



Morrison Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church
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January 1, 2009
New Year's Day
Numbers 6:22-27
Pastor Randy Ott

First Lesson: Philippians 2:9-13
Psalm of the Day: Psalm ~\8
Gospel: Luke 2:21

The Lord Bless You and Keep You

The Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you

Did you ever hear the same phrase so often it kind of goes in one ear and out the other? You know, like when you were a kid and your parents told you to do something and it just went in one ear and out the other. Sometimes even later in life some of those same things happen.

Every time I hand out a quiz to the kids I say, "Put your name on the paper." Almost every single time, someone doesn't put their name on the paper. Most of the time it's just one, so you can figure out which kid it was that didn't write their name down when you go to enter the grades. But every now and then two do it, which isn't a problem if one is a girl and one is a boy because their handwriting is usually a little different. But when it's two guys that don't write their names on the paper and you're trying to figure out who it is, that's kind of a problem because they both look like they are writing scared. You can't read their writing to begin with, and to figure out whose handwriting is whose is kind of tough.

It's kind of interesting, especially when one grade is pretty good and the other is maybe not their best effort. Then you have to wait until the next time they come back to class and see who wants to claim which paper, right? It just gets to be a pain all because that phrase, "Write your name on the top of the page," went in one ear and right out the other.

Our Lord talks about his name in familiar phrases that maybe sometimes go right in one ear and out the other. When God was telling the Israelites how to worship him after they had left Egypt, he gave Moses these instructions that I just read that they were to use to mark the Israelites with the name of the Lord. It's one of the blessings that we still use today at the end of our worship service. So think about it, every time as we end our worship service on a Sunday morning when we use this blessing, it's like God is writing his name on us at the top of our page to say we belong to him. And as you go out into the week and into the world, remember who you belong to. Remember who bought you. Remember this threefold blessing he is telling you that he does for us.

It's kind of interesting to see how we are marked with this threefold blessing of the Lord. It's even more interesting to see just how closely it mirrors how Scripture reveals to us the work of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

The threefold blessing; each of the blessings has a pair of phrases. The first part of the pair is more broad. The second gets more specific. Look at the first one. It's the most general of the three blessings that God speaks on us when he marks us with his name. "The Lord bless you"—that could cover all kinds of things that he does for us in our daily life, right? The second part of it narrows it down a little more—"and keep you." The picture that is being painted with the words "keep you" is like a guard, standing guard, watching over you, protecting you, keeping things that would threaten you away from you, keeping danger away from you, keeping things that would hurt you away from you.

The Lord keeps us in ways that at times are spectacular through miracles, preserving our lives in extraordinary ways. There's no doubt in my mind that God does that. I've seen it too often. But most often he keeps us in ways that maybe go in one eyeball and out the other, right? We don't stop and think about them. The Lord takes care of us by preserving us richly and daily. Isn't that what we learned?—giving us clothing and shoes, food and drink, house, home, wife and children. He gives us everything that we need for body and life and he does it by giving us the ability to make a living, providing us that opportunity to make a living. He gives it to us through the work of others; the living they make that puts food in the grocery stores for us that we can then put on our table. He gives us those that study to be doctors and nurses to help us when we are sick and need care. He keeps us and protects us through fellow Christians who encourage and comfort us when we are facing difficulties or anxieties or who celebrate with us when things go well. In big ways and in little ways, our heavenly Father preserves us richly and daily is how we learn to say it in Luther's Explanation to the First Article.

Every time we are marked with the name of the Lord, we have God saying to us, "I am going to be there with you wherever you go and no matter what happens. I am going to be there seeing to it that all things work out for your eternal good." Now remember, that's not the same as your earthly happiness, but the Lord will be there to bless us and keep us. Which immediately makes you wonder why? Why would God do that for us? We haven't earned it. We haven't deserved it. We so often rebel against our God. We so often chase after other things. We probably find ourselves sitting here thinking "God is with me wherever I go? I'm not sure I'm comfortable with that because there are a lot of things I do and say and think that kind of pains me to think God knows those things and sees them so clearly. I sure don't want the rest of you guys to see them. The idea that God does see them reminds me, I suppose, of how sinful I am." That's what each of us can see in ourselves as we look at it. So God keeps us and preserves us, not because we have earned it or deserved it.

The second blessing of the Lord's name reminds us of that. It says, "The Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you." Again, "the Lord make his face shine upon you"—it's a more broad thing. The warming feeling of the sun after you have snow so many days, even if it's cold out and the sun's shining, you feel a little better, right? God's face shines on us. God brings us all these blessings that bring us joy and

happiness and peace in our lives, but the one that he wants us to focus on most specifically when he marks his name upon us is “the Lord be gracious to you.”

