

“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.” (Num. 6:24-26)

We begin the new calendar year with a *blessing*, an auspicious, encouraging beginning.

We’re good at affirmation: *Good job! Great race! Really good report card. Insightful presentation. . . . You’ve lost weight. Nice haircut.*

We’re good at accusation: *Washington insider. In the pocket of Wall Street and the big banks; getting rich on the backs of the middle class and the poor. Tax and spend liberal. Or, simply, You lied to me. He betrayed us. She only looks out for herself.*

Affirmations are good; I affirm your affirming each other. Accusations are sometimes accurate, or carry some truth. Blessing is of another order, though.

Ours is not a culture much given to blessing. We say, “God bless you” when we hear someone sneeze. It’s an almost automatic, but it usually does not carry or convey much meaning or depth beyond, “I hope you’ll feel better, soon.”

Blessing *is* of another order. It is more than well-wishing, or the sentiment of a greeting card. Not a sprinkling of powdered sugar on the cake, or gilt on a lily. Blessing is *everything*. To speak God’s blessing conveys a deep commitment to the welfare and well-being of the other. It is speech that *performs*, as when God spoke creation into being, in the beginning.

The blessing from Numbers is given to Moses by God, for Aaron and the priests to say over the people. Setting is as Moses and the people are preparing to set out again, after a year encamped at Mt. Sinai. A blessing for the journey.

Usually I’m telling you that the “you” in a text is plural, addressed to the community collectively. This blessing is in the singular. Hear it, receive, ponder, accept it as spoken by God, through the text, through the preacher, to *you*.

“The Lord bless you and keep you” To keep is to keep safe, as the people set out again through the wilderness. Also hear a note of tenderness and favor: to hold in the palm of his hand; to keep as the apple of his eye.

“The Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you” God’s shining face, beaming we might say, as a parent beams with delight on a beloved child, conveying total

acceptance and love. This blessing is all grace. Not based in anything done, not earned; simply given, to you. About grace, Paul Tillich has said, “You are accepted . . . by that which is greater than you. . . . simply accept the fact that you are accepted!” (Quoted in *The Christian Century*, 12/17/11, p. 20)

“The Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.” “Countenance” translates the same Hebrew word as “face.” If the king, or other authority, looks down or away, does not show his face, you are in trouble. There is no connection, there is breach in relationship and affection. Think about it in the context of ordinary conversation; does the other person look you in the eye, attend, interact? The Lord’s face lifted up, turned toward you, looking on you, is a sign of his favor and goodness, toward you.

The final blessing, the Lord give you peace, is the broadest and deepest. *Shalom* is peace, absence of conflict, a great good. It is also happiness, prosperity, well-being, health of body, mind and spirit.

The blessing is given through a human being, a priest; but “I will bless them,” says the Lord. The blessing is God’s, on you, on all people.

And “I *will* bless them,” God says. Not, as we sometimes hear the words said, “*May* the Lord bless you, etc.,” just a little subjunctive, *the Lord bless you if he wants to, if you deserve it*. This is definite, real. This is God’s wholehearted commitment to your welfare and the world’s.

In speaking God’s blessing on the people, Aaron and his sons “shall put my name” on them, God tells Moses. This is the name of God, YHWH, I AM WHO I AM, or I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE. The people, the whole community, are God’s. They go out from Sinai bearing God’s name, under God’s protection, every step of the way, every day. It is their identity and responsibility.

On this day in the Church calendar, we celebrate the naming of God’s son, as recounted in the Gospel according to Luke. The name we know and use, Jesus, is the Latin form—somewhat ironic given the circumstances of his life and death. The Hebrew is Joshua, Yeshua, which means “Yahweh saves.”

Through him, we know God, face to face. In him, we are adopted as children of God. We have been baptized in his name and marked as his own forever. We belong to God in Jesus. This is our identity and our responsibility; and it has to do with blessing.

Paul writes to the church at Philippi, “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God” Another, better translation of that second phrase is this: “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, *because* he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited”

In emptying himself of any claim to divine status and honor and becoming fully human, in the humility and obedience of his death on a cross, Jesus *embodied* and *lived into* his name, his divine identity. There is complete continuity and coherence in who he is and what he did. It is

because he was God's Son. In him, the crucified one, we see who God is and how God acts. He reveals the holy and self-giving identity of God.

"Let the same mind be in you," Paul writes to a church where there was some dissension going on. (Imagine that!) "Let each of you look not only to his own interests but also to the interests of others," reads the sentence before this. This "you" is in the plural; the words addressed to the community as a whole.

It's not that Paul is naive enough to think there will never be disagreements in the Church. But have in mind the common good, the welfare and well-being of the community—not just your own opinion, or ideas of what should be happening or how. One thing this means is communicating: listening to each other, speaking our own truth in love, especially with anyone whose opinions differ from our own.

If Paul had had the text from Numbers in front of him, as we do, he might have thought of this having the same mind in terms

of blessing and asking one another's blessing as we journey together in the name of Jesus.

Frederick Buechner writes that when you give someone your blessing, you "convey into [the person's] life not just something of the beneficent power and vitality of who you are but something also of the life-giving power of God in whose name the blessing is given." (Wishful Thinking, 13)

To give your blessing conveys into the other's life something of yourself, "the beneficent power and vitality of who you are . . . and something of the life-giving power of God." That is a place to mentally and spiritually begin any conversation or encounter—in church, family, work, school, wherever.

Blessing comes from the center of our being, where we are most deeply connected with ourselves and the Spirit of God. To give a blessing is, at one and the same time, an act of detachment—from self-interest, impatience, irritation, etc.—and an act of deep connection with the other, in the sustaining current of God's favor and goodness.

As we begin the new year, what if we included the practice of blessing in our resolves? How might we and those among whom we live be changed by this, to the welfare and well-being of all?

Standing in the self-check-out line at a busy time, when the customer in front of me really has no idea what he or she is doing and makes one mistake after another, holding up everyone else—including me—what if I step back, within myself, and silently say, from the heart, *The Lord bless you and keep you.*

On the road, when another driver cuts you off or won't let you in . . .

Faced with an angry spouse or child; or tiresome co-worker . . .

The Lord bless you and keep you.

In the Vestry, as we wrestle with how to finalize the budget when it looks as if we, as a parish, won't have met the 2012 pledge goal, as we face each other across the table . . .

The Lord bless you and keep you.

Knowing what today's texts would be, I've been practicing this in the past week. It has had the powerfully transformative effect of calling me back to my better self, and of reminding me who the other person is: God's blessed one. It may not change the external circumstances, but it does change me; it opens a space for God to speak and act.

To bless. To ask one another's blessing. I recommend that we practice it this year—here, at home, at work, in school, on the road, in the check-out line . . . wherever we are.

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.

Lord, as we begin this new year, make it a year of blessing; make this a day of blessing; make this an hour of blessing.