

*The Words We Are Given*¹

Numbers 6:22-27

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The words we are given burst upon us without warning. That's the way it happens in the book of Numbers where these sudden, haunting words irrupt. Nothing that has happened previously in Numbers anticipates them and nothing said afterward will attempt to account for them. It is as if the heavens throw them down, unbidden, unprecedented, startling, and as the narrator tells it, that appears to be exactly what happens:

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to Aaron and his children, saying, Thus you shall bless the Israelites: You shall say to them,

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.

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

We speak of the Scriptures being Word of God and God's gift to us, but occasionally the Scriptures give us quite directly the gift of words: "Say this," "tell the people this," "speak these words." We are given a script. We are given a gift of words. We are given these words because without them we do not know what to say. Our own words—the words we ordinarily speak, the words by which we make our way in the world, the words by which we account for everyday existence—are too measured, too timid, too qualified, too namby-pamby. We hedge our bets with "if" and "sometimes" and "on the other hand."

Because our own words are jumbled, always complicated admixtures of blessing and curse, we are given words to speak God's blessing in which there is no shadow, no qualification, no condition, no "if," no impurity or imperfection, no halfheartedness.

We are given these words to speak: "The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to Aaron and his children, saying, Thus you shall bless the Israelites: You shall say to them..." These words we are given we are given in order that we might speak them to others.

We are allowed to hear the words we are given so that we might know God's blessing, but we are not permitted to keep these words for ourselves. To hear rightly the words we are given is to speak the words again and again, to speak the words aloud so that others may hear as well.

"Thus you shall bless the Israelites: You shall say to them: The LORD bless you

and keep you.”

So often when we use the word “bless” it sounds so small, so frail, so “spiritual,” but when the Hebrew Scriptures speak of blessing they mean for us to smell the spring rain on the rich soil, to taste the sweetness of wine and ripe fruit, to feel sensation of skin touching skin, to hear the sound of a newborn crying, to see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. To “bless” invokes everything God intends for human creatures: life, joy, land, fertility, health, children, long life, wealth. “To bless” in the Scriptures is materialistic enough to make even Jabez blush.

God not only blesses, however, God keeps; that is, God protects, guards, and guides those God blesses. “The LORD bless you and keep you,” therefore is quite a lot to say, but that’s only the beginning, and the blessing of Numbers 6 expands. Like a pebble tossed in a pond, this blessing thrown into our world creates ripples spreading, waves extending.

“The LORD make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you,” the blessing goes on. Again and again, the psalms pray for God’s face, for God’s face to look upon people in recognition—“Yes, I know you! I remember you!” God’s face shines upon people the way the sun shines upon the earth making things grow, making things warm and alive. The blessing goes even further, however, speaking of God’s face aglow with grace, not measuring our faults and fears and failings but regarding us compassionately, mercifully, with steadfast love.

“The LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace,” the blessing continues, expanding to encompass all God has made. Here the blessing anticipates God’s face not only shining upon the people, but also nodding toward them in welcome, a sign of God’s favor and encouragement. Finally the blessing pronounces the largest word in the Hebrew vocabulary: *shalom*, peace, the harmony of the whole creation, where all things come together in joyful praise of God. The blessing speaks of peace not as the absence of war, not as an interval between acts of violence, but as the triumph of God’s design for the creation.

So extravagant, so encompassing are the words we are given, so hopeful in this hope-hungering world that when we take their full measure we can scarcely speak the blessing without tears in our eyes, a catch in our throat. On September 16, 2001, the Sunday after September 11, at the conclusion of worship I spoke—tried to speak—these words we are given and found I could scarcely articulate the word “peace.”

This blessing is so vast, so extravagantly full of everything God intends. How can we speak it? Well, when do we speak these words? (We speak these words at the beginnings of things. At baptism, with water and the promise of God fresh on their faces, people hear us pronounce the words we are given: “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.”

We speak these words at all kinds of beginnings. Last May, only a few hours before she graduated from the College of William and Mary, our congregation commissioned a young woman to go teach at the Presbyterian Church’s Ramses College for Girls in Cairo, Egypt. Right before the service, with my usual pastoral sensitivity, I asked her mother how she felt about sending her only child to the Middle East. Tears flashed in her eyes; she couldn’t say anything, just shook her head. Well, what can you say? What we did say was: “Deborah, 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.”

We speak these words at the end. After we have read the Scriptures and prayed the prayers and said everything we can think of to say, we place our hands on a coffin and declare, “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,” believing as we do that this ending is also in the mystery of God another sort of beginning.

It is a well-established hope. In 1900 the oldest manuscripts of the Bible were from about the third century of the Common Era. In the 1920’s scraps of papyrus were found in Egypt, among them a fragment with a couple of verses from the Gospel of John, and that fragment dates to about 125, probably only thirty or forty years after the Gospel of John was written. Then, in the late 1940’s, a Bedouin shepherd looking for a lost sheep found what we call the Dead Sea Scrolls, and included among them were manuscripts of Jeremiah, Hosea, and Habakkuk dating two hundred years before the time of Christ. Then in 1986, in the Valley of Hinnom in suburban Jerusalem, right next to the Church of Scotland’s Saint Andrew Church, archaeologists digging in a burial chamber found two tiny silver scrolls, a piece of jewelry, really, and written on the silver scrolls was the earliest biblical text ever found, dating from about six hundred years before the birth of Jesus. On these tiny silver scrolls these words: “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.” For twenty-six centuries those silver scrolls adorned a woman’s grave. Perhaps it was her husband who placed those scrolls there; perhaps it was her children, a brother, a sister, a lover. We cannot know who placed them there, but we know very well that longing that Someone would bless and keep those we love, that Some Power greater than our own would look upon them as graciously as we wish we could look upon them, that Someone would smile at them and welcome them and encourage them and finally, in spite of everything, grant them peace.

