

The Blessing of God
Numbers 6:22-26; Luke 24:1-12, 36-53
April 12, 2009

A few years ago one community-wide Easter pageant assigned various town citizens to play the different parts of the passion story. The character of Jesus was cast to a most unlikely person – a big burly barroom brawler, an oilfield worker, not the usual person to be typecast as our Lord. After several weeks of rehearsal, the day for the performance of the Easter pageant arrived.

When they came to the part of the play where Jesus was being led away to be crucified, one little man, filling in as part of the crowd, got caught up in the emotion of the moment. He joined in the shouts of “Crucify him! Crucify him!” as Jesus was led away toward Calvary. Then in the midst of shouting insults at the top of his lungs, he accidentally sprayed some spit in the face of the character playing Jesus as the actor walked by carrying the cross on his back. The husky oilfield worker stopped in his tracks, reached up and wiped his face dry. Then he looked at the little man and said, “I’ll be back to take care of you after the resurrection!”

It is the day after the Jewish Sabbath. The women have come to the tomb of Jesus to finish their burial preparations. They find the stone rolled away; the tomb is empty. Two men there remind the women how Jesus told them that he would be crucified and on the third day rise again. The angels assure the women that, “He is not here, but has risen.” Later in the day two disciples meet Jesus on the road to Emmaus and experience his presence in the breaking of the bread. As the disciples are reflecting on this experience, Jesus appears to them all. Like the actor, he is back to take care of them after the resurrection! But unlike the oilfield worker, his greeting to the disciples is friendlier, more heartwarming. Jesus offers them a blessing: “Peace be with you.” He has a meal with them and then teaches them, reminding them of the meaning of his life and death. He also commissions his disciples to be witnesses of all that Jesus has taught and done with his life. He promises them that God’s Holy Spirit will empower them for their ministry.

Jesus then takes his disciples out to Bethany, raises his hands, and blesses them. While blessing his friends in the faith, he takes his leave and ascends into heaven. In response his disciples fall on their knees and worship. They return home bursting with joy and devote time to blessing God in the temple.

We don’t know the exact content of Jesus’ final blessing of his disciples, but we do know that blessings were typical prayers in the Jewish tradition. Blessings are prayers that seek the protection and the wholeness of God’s people. Spiritual leaders are commissioned to pronounce blessings on behalf of God to assure the people of God’s ongoing desire for their well-being.

It is possible that the blessing Jesus offered was like the one Aaron and the priests were instructed to offer the people as they moved from the worship of God into the world:

The Lord bless you and keep you;
the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.

Even if these are not the exact words of Jesus, this blessing reflects the essence of his life and character.

The Lord bless you and keep you. This blessing seeks the gifts of God for God's people, the basic things of life they need in order to be free to experience the spiritual blessings. The prayer of 'keeping' is for protection in the midst of whatever difficulties, misfortunes, or enemies the recipients may encounter. The blessing hopes that you will be safely held in God's hand throughout your journey.

The Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you. The face of God is symbolic for the presence of God. In the Hebrew scriptures it is commonly thought that one could not see the face of God and live (Exod. 33:20). To see the face of God was to be granted access to God's very presence. Feeling the absence of God, people often prayed, "Why do you hide your face from me?" In Jesus, the face of God is revealed. People are granted access to God. They are invited into intimate relationship with God. Jesus shows that God's face is compassionate, caring, kind, patient, generous, just, forgiving, and loving.

The Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace. It might be translated, "God look you full in the face." It has the sense of God looking upon you with approval and acceptance, beaming with pride for all that you are. In Jesus we receive the positive, uplifting, life-giving presence of God. We know God favor; we are claimed as God's beloved. Jesus accepts people as they are for who they are. He offers the gift of peace, *shalom*, well-being in the fullest sense of the word, including good health, security, inner harmony, and wellness. Those upon whom God gazes are changed. They receive the enriching gift of new life.

Jesus' death raised the fear that the presence of God he introduced would disappear along with his body. But the good news of the resurrection is that the risen Christ lives on as the shining face of God, beaming grace, peace, and blessing upon God's people. In the risen Christ the blessing of God goes on and on and one. The face of God continues to shine brightly, smiling with acceptance and encouragement. The risen Christ promises us that the blessing of God is unending.

Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen recalls her Friday afternoon visits with her grandfather when she was a young child. After sharing tea, her grandfather would set two candles on the table and light them. He would have a word with God in Hebrew, sometimes out loud, but oftentimes he was quiet, talking to God in his heart. When Grandpa finished talking to God, Rachel would stand in front of him

and he would rest his hands light on top of her head. He would thank God for her and for making him her grandpa. He would mention Rachel's struggles during the week and tell God something about her life. If she had made mistakes during the week, he would mention her honesty in telling the truth. If she had failed, he would appreciate how hard she had tried. If she had taken even a short nap without a nightlight, he would celebrate her bravery in sleeping in the dark. In these moments Rachel felt completely safe and at rest.