Grace, as we’ve probably learned to recite, means “undeserved love.” “God’s riches at Christ’s expense” is another way people have defined the word grace. It’s love. It’s a love that’s not earned or deserved. It’s a love that’s given because God is love. So he preserves us. He takes care of us. He makes his face shine on us because he is gracious. And he brings us his grace, his love, his mercy, his forgiveness. If you want to see where God’s grace looks like most clearly, most specifically, the place you look is the Son, right? Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father, the one who was born in Bethlehem. The one who left heaven, took human form so he could fulfill the Law for us because you and I don’t fulfill the Law, so that he could carry our sins to the cross of Calvary so that you and I won’t be punished for our sins.

This great exchange that takes place—we get his perfection and his holiness; he gets our sins and the punishment our sins deserve. That is grace. That’s what grace looks like. And every time we hear the Gospel, we get to focus upon that grace; that grace that maybe was first poured out on us through water and the Word which washed away our sins. That grace which comes to us this day in the form of wine and wafer where the body and blood is present for the forgiveness of our sins. God’s grace is something that warms our hearts even when the days are cloudy, and even when the snow seems to keep on continually falling, and maybe even at times when it seems as though God’s protecting us isn’t protecting us the way we would choose to be protected. When we question what God is doing to preserve us, we need to remember that God always acts in grace towards us. So his grace will always sustain us, it will always carry us through whatever difficulties we face in this world. And we will face difficulties because this world is ruined by sin. But we face it not alone. We face it marked with the name of God written across the top of the page that is us as he tells us how gracious he is and that he will always act in grace towards us.

He has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature. Purchased and won me from sin, death and the power of the devil; not with gold or silver, but with his holy precious blood and his innocent suffering and death—that’s grace.

The third blessing of the name of the Lord has an interesting picture. The first part of it says “the Lord turn his face toward you.” Turn his face toward you to do what? “Turn his face toward you and give you peace.” It’s kind of an interesting phrase, isn’t it? “The Lord turn his face toward you.” We say “the Lord look on you with favor in the blessing.” It’s a phrase that literally can mean the same thing, but the literal interpretation is “the Lord turn his face toward you,” and you can think of it this way.

I remember my sophomore year in high school in one of the classes we had that first aid video you had to watch where someone falls and breaks their leg and the bone is sticking out the side of the leg. I literally turned my face away from the screen as I passed out and hit the floor. I’m not one that enjoys that kind of stuff. If I’m the first one on an accident scene and I go over there to help and I see something that is going to be

like that, my natural inclination, and I'm assuming most people's, is to turn away from it. It's not something you want to see. It's not something, at least for me, that I want to look at.

Think about that when God says, "the Lord turn his face toward you." The accident scene that is you and me is really our sin, right? God hates sin. The Psalms even say God hates the sinner. By every right, God, who is a just God, should never turn his face toward us with any blessing. He shouldn't look on us with favor. He should look away from us in disgust, in abject disappointment, disgust and the desire to never see us again. But here we are told that when we're marked with the name of the Lord, he turns his face toward us, even though he hates what he sees in we who are sinners. He turns his face toward us so that he can preserve and protect us and give us his grace. The Spirit leads us to believe that what the Father and the Son have done, they've done for us, so that faith is created in our hearts. And the result of faith in our hearts that God gives us is peace between us and God. God looks on us with his favor and his favor comes to us through the Holy Spirit who calls us by the Gospel and lightens us with his gifts. He gives us the gift of faith and then he strengthens us in that faith so that we go forward and serve him. We go forward and serve him knowing that even though we so often stumble and fall, even though we so often sin against our God; we despise his name, we misuse the name of Jesus which we've heard today in readings and in hymns is a name above all names, a name that is the only name given by which we must be saved; even though you and I at times turn that name around as a way to express anger, disgust and every other bad emotion we can think of, God still turns his face toward us and gives us peace.

We have an amazing God. We have a God that doesn't demand things of us. What he demands, holiness and perfection, he gives to us in Christ. What he has given to us in Christ, he leads us to believe by his work, not by our decision, but by his work. No one can say Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit.

The love of our God, like we so often say, maybe words that go in one ear and out the other also, passes all understanding. It's beyond my understanding, but it's in my heart by faith. We gather together on the first day of the year to worship our God, to hear of his love, and to remember once again what it means to be marked by the name of the Lord.

So in the future, as you hear the words of that blessing, don't let them go in one ear and out the other or start thinking about what you are going to have for lunch or where you're going to go or what you're going to do. Think about how deeply your God loves you and that he's writing his name across your forehead as he sends you on your way.