

Number 6:22-27

The Blessing-Rev. Kelley L. Becker

It is really wonderful to share this day with all of you. You know, you are officially stuck with me after the installation today, so I hope that is good news to you. It is most certainly good news to me! And because that is the case, I thought it good timing to preach on a passage that sort of screams “good news”.

Today’s text is a blessing, from God to the people of God. As a minister, I have the privilege of publicly bestowing blessings, on God’s behalf, quite often. Every Sunday, I give the benediction which is a blessing. I’ve dedicated babies, officiated at weddings and funerals, blessed pets, blessed people in the hospital, and even blessed new homes. I didn’t think much about the act of blessing, even though I have been the recipient of many blessings over the years, until I sat down to write the service for the first wedding I officiated. I got to the very end of the service, and I began to think about what I thought God would want to say, in closing, to these young people as they began this new part of their journey. I think of blessings as my last opportunity to tell the people gathered what I think God really, really wants them to remember.

Here is the blessing written in Numbers 6:22-27

²²The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: ²³Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, Thus you shall bless the Israelites: You shall say to them,

²⁴The Lord bless you and keep you;

²⁵the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;

²⁶the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.

²⁷So they shall put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them.

This passage is part of a section in Numbers that talks about what the role of priests were in the nomadic Israelite community. From this passage, you have probably guessed that one of the roles was to extend

God's blessing to the people. Did you hear the good news for the people in this blessing? I think this good news is for us too. This three-part blessing summons God's mercy and favor toward the people of Israel for the sake of their general well-being, the Hebrew word for which is *shalom*. *Shalom* is typically translated to English as *peace*, but it is more than the absence of noise and chaos, and even more than the absence of war.

Peace, when translated from the Hebrew *shalom* is the absence of all violence. Theologian Walter Brueggemann, in his book, *Sabbath as Resistance: Saying No to the Culture of Now*, expands the definition of violence for us (Yes, the slide is a shameless plug for the Lenten sermon series!). Brueggeman essentially says there doesn't have to be a punch thrown, a gun in hand, or a missile launched in order to name an action violence. He writes in this book about the violence against the earth caused by over consumption of natural resources, the violence we inflict on one another through excessive competition in sports and other areas of our lives, the violence in our neighborhoods where we live suspicious of the people down the street whom we do not bother to try to get to know, and the violence against people who are poor...currently in our country, we are waging "war on the poor" instead of "war on poverty."

All of this violence keeps us, and other people, from living into who we were created to be...it keeps us from wholeness. So, whichever word we choose to use, wholeness, shalom, well-being, peace...whatever word you choose, it is what God ultimately desires for this world. Deep in our souls, we long for peace...we long to be who God tells us we are, living in the world God intended for us.

I wonder if these well put together words about peace resonate with you as they did for me:

Here's what Mother Teresa said about peace, "What can you do to promote world peace? Go home and love your family."

She also said, "If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten we belong to each other."

Musician John Lennon said, "Peace is not something you wish for; it's something you make, something you do, something you are, and something you give away."

*And my favorite, "The day the power of love overrules the love of power, the world will know peace."

In the midst of our crazy, busy lives, we talk a lot about peace. We tell our children that we need a little peace and quiet. We plan vacations in peaceful, relaxing settings. We look at the news in horror at the wars in Syria, Ukraine, and places all over the world...and we pray for an end to war as if it's completely up to God. I get the sense that we sort of wish for peace as if it's not even a realistic possibility and completely out of our hands.

Last week, in my sermon I challenged us to go to darkness, rather than avoiding it or running from it. I reminded us that we exist because there is darkness in the world. I think part of sharing our light is holding on to the hope that wholeness for the world is really possible. The *priestly* blessing, our text for today, tells me that God has given us everything we need to bring about shalom in our world. Priests, rabbis, and ministers have been bestowing this blessing from God on people for a very long time and I think there is power in blessing. The power is in our belief that God intends to have God's way in the world and we, as the people of God, have been blessed with all we need to make it happen. I believe we really have it in us. Let's take a closer look at this blessing.

I had some fun this week in my sermon study time. I got to immerse myself in a bit of Hebrew language and biblical history.

It turns out, our passage today intersects with a pretty amazing archaeological discovery.

Excavations in Jerusalem in 1979–80 turned up two amulets.

Side note...every time I say amulet, I get kind of excited, like I'm in an Indian Jones movie 😊.

Anyway, these amulets were found in the fourth of several burial caves discovered on a steep slope known as Ketef Hinnom (Ka teph hi-gnome), which overlooks the Hinnom Valley just opposite Mt. Zion.

Each amulet contained a rolled-up sheet of silver which, when unrolled, revealed the inscription of what we have labeled Numbers 6:24-26. The words are in Hebrew and say:

Yahweh bless you and keep you;

Yahweh cause his face to

Shine upon you and grant you peace.

This discovery is important for at least 2 reasons: First, it's just plain cool.

Second, this is a very early occurrence of a Biblical text in an extra-Biblical document. They are dated to the late 7th century BC, significantly predating the earliest of the Dead Sea Scrolls. It is also the oldest extra-Biblical reference to *YHWH*, the God of Israel. Because of this we know these words were well known to the Israelites and because they were found in a burial cave we can conclude the people must have believed that these words of blessing extended beyond life here on earth. In other words, in life or death, we are never out of God's reach. That seems like pretty good news to me.

I want to talk for a minute about a difference between how we, as Christians understand God compared to how the Israelites understood God. I think this is helpful as we think about this passage.

Modern Christians tend to see God as an intimate friend who dwells with us. Our focus is on a close, personal, and individual relationship with God. This friendship with God leads us to spontaneous prayer, anytime, anywhere. Our prayer life is not restricted to organized worship and does not require special rituals. It is not confined to this worship space and there is no need for me, as the minister, to interfere in your prayer life.

