



The New England Church Pulpit

New England Congregational Church UCC
Aurora Illinois

BLESS YOU

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On this last Sunday of the calendar year, on the brink of a new year with whatever that may hold for us, it is comforting to hear a word of blessing from God. Our text is a familiar one, found in the book of Numbers 6.22.27, said at baptisms, proclaimed as benedictions in worship, spoken as words of peace and hope. It is a poem rich in its comfort, powerful in its effect, offering to us today a blessing of life for our lives.

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 her countenance upon you, and give you peace.

In an age when the frantic pace overwhelms our peace, we are enriched and rejuvenated by these words of blessing from God.

The poem can be divided into seven parts, the number seven being sacred in the Hebrews culture of the day. Seven is the epitome of perfection, and this blessing from God in seven parts is a blessing of wholeness and completeness.

The first section begins *The Lord*, then branches into two parts, each of which emphasizes *you*.

The Lord:

Bless you and keep you

Make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you.

Life up her countenance upon you and give you peace.

In the Hebrew culture, the purpose and goal of the blessing was for material good things for this was the ancient sign of God's favor cast upon you; the more goods you owned, the more blessed you were by God. In the context of our Christian understanding however, it has more important spiritual applications. Today we do not equate material possessions with divine blessing or the lack of these as God's curse.

A blessing from God is a powerful tool for living with integrity, for it carries with it the necessary ingredients to make the blessing come true. A blessing from God is more than words, for the words themselves become the actual activity. It is prophecy and prophecy fulfilled at the same time.

The Lord blesses you with the unearned gift of the material things you need for sustenance; the Lord blesses you with the unearned psychological strength and personal integrity for standing against the power of evil. The Lord keeps you from being destroyed by evil and keeps you from giving up. When you must face your toughest hour in the new year, even as you reflect back on your toughest hour from the past year, remember this blessing. God blesses you and keeps you.

The Lord make his face to shine upon you. A shining face was the mark of pleasure in ancient days of Israel's history and when it was turned upon another human being it betokened favor toward that person. A shining face comes in many forms, and not necessarily from a smiling face which can be fake and impersonal. Have you ever seen a shining face on a person in pain? It is a powerful witness to the blessing of God upon a life racked with agony. Have you ever seen a shining face on a person in grief? It is a contentment in their moments of loss that passes human comprehension; it is the inward, heart-felt, spiritual face of peace, even as the outward face weeps and mourns.

A friend of mine tells about walking along a road one evening, just a few days after his 40-year-old wife had died. His sadness, he said, gave way to joy when we caught the glimpse of his wife's smiling face as clear as if she were standing right beside him. With the tragedy of his loss still upon him, he felt the blessing of God, a shining face, a graciousness, and a quintessential peace.

The Lord lift up her countenance upon you. To lift up the face or countenance from one human being to another in the culture of this poem was an assurance that there was nothing that could break the bonds of friendship and love between them. This is the permanent attitude of God which then becomes our ground for peace.

The Lord be gracious to you. Being gracious is the divine gift of overlooking faults, sins, failures, and exacting not the law or what is deserved but offering forgiveness. Grace is that gift which allows us to accept ourselves and others for who we are. Grace is what we need from God to find true joy and peace.

The Lord give you peace. Peace is a common form of greeting among Jews of the time of this poem. *Shalom* is a word that meant more than the absence of discord, but rather expresses the positive well-being and security of another whose mind and life have their foundation in God and the things of truth. Peace is a contentment that permeates our lives even when we are in turmoil. Peace is a gift, not usually something we can muster ourselves, yet it comes from being constantly in touch with the divine within us and outside of us as well. When the peace of God is granted to us in a blessing of life, we may rest with all our might and trust with all our soul.

When the storms of life threaten us, when the joys of life bring us celebration; when the trauma of our circumstances gives cause for alarm, when the unknown is frightening, when loneliness and grief and financial insecurity intrude, when frantic activity controls, when addictions overwhelm, when tranquility alludes us and hope seems dashed against the rock, when another's successes evoke jealousy, when relationships become less than intimate and new challenges loom before us like an insurmountable mountain, hear the words of the poem, the word of God:

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 her countenance upon you, and give you peace.

-- Rev. Gary L. McCann

PASTORAL PRAYER

Eternal Spirit, we would come to you today with hospitable hearts, welcoming you to our minds, our spirits and our whole lives. Come to us in stimulating thoughts, clear insights, illumined faith, in moving gratitude that makes us humble, in penitence that cleanses us, in a sense of purpose that challenges us. Come to us in a fresh vision of love, grace, and mercy..

As a new year dawns, and with it an unknown future, give us amid this noisy, crazy world a sensitive heart to listen, teachable minds to learn, and humble wills to follow truth. Let the revelation of your love be a light to our pathway, your wisdom a guide through the bewilderment, and your power that a strength in our resolve to remain faithful to our call to be your body on this earth.

The coming year portends danger as well as possibility. As we must live within the politics of the day and the unending fight across the political aisle, may our lives stay focused on your holy purpose. Cast down our pride--national, racial, and personal. Make us understanding, cooperative members of our one humanity. Lift us above the petty to grasp the important of these momentous times and thus to help build that one world, missing which our children will face chaos and catastrophe.

We pray for the leaders of the world that they may see the light of peace and work out their differences in non-violent ways. We pray to be among the world's assets and not its liabilities. We pray for strength to stand up in trouble, for courage to overcome the temptation to follow blindly, and for inward grace to be part of the hope for peace. We pray today for those who are ill; may they find your peace and your wholeness amid their difficulties. We pray for those grieving that they may know your peace. Through joy and sorrow, success and failure, the world's favor and the world's enmity, through happy fellowship with those we love and through bereavement when the bell tolls for them, keep us steadfast, undefeated, unashamed, and honorable.

As the new year dawns, may the light of love and hope, peace and joy shine upon us that we may be peacemakers in a world of hatred and light in a world of darkness. Amen.