

ALL THE NATIONS*by Rev. Elaine Poproski*

This morning I'm going to be referencing three different Scripture passages. I'd like to encourage you to find them in your own Bible so you can follow along. All the passages are in the Old Testament. Maybe one of you in Zoom could type these references into the chat so everyone has them to refer back to?

We're going to begin in the book of Numbers, in chapter 6, verses 23-25. This book is near the beginning of the Bible; it's the fourth book in. We're also going to be looking at Genesis 12:1-3, which is the first book of the Bible. And we're going to be looking at Psalm 67, which is what Nicole read for us earlier.

Let's start with Numbers 6:23 – 25.

Back in the early days of Israel's life as a baby nation, when God was instructing Moses on all that was required of them being God's people, in amongst the instructions about different kinds of offerings and ways of being together, God spoke these words from Numbers 6 to Moses. They begin at verse 23:

Tell Aaron and his sons [Aaron was Moses' brother, and he and his sons were the first priests of Israel. These instructions are for Israel's priests.]

Tell Aaron and his sons, "This is how you are to bless the Israelites. Say to them:

The Lord bless you and keep you;

the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;

the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace."

Do those words sound familiar to you? They probably do. They get said a lot at the end of worship services in all kinds of churches. I think they get said even more frequently in synagogues around the world. They are traditional words of blessing. In our church, if you ever look at an order of service, you'll see at the very end something called the Benediction. *Benediction* comes from a Latin word that means 'a blessing' or 'to speak well of'. Often the Benediction consists of the words I just read, from Numbers 6:24 -25.

The Lord bless you and keep you;

the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;

the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace.

An interesting bit of trivia for you: The oldest copies of any part of the Bible that we have, date to some time in the 7th century before Christ – that's more than 2,800 years ago! What archaeologists found were two small, rolled up pieces of silver, upon which were etched these words of blessing from Numbers 6:24-25.ⁱ

Whenever I speak these words, I hope they give hope as we go our separate ways into whatever the week has in store for us. I hope you can picture God's face shining on you – smiling at you – offering you grace and peace. In short, I hope you are blessed.

But what does that mean, exactly? What does it mean to be blessed? A few things come to mind.

The first thing that comes to mind is our automatic response whenever someone sneezes. It's said that "people used to believe that a sneeze caused someone to expel their soul out of their body, [I don't know about you, but I've had sneezes that felt exactly like that was what was going on!] and so 'God bless you' or 'Bless you' [which is the way we usually say it] was used as a protection against the devil snatching your soul."ⁱⁱ Nowadays, we say it out of politeness rather than as an invocation of protection against evil, but it's interesting to me that we still say it, nonetheless.

The second thing that comes to mind when I think about the word *blessing*, is the prayer people often say before they eat. Sometimes we call it grace. Sometimes we call it the blessing. Sometimes we call it giving thanks.

The third thing that comes to mind when I think about the word *blessing*, is the tradition of asking the parents of the person one wants to marry for their blessing on the marriage. It used to be that people asked permission, but that's not really a thing anymore. At least, I hope it's not really a thing anymore; permission implies ownership. Blessing, on the other hand, suggests approval or favour. If parents give their blessing on a child's marriage, it's like they're saying that they support the couple and their marriage.

A blessing might be a prayer for protection. It might be an expression of thanksgiving. It might be an indication of approval and support. When it's used in the Bible – when we're talking about blessings from God, it's all those things, but it's more as well. It usually has to do with things like "fruitful harvests, fertility, health, prosperity, and the like."ⁱⁱⁱ

The thing that's most important to remember is that a blessing is always a gift. It's not earned or owed. It's a gift from God. It's the result of God's grace. We aren't blessed because we are Christians or because we follow God's commandments, or for any other reason than that God chooses to bless us.

Another thing that's super important to remember when we're talking about blessing, is that not all harvests, fertility, health, prosperity, and the like are the result of God's blessing. We don't have to look far to see people and nations who have prospered massively by evil means – by the exploitation of people or waging war or any number of other things. That's why we have to be careful about what we declare to be God's blessing. Just because it looks like a blessing, doesn't mean God has anything to do with it.

What do you hear when you hear those traditional words of blessing from Numbers 6?

