literally thousands of YouTube videos designed to teach people how to do everything from fixing up your house to repairing your dryer or dishwasher. All those videos and TV episodes and books exist to answer the question *how do you do that?*

Now, we didn’t come to church today to talk about how to fix up your house or repair your dryer. We came to hear the gospel. But our Old Testament lesson for today talks about God blessing us, and that’s the connection: how does he do that? How does God make things happen for our good? How does God turn pain and sorrow into benefits? How does God protect us and care for us and feed our faith? To put it very simply, **how does God bless us?**

I.

In one sense, we can never answer that question. God’s power and wisdom are simply beyond human understanding. My father-in-law is a scientist. He once made a very interesting statement. He said that until you reach really advanced classes, almost everything you learn in a physics class is untrue, because they have to dumb it down so much to make it understandable for the average person. The real problem, he said, is that the kind of math you need to be able to understand real physics is just beyond what most people ever study. So, if things of this life, like physics, are so confusing that most of us can’t wrap our heads around them, what chance do we have of understanding God? It just can’t be done. But on another level, we can understand how God works – in the sense that we can see the tools he uses and what he does with them. In the end, I don’t have to have a Ph.D. in physics to use a power saw. I just need to know how to use the tool and what will happen when I do. We can see the tools God uses and what comes from them. So, **how does God bless us? He puts his name on us.**

God’s name is one of his greatest tools. In our reading for today, God told Moses, **“Tell Aaron and his sons, ‘This is how you are to bless the Israelites.’”** Then God gave them the blessing that we still use at the end of our church services. Then God said, **“So they will put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them.”** So, what does it mean to put God’s name on his people? When we first got married, my wife was pretty fanatical about putting our name on tools and sports equipment and anything that might get mixed up with someone else’s property. 26 years of being married to me has worn down her good instincts, but you see the point, right? She put our name on that stuff to say who it belonged to. God puts his name on his people to claim them as his own. Not as slaves. But as children whom he will love and care for all the days of their lives.

That blessing he commanded summarizes all that God does for us. Today is Trinity Sunday, a day when we remember that our God is the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, one God in three persons. While that three-fold

name of God isn't mentioned here, it is significant that the blessing God gave has three parallel parts. And many pastors have pointed out that there is a strong correlation between the three parts of the blessing and the work that the Bible generally assigns to each person of the Trinity.

The first line of the blessing says, "**The LORD bless you and keep you.**" The Hebrew word translated as "keep" means to guard, to protect, to take care of and watch over. God protects us from all harm and danger. Most of us go through our whole day without bullets whizzing past our heads. And he gives us all that we need for our body and life. Every day, we wake up in a home that has roofs to keep the rain out. We eat. We drive cars. We have clothes to wear. While most of us probably wish for all kinds of things we don't have, I hope we all recognize just how blessed we are. Even when painful things happen, he promises that he uses those things for our good. God keeps us. All that is work that the Bible usually ascribes to God the Father. And we couldn't make it through a single day without it.

The second line of the blessing says, "**The LORD make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you.**" In the Old Testament, God's face usually represents his presence. Being in God's presence is a bad thing if he has come to judge us. But here, he makes his face shine on us – he's smiling. And he is gracious to us. He doesn't treat us as our sins deserve. He loves us. He makes us his favorites. He gives us gifts we can't possibly earn – the greatest of which is eternal life. Obviously here, we're talking about Jesus. His work for us on the cross makes it possible for God to ignore all our sin and make his face shine on us. Jesus changes God's attitude toward us: God no longer has a reason to condemn our sins. Instead, he views us as his own children whom he loves.

The third line then says, "**The LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace.**" When he turns his face to us, God looks at us. The point is, the great King notices us nobodies down here, and then God acts and we are changed. He gives us true peace. The Hebrew word for peace implies health and wholeness. God reaches into our troubled and confused hearts and he calms them. God reaches into our broken lives and he touches all the sorrow and anxiety and frustration that we feel and he makes us whole again. He gives us the peace that surpasses all understanding, peace that simply should not exist in this sin-filled world. But it is ours. Most of the time, the Bible sees that work as the work of Holy Spirit.

