

Blessed and Blessing

1 Kings 3

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There's a joke that says next time you are in a Starbucks, you should tell the barista your name is "The Lord Be with You". That way, when they read it aloud, you'll know the Methodists—because they'll automatically say, "And also with you." Sometimes our answers are automatic. For instance, years ago my mother was doing a wedding. After introducing the bride and groom, she wanted to end with some kind of sending forth to signal the end of the ceremony. "I now pronounce you man and wife," she said. "Go and sin no more."

Last week we spoke of "sending forth" and tied it in to our hymns. Certainly we should "go out singing". Benediction—literally, bene dicto, a good word, also carries the connotation of a "blessing".

There are times that the benediction can feel a bit like a moment to re-summarize the sermon. In case you didn't catch it the first time; to drive that point home, or make sure it's coming across to you congregation. I've done that. Of course I want the sermon and the benediction to be connected. But I'm not sure that's the point—if it's truly a "blessing".

In some way, the benediction is our weekly answer to God's command, "Ask what I should give you." In the benediction, we dare to join as a community to ask for God's blessing. Not just understanding or help. *Blessing*. And more specifically, a blessing that extends the work we rehearse in worship into our daily lives.

Each Sunday, Pastor Jon sums it up beautifully with this:

May the love of God, the grace of our lord Jesus Christ and the communion and fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you and give you peace, and set you free..

When I sent him a text last night, to make sure I was quoting his words right—he laughed and said that's it actually straight from Paul.

Here are some other beautiful examples:

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing,
so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.
(ROMANS 15:13)

Before us it is blessed, behind us it is blessed,
below us it is blessed, above us it is blessed,
around us it is blessed as we set out with Christ.
Our speech is blessed as we set out for God.
With beauty before us, with beauty behind us,
with beauty below us, with beauty above us,
with beauty around us, we set out for a holy place indeed. Amen.
(TRADITIONAL NAVAHO PRAYER, ALT.)

From old Irish or Native American translations:

May the road rise to meet you,
may the wind be always at your back,
may the sun shine warm upon your face,
may the rains fall soft upon your fields,
and until we meet again,
may God hold you in the palm of his hand. Amen.
(TRADITIONAL GAELIC PRAYER)

God be in your head, and in your understanding.
God be in your eyes, and in your looking.
God be in your mouth, and in your speaking.
God be in your heart, and in your thinking.
God be at your end, and at your departing.
(SARUM LITURGY, ENGLAND, 13TH CENT., ALT.)

The "Youth Group Blessing" we'd always trot out at the end of MYF,
everyone in a circle, asking the kids to cross hands, right over left, speaking
together, with the one boy who would always say "PEACE!" as loudly and
deeply as he could.

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. Amen.
(NUMBERS 6:24-26)

So how does all this relate today's text, you are wondering?

“Ask what I should give you” (3:5). Notice that God doesn’t ask Solomon a question. God commands Solomon to ask. We often end up focusing on the wisdom Solomon requests, but what if we began with God’s command? What might God’s command and Solomon’s response tell us about benediction?

If benediction is our answer to God’s command to ask, then Solomon’s response demonstrates the importance of answering God’s command according to what God values. God did not guarantee that Solomon would receive whatever he asked for. Of course, he could have asked for power, wealth, and strength. Defeat of enemies. Expansion of his kingdoms. There are so many worldly things we could imagine in response. But that’s not what Solomon says at all.

3:9 Give your servant, therefore, an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil, for who can govern this great people of yours?”

What we ask for matters, not because God will condemn us for asking the wrong thing, but because when we ask God for blessing, we are participating in an ongoing conversation and work of grace with God and one another. Will our benediction extend or resist the work of grace in our communal life together?

3:10 It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this.

3:11 God said to him, "Because you have asked this and have not asked for yourself long life or riches or for the life of your enemies but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right,

3:12 I now do according to your word. Indeed, I give you a wise and discerning mind; no one like you has been before you, and no one like you shall arise after you.

Maybe his request for blessing is “just don’t let me be like my Dad.” Let me make good choice. Let me know the difference between good and evil. Let me actually walk in your ways. Solomon gives his father a great deal of credit—maybe more than he really deserves, when he speaks the following words of him:

3:6 And Solomon said, "You have shown great and steadfast love to your servant my father David because he walked before you in faithfulness, in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart toward you, and you have kept for him this great and steadfast love and have given him a son to sit on his throne today.

I told you I would eventually get around to the rest of David's story.

There is no getting around the fact that—even though David was “a man after God's own heart (1 Samuel 13:14, Acts 13:22)—he abused his power and dishonored God's law. One scholar summarizes the events of David's narrative this way:

Before his encounter with Bathsheba, David's arc went from achievement to achievement. He slew beasts, defeated Goliath, was heralded by the people in song as a mighty warrior (1 Samuel 21:11), and became King of all Israel and Judah. After his transgression, however, his life was fraught with pain and betrayal. David and Bathsheba's son died. His daughter, Tamar, was raped by David's son, Amnon, who was then murdered by her brother, Absalom. Absalom betrayed David and went after the kingship in a stunning coup d'état. Absalom also raped his father David's concubines and expelled David to exile. David is eventually restored but is bitter and left instructions with Solomon to exact revenge on his enemies. Even after his death, Adonijah, another son, is murdered in the conflict for succession.

We move from the one called "a man after God's heart" to the wise one. How do wisdom and passion for living and for worship work together? Maybe we're supposed to see something in the combination, the head and the heart, as a pointer to a whole-bodied expression of faith and commitment to God.

Wisdom and a passion for doing the right thing. Now, Solomon goes out—and this is important, because the text says it's technically the one transgression he commits. God is supposed to be worshipped only in God's specific holy place, not in the “old school style”, outside, on a high hill. Solomon's only supposed to be worshipping and praying in the Temple. Yet... God shows up. Quite literally. This exchange goes from the abstract to a very personal prayer, a blessing fraught with presence.

So, let's step back a moment and see what is happening here. What has God pronounced over Solomon in this encounter?

This is the last sermon in our series about the theme of "Worship with Rejoicing." It has all the marks of a benediction. God invites Solomon to walk in God's ways as he leaves from this moment. There is a blessing imparted and a charge given. When we gather for worship, we need a good word to go with us as we depart. Hopefully. As we are sent out—into the community, the world, workplace, even just back home, we need something that will go with us, something that will enable us to hold on to the wisdom we have heard and shared.

We need something that will inspire us to continue in the same spirit we received and offered during worship. Church can't just be a one-day a week opportunity. The benediction is a reminder that worship never really ends. The service might be over, but the worship goes on as we continue living as a witness to God at work in our lives. *A benediction, then, is not a period at the end of our worship sentence, but a comma connecting us to whatever comes next.*

3:7 And now, O LORD my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David, although I am only a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in.

There's something in that needing blessing on entering and exiting. I feel like Solomon, wanting to be constantly learning how to do both of them in a way that pleases and praises God. Solomon heard the call to walk in God's ways, keeping the statutes and commandments as well as (or maybe better than?) his father David did.

When we leave our places of worship, we go out to walk in those ways too. May we hear the blessing in our going out today. Amen