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First Sunday after Pentecost

The Holy Trinity

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The Triune God Blesses his People

Today we focus our worship on the Holy Trinity. All Christians confess the truth that there is one God in three persons: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. God reveals to us in the Bible how we benefit from the triune nature he possesses. In that way, this special Sunday is no different from any other Sunday. It simply shines the spotlight on the indescribable blessings we receive every time we gather in the name of our Lord, our triune God.

Sermon

Numbers 6:22-27

The LORD said to Moses, Tell Aaron and his sons, This is how you are to bless the Israelites. Say to them:

The LORD bless you and keep you;

The LORD make his face shine on you and be gracious to you;

The LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace.

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

For as long as most of us can remember, the Blessing or the Benediction, is the last significant word we hear as we leave church on Sunday morning. You can thank Martin Luther for that; he was the one who suggested that these words bring the Lutheran order of service to a close. And that's the way it's been ever since. In thousands of Lutheran churches all over the world, from Zambia to Zilwaukee, in dozens of different languages, from Swedish to Swahili, Lutheran pastors raise their hands and speak the Blessing—and then the people go home. And that's what we do, too.

The words of the Blessing aren't original with Martin Luther. If you didn't know that you learned this morning that they come from the Bible book of Numbers, chapter 6, the First Reading for today. The words of the Blessing come straight from God. God dictated the words to Moses and he instructed Aaron, Moses' brother and Israel's spiritual leader, to speak them to the people. That's why we sometimes call the Blessing the *Blessing of Aaron* or the *Aaronic Blessing*. Whether the people of Israel worshiped in the tabernacle or in Solomon's temple or in the synagogue, Aaron's Blessing always sent them home. Actually, it still does. Just like it sends us home.

The Blessing of Aaron is a word we know well. This morning we're going to see why this Blessing is

A Good Word to Go Home With.

You all remember from Sunday School that the people Israel ended up as slaves in Egypt and that the Lord called Moses to lead them to a new land that would be their very own. Obviously, the Pharaoh of Egypt wasn't too happy about this and came after them with his army. You remember how the Lord parted the waters of the Red Sea and rescued the Israelites and then drowned Pharaoh's chariots in the sea. From there Moses led the people to Mt. Sinai. At Mt. Sinai the Lord promised the Israelites that he would be their God and they would be his people. He gave them a set of rules and regulations which included the Ten Commandments. Right here is where the story gets a little murky for most people.

It got to be time to get organized to invade to their new country. Moses ordered a census of all men over 20 and counted everyone who would be able to serve in the Lord's army—that's where the title Numbers comes from. There were 603,550 men. Then God commanded that everyone who might impede or delay the march—people who were critically ill or notoriously sinners—all these were to be put outside the camp. When everything was ready, when the men were ready to soldier and the people ready to support them—right at that moment, **The Lord said to Moses, "Tell Aaron and his sons, 'This is how you are to bless the Israelites.'"** And then the Lord spoke the words we hear every Sunday.

This passage from Numbers chapter 6 often appears as a Reading on the Sunday of the church year that celebrates the Holy Trinity. That's today. The terms Father, Son, and Holy Spirit aren't mentioned here, but you and I can see the work of the Triune God in these three sentences. I'm not so sure the average Israelite understood this, but one thing the Israelites knew: they knew the name of the Lord. Each of the three phrases begins the same way: The LORD. When you see the word LORD in all capital letters in your Bible, you're seeing God's personal name. In Hebrew it's pronounced Yaweh. In English translations it comes out as Jehovah. There were many gods in the ancient world, but there was only one true God: Jehovah. The Lord was the God of their ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The Lord led them out of slavery, the Lord rescued them at the Red Sea. The Lord made a promise to them and the Lord had a plan to lead them to a new land. The true God revealed himself to Moses like this: **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.** The Lord was the God of free and faithful grace. And this Lord put his name and his blessing on his people.

The LORD bless you and keep you. When the Lord blesses us, everything he gives is good. He doesn't put lumps of coal in your Christmas stocking; he doesn't give gag gifts. Since the Lord is perfect, his blessings are perfect, too, and they are especially perfect for you and me. What the Lord gives he also protects. He keeps Satan away from us and refuses to allow the devil to steal our blessings. Through thick and thin the Lord uses his power to protect us and preserve us, just like a father takes care of his children.

The LORD make his face shine on you and be gracious to you. I've read articles written by people who know her that when Queen Elizabeth smiles, the whole room lights up. That's the way it is with the Lord. The disinterested glance, the stern frown we have coming, the fiery glare we deserve, that all changes, and a smile spreads over God's face from ear to ear. We know why that happens. The Son of God came into our world as the God-man Jesus. He endured God's stern frown and fiery glare because he carried our sins to his cross. Because of Jesus the Lord lifts us out of our guilt and out of our hell and wraps us up in his grace. He picks us up when we stumble and fall and carries us across the finish line to heaven.

The LORD look on you with favor and give you peace. The Lord finds us and he claims us as his own. Parents tell their adopted child: "We didn't have to take you home. We saw you and we picked you out; you were the one we wanted." The Lord says to us: **I have called you by your name; you are mine.** The Lord is never far away from us; nothing separates us from his love. The Lord's love becomes so intense and so real for us that we're filled with an inner contentment and peace of mind. Even when life isn't going so well, the Lord takes over our hearts and minds and puts us at peace with him.

The Old Testament Israelites may not have seen it clearly, but it's all there. We confess that God the Father preserves and protects us with his power, that God the Son forgives our sins in pure grace, that God the Holy Spirit creates faith in our hearts and gives us peace with God. Power, grace, and peace, this is what the Triune God pours out on us every time he blesses us. Make sure you understand this. This is not a pious wish; the Blessing is not "May the Lord bless you and keep you." This is not a promise for blessings in the future. The Blessing is not "The Lord will bless you and keep you." Every time the minister speaks these words, the Lord is actually placing his power, grace, and peace on each of us. The Lord said it himself: **So they will put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them.** And that's the word we go home with.

So Aaron spoke the Lord's Blessing. With the Lord's blessing ringing in their ears and their hearts the people of Israel marched toward the promised land. They arrived at the borders and then they stopped. Truth is, they got scared and chickened out. Despite all of his blessings, the people of Israel decided the Lord wasn't strong enough to give them victory. The Lord wasn't pleased; if the people wanted to stay in the desert, he would let them stay in the desert, and that's where they stayed for 40 years. Actually, the original title of Numbers isn't Numbers; Moses entitled it "In the Desert." What happened during those 40 years in the desert isn't pretty. It's a constant story of complaints, rebellion, sickness, and death. None of the people who refused to trust the Lord ever made it to the Promised Land. But here's the point: At the end of each day's worship, Aaron or one of his sons spoke the Blessing for all to hear. The Lord was saying: You may leave me, but I will never leave you. You may forsake me, but I will never forsake you.

So worship comes to an end. It's time to head for home. Back to our homes and families, back to our tasks and trials. Who knows what the week is going to hold: a sin you never thought you'd commit, a mistake you'll have to live with for a long time, an ache that alarms you, a diagnosis that scares you, a disappointment that eats away at you, a future that frightens you? None of us knows what tomorrow holds.

That's why the Blessing is a good word to go home with. At the end of worship today the Lord will confer on you all his power, all his grace, and all his peace. There's power in these words to protect you from trouble and fear. There's grace here to forgive your sins and prepare you for heaven. There's peace here to calm your conscience and take away guilt. There's enough here to get us all through the week ahead. Amen.