Now, it would be saying too much to argue that the doctrine of the Trinity is taught in this passage in all its New Testament fullness. But the New Testament lies concealed in the Old Testament. The Old Testament is revealed and explained in the New. God himself gave this threefold blessing to prepare his Old Testament people for the revelation of himself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit in the New Testament. It is right for us New Testament Christians to see him in this blessing.

But do we deserve this tremendous blessing? Week after week, we hear a version of these words, but do we really expect God to do all this for us? It's too easy for these words to lose their meaning for us today. Worse, it's too easy for us to fail to see why we need them. Our society almost reduces God's work in our lives to luck. We white, middle-class Americans have a strong belief that each of us needs to take responsibility for our own lives. That's true. But it can lead to an attitude that dismisses God's role in our success or failure. Even worse, we live in an age that tries to make all gods generic. It's all the same. Muslims, Christians, Hindus, whatever – we all worship the same god. We just use different words and have different traditions. You know what? None of that is true or God pleasing. God's words here show us just how far from him all those attitudes are. Following those attitudes means leaving the one true God behind.

But God is gracious to us. In Christ, the Light of the world, God makes his face shine on us in love and forgiveness. No one ever loved God the way Jesus did. No one ever was as committed to trusting in his mercy and to knowing the one, true God the way Jesus was. God has now given us credit for that perfect faith of Jesus. And, of course, Jesus died to clear away all the darkness that our sin casts on our lives. Jesus died to pay for all the ways that we fail to trust in him and even for that part of us that wants to believe that all gods are the same god. Jesus rose to tell us we will, indeed, live with him, in the light of his presence for all eternity. And between now and then, all these blessings are ours. The Holy Spirit turns his face to us and gives us the peace that knows God loves us and does all things for us. The Father blesses us and keeps us from all harm and danger. Jesus returns to us in grace every single day so that we can live with him forever. All because we have God's name on our souls and on our hearts. We belong to him forever.

II.

But how does God put that name on us? How does he bless us? It's such a tremendously important thing that you would think it must be accompanied by some powerful sign or ritual. There's a famous Old Testament story that happened long after Moses wrote the words. Naaman, an officer in the army of one of Israel's enemies, had leprosy. He came to the prophet Elisha to be healed. The prophet sent his servant out to tell him to take a bath. Naaman said, **"I thought that he would surely come out to me and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, wave his hand over the spot and cure me of my leprosy."** Surely, for something to have real power, it has to be impressive, right? No. God is a master of doing amazing things through very ordinary means. That's true about the blessing he gives today. **How does God bless us? He gives his word to us.**

Through Moses, God said to the priests of Israel, **"This is how you are to bless the Israelites. Say to them..."** Just speak these words, and all those blessing will belong to my people. How can that be? God himself acted in response to the words he commanded the priests to speak. When the priests used these words to bless Israel, they put God's name on his people. And then God said, **"I will bless them."** The priests had no magic powers. These were not incantations or magic words. They were prayers. They were invoking the promises God himself had made and holding God to his word. That's what God wants us to do! And God promised he would absolutely keep his word. So, the Father would guard and keep his children. The Son would take away their sins and open God's favor to them. The Holy Spirit would give them real and lasting peace.

But there's another part to this: the words are powerful because they are the word of God. God built his own power into them so that whenever we speak his word, it works. Now, unlike magic words, we can't use God's words for our own purposes. God's word does what he commands it to do and it accomplishes the purpose for which he sent it. But that doesn't change the fact that God in his grace gives us the most powerful force in the universe: his word. God lets us human beings take his words up on our lips and they do what he wants them to do.

And that works even if we stumble through those words. You may have noticed that at the end of our service, I say these words a little differently than they are written in our text. I grew up in the Lutheran church and I have the version from the old hymnal burned into my brain. And I fear that if I try to change too much now, when I raise my hands at the end of the service, there won't be anything there. I'll just stand here in silence for several minutes and then make something up. The beauty of God's Word is that even if we garble the words a little bit or use an older translation or rephrase them to make them clearer, it's still his word. It still accomplishes what he sends it to do. And he sends that word to bless us. He guards and keeps us. He forgives us and shines the Light of Christ on us. He gives us peace now and forever. Trust the power of the one true God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the holy Trinity, working in that word. It will bless you. Amen.