At Rachel's own home her physician parents were always struggling to learn more and to be more. It seemed that there was never enough. If she brought home a 98 on a test from school, her father would ask, "And what happened to the other two points?" She pursued those two points relentlessly throughout her childhood.

But her grandfather did not care about such things. For him, she was already enough. When she was with him, she knew with absolute certainty that she was blessed.

Many years later her mother surprisingly began to light candles and talk to God herself. Rachel told her about her grandfather's blessings and what they had meant to her. Her mother smiled at her sadly and said, "I have blessed you every day of your life, Rachel. I just never had the wisdom to do it out loud."¹

In God's wisdom, the risen Christ is present with his disciples then and now to bless us every day of our lives. Because the face of God continues to shine in our risen Lord, the hungry are filled and the grieving are comforted. Those at the end of their rope find strength and confidence restored. Souls that have shriveled in despair are planted with seeds of hope.

We are blessed not to hoard the blessing for ourselves. We are blessed to be a blessing. Our Christian vocation is to reflect the shining face of God. We are called to place others in the care and favor of God. We are called to proclaim the blessing of God out loud, so that others will know that they are held in the loving embrace of God. We are wise to embody the blessing of God, as Jesus did in his very being.

When we are in touch with our own blessedness, it is remarkable how easy it is to bless others, to speak good things to and about them, to call forth their beauty and truth. We are moving through a difficult season in the life of our nation. People are fearful. Some are angry. Many are hurting. They need to hear a word of blessing, receive a message of encouragement. Pay attention to the opportunities that you have to be a blessing to others, to lift them to new life, as Christ has given you new life and hope.

One of our church members, Greg Horner, has fulfilled a longtime dream this past week. He wanted to walk the pilgrimage to Chimayo in New Mexico. For hundreds of years the native population has believed that the springs and soil around Chimayo had healing properties. The 200-year old sanctuary in Chimayo is

often called the “Lourdes of America.” For decades visitors have come to the Santuario hoping and praying for relief from their pain and cures for their afflictions.

Greg had this dream long before he was diagnosed with lymphoma five years ago, just as he and Ginny made this their church home. Last year he spent about three months in the hospital. He spent last Easter Sunday in the emergency room. This year Greg has been strong enough to make the pilgrimage. Although he suffers from neuropathy in his legs, he has been walking miles each day to prepare for the pilgrimage. This past week he walked 31 miles over three days to Chimayo. As he made this journey, a higher priority than his own healing has been his prayers for four friends of Greg’s with cancer. Two are members of our congregation, one a friend of our church family, and another a young adult with Hodgkin’s disease. Greg has invited many of us to pray for him as he made the pilgrimage, but especially to pray for his four friends. I see Greg’s journey as a way he is blessing others. He is walking with and for others. He is their champion, seeking to breathe new life and hope into his friends. He has been blessed to be a blessing to others.

The blessings of God continue, my friends. The Easter message reminds us that the risen Christ is among us, lifting holy hands in blessings of hope and protection, beaming grace upon a smiling face, gently gazing upon you with love, proclaiming God’s blessing out loud. God lives on, my friends! May our lives shine with the light and love of the risen Christ, beaming his blessings beyond. Alleluia! Amen.

God of many blessings, you surprise us with good news this Easter morning. Christ is risen, continuing to bless people in your name. Jesus’ ministry brought hope and healing to so many. We are grateful that your presence continues to abide among us, sharing the hope of new life.

We are grateful for the blessings of family, of parents and grandparents, children and cousins, from whom we know love. We thank you for soul friends who offer the blessings of listening hearts and empathetic concern. We are grateful for public servants whose expertise is a blessing to others. Our lives are enriched by the arts, which reach deep into our spirits. Receive our gratitude for these and all your gifts.

Lord, we ask that you would keep and protect all who are vulnerable: our children and youth, Capitan Phillips and others held against their will; persons threatened with the loss of jobs; victims of the earthquake in Italy. Many are in need this day of a resurrection experience, of rising out of a dark cavern of hopeless into a springtime of fresh pathways and bright opportunities.

Gentle Presence, shine your light upon all who are restless for guidance or healing. Embrace them with your unending love.

Show us, O God, those ways in which you desire for us to bless others, just as Jesus blesses us. We offer ourselves back to you as channels of your peace and joy.

We pray in Jesus' name, uniting our voices as one....

ⁱ Rachel Naomi Remen, M.D., *My Grandfather's Blessings: Stories of Strength, Refuge, and Belonging* (New York, NY: Riverhead Books, 2000), pp. 22-24.

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