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Thursday, January 1, 2015, The Name of Jesus

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My text for this morning is a dear one for me. It is called the “Aaronic benediction.” That means Aaron, the brother of Moses and the priest of Israel. His blessing goes this way:

<sup>24</sup>The LORD bless you and keep you: <sup>25</sup>The LORD make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you: <sup>26</sup>The LORD lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.

Notice that the version in the Bible (both KJV, RSV, and NRSV) speaks of the LORD’s “countenance.” The version in our worship book (the LBW) drops the word “countenance” and simply speaks of “favor”:

The Lord look upon you with favor and ✠ give you peace.

I don’t know that any great harm is done by this rewording. As with many questions of translation, the issue turns on whether a word is falling out of use in the current generation. I suspect that the word “countenance” has not entirely fallen out of use. Perhaps you are familiar with its meaning in this example: “The law does not countenance trespassing.” That is, the law does not permit trespassing. It does not smile with favor upon trespassing. Likewise, in his blessing Aaron prays that the Lord will “countenance” us — that he will “lift up his countenance” upon us, lift up his approval upon us. For me, the prayer that the LORD should look upon us “with favor” is a fairly eloquent and simple translation of this. But maybe some of you have more insight to this rewording than I do. If so, I will be glad to be better instructed.

Meanwhile, let me say simply that I love this Aaronic benediction, whichever translation we use. Let me quickly count off some of my reasons for being happy when at the end of this liturgy, I launch you out into this new year of our Lord, 2015, by pronouncing the Aaronic benediction upon you. Here is my quick count. I will develop them next:

- 1) The Benediction *is not* what the scholars call a “liturgical option.” I have no option here. If I would be a minister of God, I will bless you folks as you leave.
- 2) The Benediction does not discriminate. It throws its goodwill out over each of us, rich or poor, saint or sinner.

- 3) The Benediction is not *my* blessing, but the Lord's. It is much more important than my blessing is.
- 4) The Benediction is one that Jesus loves to hear, because it is so much in his Spirit.

So, these are my four reasons for admiring the Benediction. Let me develop them now. First, we begin with the pastoral necessity of the Benediction.

## THE PASTORAL NECESSITY OF THE BENEDICTION

If I would be a pastor, then I should be willing to dismiss the congregation with the Benediction. There is no point in heading off to Seminary if I should be unwilling to bless the people. If my heart were so variable and so narrow that I hated to bless the people, then the ordained ministry is probably not for me.

When next you have our worship book lying before you, notice two things about the Benediction. First, its rubric is what is called a “directive rubric,” rather than a “permissive rubric.” The difference is signaled in the verbs “shall” vs. “may.” The rubric for the Benediction is directive: “The minister blesses the congregation.” It doesn’t say, “The minister *may* bless the congregation,” as if he gets to choose whether or not to do so, depending, I guess, on whether or not you have been good boys and girls. No, the liturgy simply ends with the Benediction. There is a pastoral necessity to it.

And the second thing to notice is that the Benediction is what is called a “**P** line.” That stands for “Presiding Minister,” which is always a pastor, an ordained minister. **A** lines are for the Assisting Minister, and **C** lines are for the whole congregation.

Well, the Benediction is a **P** line. It is my job in the eyes of God to bless the people as they prepare to leave the church. The one who presides at the Holy Communion is the one who speaks the Benediction.<sup>1</sup> It is as if the ancient liturgy

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<sup>1</sup> Prayer services are different. Morning and Evening Prayer, for example, can be led by either an ordained minister or a lay minister. In either case, the Benediction is phrased differently from the Aaronic Benediction — the difference is marked by the shift in pronouns from “you” to “us”:

**L** The almighty and merciful Lord, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, bless and preserve *us*.

Still, when Pastor is leading, the liturgy calls for his form of the Benediction to shift back to the “you” of Aaron’s benediction:

**P** The almighty and merciful Lord, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, bless and preserve *you*.

disciplines the Pastor to always be ready to speak a final word of blessing. When all is said and done, a pastor's final word is "bless you."

## **THE BENEDICTION DOES NOT DISCRIMINATE.**

Next, the Benediction does not discriminate. It broadcasts God's blessings far and wide. The Benediction is addressed to the whole congregation. I am not permitted to exclude anyone from the blessing. I cannot say, "The Lord bless you and keep you — except, except for you folks over in that corner, because you were rather a rather rowdy group today."

