

Lessons:

Numbers 6:22-27

Philippians 2:5-11

Psalms 8

Luke 2:15-21

Today I'd like to talk about blessings and generosity.

We heard wonderful blessings in our first lesson

- The escaped Hebrew slaves are in the eastern edge of the wilderness
 - They are newly formed as community of the Holy One
 - After almost a year at the base of Mount Sinai they are about to travel deeper into the wilderness
 - This will be their first journey while "...they are bonded by covenant to YHWH"¹
 - Today's blessing is between two Scriptural segments about ways to live with/for God
 - Preceded by rules for women and men who promise "to set themselves apart for Holy One" - Nazarites like Sampson or John the Baptist
 - And it is followed by detailed instructions - VERY detailed - for how to build the Tabernacle where the Holy One would dwell among the people
 - It's scary business to have God as a close neighbor!
- There is a cascade of blessings which Aaron and the priests are to give the people
 - "Each of the three parts is longer than the preceding one, emphasizing the overflowing of blessings that is hoped for"²
 - The generous blessing is³:
 - The LORD bless you and keep [protect] you
 - The LORD make his face to shine upon you [deal kindly] and be gracious to you

¹ *The Jewish Study Bible*, 2nd Edition, TANAKH Translation (Oxford U. Press, 2004) p. 268

² *Ibid.*, commentary, p. 282

³ Text in square brackets is how *The Jewish Study Bible* translates the respective phrases

- The LORD lift up his countenance [bestow his favor] upon you & give you peace
 - “peace” is “shalom” - community well being - not individual bonuses to brag about

Our second lesson is emphatic about the generosity we are called to demonstrate

- Paul quotes what is probably an early hymn about Jesus as God’s self-emptying embrace of humanity
- In the hymn, “God’s essential character is shown to be one of self-emptying lover rather than self-aggrandizement or grasping for power and glory”⁴
- God’s nature is not our own; it is
 - Not claiming “I have the biggest button” for nuclear destruction
 - Not the relentless drive for the corner office, or to lead the unit with the biggest budget, if we work in a large institution
 - Not the insistence that it’s “my way or the highway” in our family lives, or our faith practices
 - Not evoking destruction of ourselves and the creation when we clamour: whoever has the most toys wins!

The hymn Paul quotes is about how

- Jesus lived the opposite of selfishness
- And the surprising outcome is God’s cosmic blessing of Jesus
 - Pointing to a time when Jesus’ name is recognized by everyone

I wonder what we may think of as our moments of grace/blessing?

- From the basic to the splendid, they might include
 - Hot running water and solid walls around the bathtub
 - Being able to walk again after surgery
 - The gift of children in our lives
 - The comfort of community when walking through the valley of the shadow of death

⁴ Elisabeth Johnson, https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1129

- Moments when we glimpse how much the Holy One love us
- That's the good and wonderful news
 - Times when we feel the kind of blessings Aaron is instructed to give the community of faith

Here's the trick

- That loving description of divine self-emptying
 - is part of asking a squabbling congregation to “Let the same mind be in you...”
 - as in “y'all” or “among all of you”
 - “that was in Christ Jesus”
- That particular church was conflicted about how much of their religious laws and traditions still applied after Jesus' life, death & resurrection
 - Paul asks them to “do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves” and then says
 - “Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others”⁵
 - Paul knows his congregations well enough
 - To know that differences of opinion will not disappear
 - But he “implores them to be united in a spirit of love and concern for the common good.”⁶
 - For the shalom/community well being in Aaron's blessing
 - not for personal power trips.

In today's Gospel, we reflect on Jesus being named

- “Jesus” is the Greek version of “Joshua”
 - It means “God saves” and uses the first part of that most sacred name revealed to Moses
 - what we approximate as YHWH

⁵ Phil. 2:3-4

⁶ Johnson, *ibid.*

- “God saves” is the name the angel Gabriel gave to the child Mary agreed to conceive
- The angel’s descriptions of the child’s role is clearly tied to being the anointed ruler expected by the Jews
 - But this birth does not look like any monarch’s arrival we might expect

I keep thinking about the shepherds who were witnesses

- Shepherds were about the least respected people in their community
 - Their being messengers here is a vivid example of the Holy One reaching out to those discounted by their neighbors
 - It’s consistent with centuries of the Holy One responding to the cry of those who have been economically or physically enslaved
- But I also notice that this is the only time we hear of them
 - Did these children and adults remember that night?
 - Did they look for the Holy Child as the years passed?
 - Did they join the rag-tag group which followed Jesus?
- Most importantly: did those shepherds have only a sweet memory or did they dig in and do the hard work that Paul calls us to do?
 - To have the same mind in us - in the midst of our families, our jobs, our church - that was in Christ Jesus
 - Living out the generosity and loving service that gives glory to the Holy One, and not to ourselves.

Sounds like we’ve got some work to do!

- So I’m grateful we are not tackling this alone
- Drawing comfort from Paul’s letter to the Ephesians... we can rely on
- “...God whose power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine.”⁷

Thanks be to God! Amen.

⁷ Ephesians 3:20