

Trinity Sunday
June 6, 2004
Number 6:22-27

Sermon by Pastor Paul Janke

The LORD Puts His Name on Us in the Benediction

1. A name of grace
2. A name repeated three times
3. A name through which we are blessed

^{NIV} Numbers 6:22 The LORD said to Moses,²³ "Tell Aaron and his sons, 'This is how you are to bless the Israelites. Say to them:²⁴ ""The LORD bless you and keep you;²⁵ the LORD make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you;²⁶ the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace.""²⁷ "So they will put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them."

"The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the LORD look on you with favor and give you peace." How many times have you heard these words? Almost all of our Sunday morning services conclude with this benediction. For some of you, it may be thousands of times that you've received this blessing. Our Old Testament lesson for this Trinity Sunday reminds us that the familiar words of this blessing were originally given by God to Moses so that he could pass them along to his brother Aaron for use in blessing the people of Israel. This benediction was devised by God and authorized by him as a way in which he—through his priests—would regularly bless his people. In fact, it's the only blessing that God ever commanded to be used. The blessing of Aaron, then, was probably used regularly when the priests of Israel led the worship at the tabernacle and later at the temple. It was Martin Luther who, in writing a Latin communion service, suggested that the Aaronic benediction might serve as one of the blessings for use at the close of the service. And when Luther wrote his German communion service, he specified that this blessing be used at the close of worship.

You can see, then, that this benediction has a long history—something on the order of 3,500 years of history. And in services like this one God is still putting his name on his people through this blessing. Today, as we think about the Triune God and the way he blesses his people, it's also fitting that we explore the meaning of these powerful and beautiful words. We learn from Number 6 that **The LORD Puts**

His Name on Us in the Benediction. His name is 1] a name of grace, 2] a name repeated three times, and 3] a name through which we really are blessed.

1. A name of grace

What's in a name? An awful lot, actually. Almost any well-known name carries with it much more than the sound of the syllables. If I say, "Osama bin Laden" or "George Washington" or "Arnold Schwarzenegger," those proper names immediately carry a meaning for you. It might be Islamic terrorist or first U.S. president or bodybuilder turned governor. So it is with the name LORD. Did you notice how it's spelled in all capital letters? That's to indicate that this name for God, which occurs more than 5,300 times in the Old Testament, is not the same as the word "lord" in the sense of one who has authority or high rank. LORD here is God's personal name. It may have been pronounced Yahweh, but since the Jews wanted to be very careful not to misuse God's personal name, they avoided pronouncing it out loud. Whenever they came to it in the Scriptures, they would say the Hebrew word for lord instead.

Bible scholars spend a lot of time and ink debating the derivation of the name Yahweh and what it means. But we aren't left to pick from a list of options when it comes to the meaning of the name LORD. The LORD himself tells us what his name means. Do you remember when God was preparing to send Moses to lead the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt? At that burning bush in the desert he revealed himself to Moses as "the LORD" and went on to define his name. He said, "**I AM WHO I AM.**" "**This is what you are to say to the Israelites: I AM has sent me to you.**" But what does that mean? Well, when God identifies himself as the great "I AM," he is speaking to us of his absolute independence. He was before time was. He always will be. And he's always the same—changeless. But in that absolute independence of his, God has determined to have mercy on his people.

Later, when he was preparing to give the Ten Commandments, God said, "**I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.**" (Ex. 20:2) It wasn't some angry tyrant of a god who was about to reveal his holy will to Israel; it was the LORD, who had seen the misery of his people and was so concerned about their suffering that he had come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians. And after those same Israelites brought God's righteous anger down on themselves through their idolatry with the golden calf, the LORD was still faithful. He proclaimed his name to Moses, essentially preaching a short sermon on the meaning of his

name, LORD. He said, "**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. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation.**" (Ex. 34:6-7) This is the name God told Aaron through Moses to put on God's people: the LORD, the faithful God, the compassionate and merciful God. This is the name that's put on us each time we receive the benediction. It's a name that tells us about our God and, most important, tells us about where we stand in his sight. LORD is a name of love.

You noticed that the LORD instructed Aaron to speak his name three times as he was blessing the Israelites. That fact is of special interest to us on this Trinity Sunday. Why three times? It would be going too far to say that the people of Israel in the time of Moses had the kind of understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity that Christians today have. God hadn't yet revealed himself to the Israelites in that kind of detail. But neither is it a mere coincidence that the name LORD is mentioned three times here, or that the word "holy" is spoken three times when the prophet Isaiah has his vision of the LORD. The Bible—Old Testament and New—is a unit. The messages of the Old and New Testament don't compete with each other; they complement each other. Here we see how the full revelation of what we call the doctrine of the Trinity fits with what God was saying more than fifteen centuries before the writing of the New Testament. The Old Testament does not contradict our confession that the true God is the Triune God; it supports it. Let's look a little more closely at the way this name LORD is repeated three times.