And this too is interesting: We seldom speak of "excommunication" these days. And yet it is always a pastoral possibility that the pastor and a church member will quietly agree that this is not the right time in that member's life to be receiving the Holy Sacrament — that the person is still too caught up in some heavy sin, or that the Private Confession has started but is not yet done and might not be done for a few more weeks. So, it is always a pastoral possibility that a person could come to the Communion rail and signal that this time the person would like to receive a blessing rather than the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ — for reasons that the pastor might understand or might not. In either case, when it comes to the final benediction, that benediction sweeps up into itself the sinner. The benediction is generous because the heart of our God is generous, never desiring the death of the sinner, always wanting life for you, for me.

## **THE BENEDICTION IS NOT MY BLESSING, BUT THE LORD'S.**

My third praise of the Benediction is that in the end, it is not the Pastor's benediction, but the Lord's. Notice that the divine instructions to Aaron are meant not just for Aaron, but also for "his sons." The divine benediction is to be a continuing blessing, stretching across the generations and the centuries. It is the will of the Lord that this should be so.

It is nice when one person says to another, "Bless you." I even whisper that to myself for strangers on the subway when they sneeze. And with real warmth and heartfelt feeling we can say to our children, "God bless you, Son. God bless you, Daughter." Likewise, we can bless our surgeon or any helpful person in our life. And hearing a blessing from someone is a good and uplifting thing.

But the Aaronic blessing is not really Aaron's blessing, but the blessing of the Lord. It is the Lord who commands such a blessing and the Lord who desires such a blessing on his people.

If a king gave me some small gift — say, a fountain pen would be really cool — well, I'd be grateful for the gift, not just because I like fountain pens, but even more because it was king who gave it to me.

How much greater is the Benediction of the King of kings and Lord of lords! He does not give anything so lowly as a fountain pen, but rather speaks of

“blessing” and “keeping” and “favor” and “peace.” These are great, even eternal gifts. And they come from someone greater than a king. They come from Someone to whom any king would be the merest grasshopper. Indeed, they come from the maker of kings, even the Maker of heaven and earth.

## THE BENEDICTION IS ONE THAT JESUS LOVES TO

### HEAR

My last reason for admiring the Benediction is that it is a prayer I am sure Jesus loves to hear. He loves to hear it because it is so very much in his Spirit. When he began to preach that golden sermon, for example, the Sermon on the Mount, how did he begin?<sup>2</sup> With blessings:

<sup>3</sup>Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

<sup>4</sup>Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted.  
(Matthew 5:3-4, KJV)

When he gathered the little children up into his arms, what did he do to them? He blessed them:

Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God. <sup>15</sup>Verily I say unto you, Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, he shall not enter therein. <sup>16</sup>And he took them up in his arms, put his hands upon them, and blessed them.  
(Mark 10:14-16, KJV)

And at the end, when he was ascending to his Father, what was the farewell gesture he made to his disciples and so to us who have believed on their word? He blessed them:

<sup>50</sup>And he led them out as far as to Bethany, and he lifted up his hands, and blessed them. <sup>51</sup>And it came to pass, while he blessed them, he was parted from them, and carried up into heaven. (Luke 24:50-51, KJV)

The Benediction, then, is a prayer our Lord Jesus is pleased to hear. It accords with his heart's deepest desire for us.

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<sup>2</sup> This nice observation comes from Spurgeon's sermon "The Blessing of The High Priest" (1890).

As I have gotten older, I have found myself trying to pass on some thoughts to my sons. I write them down in a journal. It's a small thing so far, but I hope to add to it as time goes by. One of the things that life has taught me is that the benediction of the Lord rests upon us throughout our lives. I am older now, and I believe myself to be blessed by the Lord. But looking back, I believe that the Lord blessed me continually, that even the days when Carol and I were young and seemed to have no money and did not know how in the world we were going to be able to pay for college for our boys, nonetheless those days were filled with God's blessings — blessings of strength and energy and passion that I simply took for granted back then and could hardly even perceive, but which now I can see and for which I am grateful. Likewise, these days of getting older have the signs of God's benediction: more calmness and seasoning and confidence that I can do the things that need to be done because I have done them before.

Indeed, I have come to recognize the truth that Saint Paul learned too from the Lord:

<sup>9</sup>And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. (2 Corinthians 12:9, KJV)

Heretofore, the benediction of our Lord has carried us, and it will carry us forward too into this new year before lying before us. The benediction is wonderful and powerful, I say, because it is in fact the blessing of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.