

“The Lord Bless You”

We gathered in the name of our Triune God. We confessed our sins to him, and received from him, through the pastor, forgiveness for all of them. Perhaps we witnessed a baptism, and in any case we were reminded of our own baptisms. We heard God’s Word in lessons and sermon, and we responded with songs and hymns, prayers and praise. We gladly supported the work of the church through our generous offerings given out of love for God. We received the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ in, with, and under the bread and the wine of Holy Communion.

So much is packed into the hour or so when we are gathered for public worship. We have spent several weeks considering individual parts and portions of our worship service, and today we have reached the end of that series and the end of the service.

It is a brief part of the service. Not many words. The pastor turns away from the altar at which he has offered one final closing prayer. He raises his hands toward the congregation and offers the blessing.

This blessing or benediction is an ancient rite of worship. At the conclusion of nearly every worship service we use the Aaronic benediction, which is recorded for us in Numbers chapter 6. The benediction begins with the words, “The Lord bless you.” May your hearts be comforted as we consider that this is a blessing from the Lord, and it is a blessing for you.

The Old Testament book of Numbers records the history of the Israelites following Exodus and Leviticus. The Israelites were that special nation that God had made his very own. They were the descendants of Abraham who had by this time grown into a large nation exactly as God had promised. Moses was God’s chosen leader for the Israelites, and Aaron his brother would be the first high priest. According to God’s command, Aaron’s sons would serve as priests throughout the history of the Israelite nation. In the midst of various instructions that the Lord gave to Moses concerning the life and worship of the Israelites, he gave Moses instructions for how the priests were to bless the people.

Numbers 6:22-27: ²² **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; ²⁵the LORD make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; ²⁶the 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.”**

Here is one of at least sixty-five places in the book of Numbers alone where the phrase, “The Lord said” appears. Like all the other instructions regarding the worship lives of the Israelites, this wasn’t something that Moses or Aaron or anyone else came up with on their own. It was an instruction from the Lord.

And the Lord’s instruction was to convey the Lord’s blessing. The source of blessing, indeed the source of every good thing that the Israelites received was the Lord. And let’s not miss out on the

significance of that special title for God, the Lord, that is used in these verses. You may have noticed in your bulletins that every letter of the word “Lord” is capitalized in these verses. In your NIV Bibles, this word is printed with small capital letters. This is a way to convey in English that this word “Lord” is a translation of the special name that God had revealed in its beauty and majesty to Moses. It is the name that is used of God to emphasize his faithful love, especially in the context of keeping the promise he made to Abraham and his descendants. God himself proclaimed the meaning of this name in the words: **“The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin”** (Exodus 34:6-7). Such faithful love would bless the Israelites who gathered to worship and were blessed in his name.

And such faithful love is on display when we receive the blessing at the end of our worship services. We do not have the same ceremonial commands and instructions for worship that the Israelites did, but as the Christian church has for many years, we use these beautiful words of blessing in the name of the Lord.

We use these words because we recognize our need for blessing. We know that nothing good lives in us, as even the apostle Paul confessed in Romans 7. We know that ultimately nothing good comes from us. We stand in deep need of God’s blessing. We come before him with the empty pockets of beggars absolutely dependent on someone else for every good thing.

And we receive from his hand many gracious blessings. We do well to be reminded of the Trinity in the threefold application of the Lord’s name in the benediction. We do well to consider how God has blessed us according to the work of each person of the Trinity in our lives. God is our creator who has given us everything we have and has made us everything we are. He preserves us by his almighty power, though it is often through the ongoing forces and laws of nature that we rarely even notice. Jesus the Son has saved us from our sins. He has turned God’s face toward us in love instead of anger. He is the ultimate expression of God’s grace and the satisfaction of God’s anger and outrage over sin. The Holy Spirit has called us to faith and strengthens our faith through Word and Sacrament. By his work the Lord’s peace has become our possession. With our sins forgiven we enjoy peace with God.

And so these words are more than a happy wish, even more than a prayer. They are a confident statement of the blessing that God has and will continue to pour into our lives. And these are words of blessing for everyone gathered here.

The Lord’s instructions were for Aaron and his sons to bless the people. The Lord bless you and keep you. We don’t notice it in English where we use the same word you whether we’re speaking to one person or to many people, but the Hebrew indicates that the blessing is given in the singular. To each individual gathered in the congregation, the Lord was giving his blessing. To each person according to his own individual needs and cares and concerns God would provide his blessing. For each individual as God knows best he will give his blessing.

The same holds true today. While we pray that God would bless our congregation as a whole, the benediction is a personal blessing. It is something for each of us to take home and to hold fast to.

It is reassurance from God who knows your personal needs and desires, who knows you even better than you know yourself. The blessing is for you, Christian man, woman, or child, gathered in the name of the Lord. The blessing is for you to take with you as you live in the name of the Lord.

The pastor who speaks the benediction is not exempt from the blessing by any means, but it is worth mentioning again here his unique role and special privilege. Like Aaron and his sons, the pastor stands between the people and God. We do not require a mediator in the way that the Israelites did, because Jesus has opened our access to God once and for all. But in our gathering together for public worship, the pastor serves as a spokesman. He turns his back to the people in the congregation and faces the altar to lead the people in addressing God through prayer. He turns to face the congregation to speak the Word of God to them.

And so for the benediction, the pastor looks over the congregation in God's name presenting God's word of blessing. His hands are raised as a symbol of the blessing being communicated, a visual reminder of the Lord placing his name upon his people. And he makes the sign of the cross, reiterating and pointing to the greatest blessing. Because of the life and sacrificial death of Jesus, the blessing of God is ours. Apart from the cross no blessing has any value.

Soon the congregation, now worshipping in unison, will separate. With the backdrop of postservice music, we will greet each other, get to know some people better, introduce ourselves to others. Perhaps we'll linger and enjoy a cup of coffee or lemonade and a cookie or two. Eventually, we'll climb into our hot cars and head off our separate directions. But first we'll stand and with believing hearts receive the benediction from our Lord. We'll hear a summary of all that we have done together today, of all that will keep us throughout the week, and of that which will encourage us and strengthen us to return again to hear it next week. The Lord bless you.