

Sermon Text for February 20, 2022

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

Numbers 6:23-27, I Corinthians 11:23-26

“The blessing of the new covenant”

After session meeting on Wednesday your elders made the statement that this congregation thrives in being a blessing to others in a multiplicity of ways. Last evening was one example, but there are so many other ways in which we feel it is not just our duty and our responsibility, but rather it is our joy to bless others. The way in which we make it a priority to provide opportunities for those who do not have, to have at least something. The way in which we provide opportunities for the children of this community to hear about Jesus. The list goes on. You are a blessing to this community, to each other, and we hope, to yourselves as well.

I had an opportunity this week to spend some time with some people who have been having a really difficult past few months. When you are going through that valley at times it can feel lonely and isolating and you wonder if you are really walking that lonesome valley by yourself. It is hard to see blessings that might be right in front of you due to the darkness of the valley surrounding you. When crises hit, blessings can seem to disappear, even if they are right there in front of you.

Today, I hope we have an opportunity to be reminded of our theology of blessing, how do blessings manifest themselves and what role do they play in our understanding of who God is and our understanding of who we are. The Bible recounts blessings that are abundant and as we read through the Bible together it should be pretty obvious that even though God was in their midst as they made it from Egypt to the promised land, they consistently forgot the presence of God and the blessings that he was in real time showering upon them. That can be the story of our lives. We can consistently forget the blessings of God that are all around us even when we are walking in the promised land, it can feel like the wilderness.

In both of our Scriptures for today, in the Old Testament in Numbers we actually receive a blessing and in the New Testament we are reminded of a blessing. We live lives where God's desire, God's primary desire is to bless us, He is striving and working hard to be a blessing and to provide blessings, if we would only let him. Let's read.

READ

Let's go to Numbers as we make our way through the Bible we find ourselves with the Israelites who are in the midst of what they would consider the utmost difficult time of their lives

as they wander through the wilderness because of their unfaithfulness to God. It was obvious to Moses and the leadership that the people needed a pick me up.

So God speaks to Moses and tells him to provide Aaron with what is called the Aaronic blessing that he is to proclaim upon the people so that they can be reminded of who the Lord God is. Listen again to the blessing: 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. As you are going through what you consider to be a dark valley in your life and those all around you are going through the same thing. As collectively you are a body of people who are facing the most difficult time that you have ever faced as a body, it is important to be reminded and to hear that God's desire, God's primary desire is that you would be blessed, is that his face is upon you, he is right there by your side, that he will give you peace.

The people desired and longed for all of that and felt like they didn't quite have it. It would have been better if we had stayed in Egypt than to be abandoned out here with nothing to show for it. They chose to complain and be angry with their current situation rather than to identify how God was blessing them in the midst of this difficult time. They missed the fact that God was there in a real presence but they were not experiencing it because they were not focusing on it.

It is so much easier to focus on what we don't have, or what has changed over these past few years, than on how God has worked in us and through us and blessed us in these past few years. We can always come up with ways in which life has been a struggle, and sometimes we are wired to focus and emphasize that, rather than hearing the words of Aaron who reminds us that it is God who leads the way in a cloud and a fire and provides the manna and the quail and the water, and who clears the way from enemies on our path.

The Aaronic blessing was not just words that are nice, they point to a real presence of God in their midst. A God whose desire and who works hard to bless us, if we would only recognize Him. The blessings of God were hard to see for the people of Israel, but Paul in the New Testament wants to continue this trend of providing the people, like through this blessing in Numbers, an opportunity to experience and recognize and remember the real presence of God in our midst as we make our way through these valleys and difficult times. Let's go to I Corinthians.

Let's be clear, you have heard these words before. If we set the stage we have to set two stages. The first is when Jesus first said these words and took these actions which was when he

was with his disciples on that last evening and they shared together in the last supper. What an intimate time that was together. Jesus knew what was going to happen. The disciples, well, not so much. Can you just imagine the emotions that were going through Jesus as he shares this time with his disciples. After that they leave Jerusalem and walk across the valley and get to the Mount of Olives which is where we find the Garden of Gethsemane. Is there any more difficult time in the life of the disciples and Jesus than the events that take place in that garden?

Paul, likewise, as he is writing this letter to the church in Corinth, finds himself in a prison in Rome, his communities are in hiding as they are being persecuted across the Roman Empire. The valley is dark and the times, they were not changing, they were difficult and dangerous. Where can you find a blessing in the midst of this journey? Paul provides these verses as a blessing to his readers and he starts our verse by saying these are words and this is an act that I am passing down to you not of my own accord, but it was passed down to me.

These words are called the words of institution and they are meant to be a conferring of a blessing upon the people of the church in a similar way in which Jesus at the last Supper passed to his disciples a blessing that was to bind them together so that as they went through the most difficult times they could know that Jesus' real presence was among them. Paul says we will take part in this institution in a decent and orderly fashion because its meaning is the same as the Aaronic blessing. It is to recognize and call upon the real presence of God in our midst.

For us today vs.25 is the central verse in all of us, as we talk about the blessing of the New Covenant. We already know that God's blessing runs like a red thread through all of Scripture. But in vs.25 Jesus proclaims that the cup is the new covenant in my blood. Jesus establishes the new covenant in this act of incredible blessing that his disciples, and Paul tell us, that all of us are not only welcomed to take part in, but commanded to take part in it because it is in this covenant act that we experience the real presence of God.

This new covenant is the one that is talked about by Jeremiah 31:31-34 where he states: ...This new covenant is now upon our hearts so as we face the wilderness, the trials, the difficulties we need to be reminded of God's real presence among us. There is a spectrum of beliefs as to what happens when we take part in the Lord's Supper. From one end of the spectrum we have the anabaptists who believe that the Lord's Supper is a memorial to what Jesus had done, and that in the taking of the Lord's Supper there is no real change in the presence of our Lord. There is the Roman Catholic belief that when the priest prays over the elements they

actually change substance and when we eat the bread and drink the juice we are actually eating the physical body and blood of Jesus.

We are somewhere in the middle where we believe in the Lord's Supper when we take it together there is a real presence of Jesus which is spiritual and which manifests itself as a blessing to us in a tangible way that he doesn't when there isn't the Lord's Supper. The presence of God is evident and real during the Lord's Supper like that fire and that cloud, like he was with the disciples as they gathered together. We have received a blessing which is not theoretical and nice, but rather which emphasizes the glory of the Lord in our midst.

Brother's and sisters, I am so grateful that your leadership has been able to identify the blessing that you have been to each other and to this community over this period of time as we have walked through a very, very difficult time in the life of the church and in the life of this nation and beyond. You have been a blessing because you have seen the fire at night and the cloud by day that has been leading you. You have been able to identify the blessings that you have received and so you feel compelled by joy to be a blessing to those around you. Amen.