2. A name repeated three times

In the first of the three lines of the benediction, God told Aaron to say, "*The LORD bless you and keep you.*" "Keep" means to sustain and preserve. In the First Article of the Apostles' Creed, we confess that God the Father not only created us, but that he still preserves us by richly and daily providing clothing and shoes, food and drink, property and home, spouse and children, land, cattle and all we own. More than that, our Father in heaven defends us against all danger and guards and protects us from all evil. The God we call Father is the LORD who does all this simply because he is our good and merciful Father in heaven.

Then, in the second line of the blessing, God told Aaron to say this: *"The LORD made his face shine upon you and be gracious to you."* To have the LORD's face shine upon us means to enjoy his favor and his grace. It's through the work of the second person of the Trinity, God's Son, Jesus Christ, that we know that we stand in God's favor. Jesus redeemed us from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver, but with his holy, precious blood and with his innocent suffering and death. The God we call Jesus is the LORD who redeemed us so that we can live under him in his kingdom and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness.

In the final line of the blessing, the priest was to say, *"The LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace."* Here is another reference to God's face, this time that the LORD's face is turned toward us or, literally, lifted up. The opposite would be for God to not want to look at us, to want us out of his sight. But because of Jesus' redeeming work and through faith in him, we see the face of God, in a sense, and enjoy peace with him. It's the Holy Spirit who works through the gospel to cause us to believe that we are at peace with God. You heard the Spirit doing that work in today's epistle lesson. He guided St. Paul to write, *"Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ..."* The God we call the Holy Spirit is the LORD, who has called us by the gospel to the peace of knowing that in Jesus we are God's forgiven children.

In some Lutheran churches in Europe, when they used this benediction, the pastor would end it by saying, "...in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." I think it was a way to make the Trinitarian nature of this benediction obvious. I don't suppose we'll be augmenting the wording of the benediction any time soon, but all of us will want to know that it is the blessing of the Triune God that we're receiving at the end of our worship.

Some years ago in a different congregation, I had put together a special service for Good Friday. It was similar to the one we had here this past Good Friday evening. When my associate pastor looked at the service, he called my attention to the fact that there was no benediction at the end of it. I said that was by design, that the Good Friday service was linked to the Easter service. The death of Christ is not the end of the story. On Easter Sunday we would celebrate the resurrection and close that service with a benediction. He accepted the explanation, but it was clear that he missed having the benediction. He wanted that blessing and he wanted the people of our

congregation to have that blessing. I think his attitude toward the benediction is one that all of us will want to have. I say that because when the LORD puts his name on us, we really are blessed.

3. A name through which we are blessed

When the pastor raises his hands at the end of a service and says to the people, "*The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face shine upon and be gracious to you; the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace,*" what is that? The raising of the hands comes from the fact that Jesus raised his hands when he was blessing his disciples as he ascended to heaven. But what about the blessing? Is it a pious wish? Is it a prayer that the LORD *might* see fit to do these things? It's more than that. For a believer who receives this blessing, the blessings promised here are actually received by the promise of the God who commanded this blessing. The LORD says here in Numbers, "*So they will put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them.*"

When I think of a man who really knew the value of a blessing, I think of the patriarch Jacob. He so intensely wanted the blessing of the firstborn that, with the help of his mother, he tricked his nearly-blind father, Isaac, into blessing him rather than his older brother, Esau. When Isaac learned that he'd been deceived by his younger son, he had to tell Esau that it was too late to change what he'd done in giving the blessing to Jacob. He said, "**I blessed him—and indeed he will be blessed.**" And Jacob was blessed. Then years later when Jacob was about to meet up again with that same brother he had cheated, the Bible says Jacob wrestled with God—literally wrestled with God in human form and wouldn't let go. Finally, Jacob told his wrestling partner, "**I will not let you go unless you bless me.**" (Gen. 32:26) And Jacob got his blessing.

The LORD speaks here of putting his name on the Israelites. That means just what it sounds like. The Israelites are his. He created them. He redeemed them from slavery in Egypt. God put his name on us for the first time when we were baptized. "Receive the sign of the cross on the head and on the heart," the pastor said, "to mark you as a redeemed child of Christ." Then, as the water was applied, the pastor said, "I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." God put his name on us in baptism. And now, regularly, at the close of each worship service, he puts his name on us again, marking us as his own and pledging himself to provide for our physical and spiritual good.

In a world that seems to favor cursing more than it favors blessing, God has preserved for us this beautiful blessing. It's a blessing that comes from the LORD himself, a blessing reminds us that the God we serve is the gracious Triune God, and it's a blessing that actually communicates to us the good things of which it speaks. What a joy and a privilege it is, then, to receive with believing hearts the benediction of the LORD! *The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD look on you with favor and give you peace.* To such a blessing, we gladly say, "Amen."