At beginnings and endings we speak this blessing, and if at beginnings and endings, then perhaps also in the odd times in between.

Magazines list the best restaurants in the United States. It’s fun to read their lists and see what they think makes for a great restaurant. Each year they miss one terrific place. I’ve only been there once, but I can’t wait to go back. It’s the Burger King on one of the concourses of the Detroit airport. The day I went there I was on my way to Kansas City to preach a colleague’s ordination service, and the ticket the church sent routed me through Detroit. My flight arrived around noon, and I knew if I didn’t get something on my stomach the flight to Kansas City would be miserable. The only place to eat on this concourse was a Burger King. The line for Whoppers and fries snaked around four or five times, but it seemed to be moving. As I neared the front it became obvious that the three Asian gentlemen in front of me had only the barest acquaintance with English. They tried to order, and the two bright, twenty-ish kids behind the counter were the very soul of patience. They listened, tried to repeat their order; they pointed to pictures on the big electronic menu; heads nodded, it was taking a while. “Oh, for God’s sake!” said the man behind me. One of the young men taking orders looked up with a smile: “We’ll get your order in just a moment, sir! Don’t you worry; we’ll get you to your flight on time.” The two young men went back to trying to

understand, smiling, encouraging the three Asian gentlemen. You can go to very expensive, really elegant restaurants and not get hospitality like that. I hope they got what they ordered. I got my Whopper, fries and Coke, went to the cashier, paid for my lunch, and as the cashier returned my change, she said to me: "The Lord bless you and keep you on your flight." I was stunned. "And....and...uh the Lord bless you," I stammered out. I went and sat down to eat, but I felt like I could have flown to Kansas City by myself. I don't know what church that woman belonged to, but it was a church that had empowered her to bless. I recommend the Burger King in the Detroit airport; I can't wait to go back there again. Wouldn't you want to eat at a place like that? Wouldn't you want to belong to a church like that?

We hesitate to speak a blessing. we get power to bless? Who are *we* to pronounce such vast, encompassing words? Oh, we can say them, but we can't make them stick, can't make them happen. So we are more likely to say something smaller, more timid: "Good morning," "Have a nice day!" "Take care!" God help us.

I'll bet at least a few of you are Tony Hillerman fans. Tony Hillerman is probably the dean of American mystery writers. His mysteries are set among the Navajo People, and his detectives are officers of the Navajo Tribal Police. One of these officers, Jim Chee, lives in two different worlds. He is not only a modern police lieutenant who uses the latest forensic methods but also a traditional Navajo who aspires to be a *hataalii*; a rough English translation might be shaman or medicine man. For twenty years of mystery novels Jim Chee has studied with his ancient uncle. He has learned the sacred songs, the sand paintings, how to use herbs, all the skills required to return his people to *hozho*, so they may "walk in beauty," we might translate, or "live in harmony." If we asked the prophet Isaiah to translate the word, he would undoubtedly say: *shalom*, peace.

In a recent novel Chee's ancient uncle tells Jim he has mastered all the techniques: "You know the chants. You sing them without a mistake. And your sand paintings are exactly right. You know the herbs...all that."² Only one thing is lacking.

Jim Chee believes in the efficacy of the songs and sand paintings and rituals; he is proficient in every detail. He has mastered the techniques. He believes in the great harmony he invokes and he understands his people's need of it. What he cannot bring himself to believe is that the great peace that is the inheritance of his people can flow through someone as confused and divided and unpeaceful as he is.

God understands our hesitation and our timidity in pronouncing the blessing. In the last verse of God's command to Moses—which Moses was to pass on to Aaron and Aaron to all his children for all time—there is the most curious grammar. It is unnecessarily and unreasonably emphatic. The verb form already supplies the subject, but the rhetoric reiterates the subject so there can be no mistaking the One who provides power to bless, so there can be no misunderstanding the determination of the One who means to bless.

God knows how the words of blessing stick in our throats; God anticipates our awkwardness in saying such marvelous things; God knows how bereft of blessing we are, so God declares, "So they shall put my name on the Israelites, and I, I will bless them," or "I, I myself will bless them."

As if anticipating our objection and timidity and doubt, God says, "I, I will bless them." In spite of your hesitation and timidity and doubt, and even through them, I, I will bless. By your words and by your gestures, I, I will bless. You think you don't

know how to bless; I, I know how to bless, says the LORD: speak the words to my people, put my name upon them, and I, I will bless them. Say to Aaron and all his children: bless my people, and I, I will bless them.

God promises that through what we do God will bless. God promises that through the words we are given, the words we speak and the words that stick in our throat, and the words we scarcely dare to believe at all, God, God will bless.

Notes

1. This was one of the Wells Sermons from Ministers Week of Brite Divinity School, Texas Christian University, Fort Worth, Texas.
2. Tony Hillerman, *Hunting Badger* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 2000), 114.