Things were very different for God's people who had been rescued from the Pharaoh and brought out of Egypt under Moses' leadership. For them, God needed to physically be somewhere. Later, God would dwell in temples, but because the Israelites were mobile, God's dwelling place needed to be mobile too. That is what the tabernacle was...kind of a tent for God who camped out with the people.

The tabernacle was always placed at the center of the camp. In fact, chapters 1-4 of Numbers deal extensively with how the camp is supposed to be set up given God's presence there. Because of God's presence in the tabernacle at the center of the camp, there was great concern about how the people were to live, specifically that impurity and guilt would stay far from the camp. After all, God is holy, human beings are not. Human beings are common. The Israelites were taught they must conform to divine holiness, symbolized as completeness. Care must always be taken when bringing the Holy together with the common. That's where the priests came in.

Chapters 5 and 6 of Numbers deal with laws and their corresponding rituals which are enforced and conducted by the priests. These laws and rituals were all about the contrast between holiness and impurity, the contrast between life and death. All forms of impurity, whether physical illness or immoral behavior, threaten to defile the camp. Laws were to protect God's holiness from threats. The holiness of God, at the center of the camp gives life that is whole and complete.

Let's look at one example, so you can get an idea of how things worked. In chapter 5, verses 11-31, the topic of adultery, which was a threat to God's holiness, is discussed. These verses describe what's called a trial by ordeal. If a husband suspected his wife of adultery, and there were no witnesses to testify against her, he would take the wife, along with a grain offering of jealousy and a grain offering of remembrance to the priest. The priest would mix a potion made of holy water and dust from the floor of the tabernacle. He would loosen the woman's hair, and have her hold the grain offerings in her hands. The priest would recite an oath while holding the potion. The woman would say, "Amen, amen," as a sign that she accepted the oath. The priest would write the words of the oath on parchment, wash the parchment in the potion and then as the woman drank the potion, the priest would sacrifice the grain offering.

The woman's reaction to the potion would determine her guilt or innocence. If she was innocent, she would be immune to the effects of the potion and would be able to conceive and give birth to children. If she was guilty, the potion would cause her womb to miscarry if she was pregnant and she would be physically unable to have children from that point on. One thing to note...the reason the priest was involved was not so much because the accused woman had allegedly violated her husband, but because she had allegedly committed a violation against God, thus potentially defiling the whole camp. It was all about protecting the community, keeping the community safe, whole, complete.

I learned this week, through a conversation with Dr. Lisa Davison (because this is the kind of thing that's fun for friends to talk about, right), that this passage is one that feminist scholars often debate. I was intrigued to discover that there are scholars who think this very strange ritualistic test of marital faithfulness was a very good thing for women

who were married to jealous men. One theory is that the priests and the women collaborated to protect the women from unfounded accusations. Think about it, drinking a little dirty water might make the woman sick, but it certainly would not cause a miscarriage or infertility. My guess is, women did not fail this test. Drinking some dirty water was certainly a small price to pay, especially when the alternative, the punishment for adultery, was stoning.

As I considered this possibility, I have to admit, I liked it. I liked the idea that the priests, or at least some of the priests, would have used their position to covertly stand on the side of the women who, in that time and place, were vulnerable to the whims of a jealous husband. What do you think? It certainly makes a very bizarre, disturbing text a little easier to wrap my mind around. In this case, it would seem that the thing that was best for the most vulnerable person was also the best thing, from a holiness standpoint, for the community.

This description of the guidelines for this trial by ordeal illustrates the priests' important role as mediator between God and the people in virtually every facet of life. The priest was responsible for that careful bringing together of the holiness of God with the ordinariness of human beings. This section about priestly duties, ends with one final priestly responsibility, the blessing.

We know the act of blessing is deeply rooted in Israelite culture. For the Israelites, to receive a blessing was to receive power. This blessing presents a picture of the ideal or complete camp. For us, the ideal community.

The ideal community, according to the first part of the 3-part blessing, is a place where God pays particular attention to human beings and is concerned with our material sustenance and protection. The second part is a spiritual blessing. We humans may be physical beings but we are also spiritual beings. We are assured that our spiritual selves will

find comfort. In the third and final part of the blessing, God looks at us and gives us shalom, wholeness, peace. We have already been given that which we seem to be seeking.

What would it be like if we internalized this blessing? What would it be like if we really believed that we have already been given what we need to make God's desire of shalom a reality? What if we really believed that true peace was within our grasp? More than believing it, what if we lived into it?

And what if peace was more than a wish, but a promise? What do you need to change so that your life reflects the good news of this blessing? What can we do together to live into, and help others live into, the fullness of life?

Maybe the answer is back in chapter 5 with the dusty water ritual for the women accused of adultery. Maybe the answer is, that like the priest, we are all called to do whatever it takes to, piece by piece, make God's promise of wholeness known and lived. I choose to believe that the priests, rather than pronouncing a death sentence on the accused women, chose to find a way to bring forth life from a body of dusty water.

And I hope when faced with that same kind of choice, we would choose the same. I hope at every fork in the road, we choose to do and say that which brings forth the fullness of life. When we, and our neighbors, are faced with death dealing injustice I hope we will choose to say the things and do the things that will breathe life into this world. We have all been blessed that we might truly bless this world with our voices that speak the truth about God's steadfast love for everyone and with our actions that share God's compassion with people who are the most vulnerable.

Today, I will be installed as your minister. I am going to continue to remind us of the promises of this blessing. I am going to be your biggest cheerleader. And I am going to keep challenging us to do hard things together because who we are is enough. God says so. And that's very good news.

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.