"The Lord bless you and keep you;
the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;
the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace."

Psalm 67, which Nicole read for us earlier, takes those traditional words of blessing from Numbers 6, and changes them just a bit. It's not a huge change, but I think it's an important change.

The blessing from Numbers 6 was meant to be spoken by Israel's priests to the people. The Lord bless *you* and keep *you*...

In Psalm 67, we read: May God be gracious to *us* and bless *us* and make his face to shine upon *us*... There's something of a sense of our collective human identity in this shift in pronouns. One commentator wrote this: "Our Psalm soars upward, then gazes down over *all* the earth and invokes God's blessing on *us*, a big, comprehensive *us*."^{iv}

I love this! It reminds us that God isn't miserly about his blessing. He's generous. He blesses whoever he chooses for whatever reasons he chooses. But it also reminds us that God's blessings aren't limited to specifics, they include the bigness of creation itself. Genesis 1 and 2 tell us that God created the whole world – everything – and then he made human beings and gave us – blessed us with – the gift of the world. Admittedly, we often forget that creation is a blessing. Or at least, we certainly often don't treat it like it's a gift or a blessing from God, but that doesn't change the truth of the matter. It also reminds us that God's blessing isn't limited to a specific people group. God's blessing isn't even limited to people who acknowledge his existence.

One of the things that's important to note is that the Hebrew word used in this psalm, that's translated as God, is not the name *Yhwh*, which is the Israel-specific name for God. Instead, the psalmist uses *Elohim*, which is a more all-encompassing term. It's not specific to the Hebrew people. It's God – the Creator – the One who was before everything – the One who made everything, including people. This is important because it gets at the bigness – the all-encompassing-ness – of God and God's blessing

The same commentator I just quoted also wrote this: "God's grace is as lavish as the mind-boggling scope and diversity of creation, as steady as the broad sweep of God's work through history, as tender as a single person knowing God."^v

That is the sense of these opening words from Psalm 67, which carry the weight of the priestly blessing from Numbers 6, but at the same time shifts that blessing from a particular *you* to the much broader *us*.

"May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us."

What a wonderful prayer. All by itself, such a wonderful prayer. But it's not all by itself. It's not even the end of the sentence. The sentence continues in verse 2, which reads:

"...that your way may be known upon earth, your saving power among all nations."

"May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us *so that* Your way (God's way) may be known upon earth, your saving power among all nations."

I think most of us really like the idea of being blessed. We like it for ourselves, and we like it for other people. But I think we usually think of the blessing as being an end in and of itself. We want to be blessed and we want other people to be blessed because being blessed is great. But Psalm 67, by not ending the sentence at the end of verse 1, doesn't allow the blessing to be an end in and of itself. It has another purpose – a bigger purpose. It's reminiscent of God's call of Abraham that we read about in Genesis 12.

Where the first 11 chapters of Genesis have to do with everyone on earth – they're the pre-history chapters. They tell the story of the beginning of the world, from its creation to humanity's

diaspora throughout the world. That's the first 11 chapters of Genesis. Genesis 12 moves us from pre-history into history and into the specific, localized story of God's chosen people. Genesis 12 begins with Abraham. We don't know much about Abraham at this point. He's already fully grown, with a family and at least some amount of wealth. He seems to have some kind of relationship with God. After all, the first thing that happens in Genesis 12 is that God speaks to Abraham and Abraham apparently recognizes that it's God speaking and is willing to do what God asks of him.

Here's what happens, reading from Genesis 12:1:

Now the Lord said to Abram [An interesting side note here: the Lord is Yhwh – the Israel-specific name for God, not Elohim, the more all-encompassing name for God as is used in Psalm 67]

Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing."

Did you hear it? God pronounces his promise – his blessing – *so that* Abraham will be a blessing.

Actually, if you're reading the NIV or the King James or almost any other version (I read the NRSV), there's no *so that*; there's just an *and*. "...and you will be a blessing.

What we're dealing with here is something translators of ancient Hebrew are only too familiar with: translating ancient Hebrew is really difficult. One of the challenges with this part of Genesis 12 has to do with the verb tenses. The blessing part is all the same: "I *will* make of you a great nation, and I *will* bless you and [I *will* – it's not said, but it's understood – I *will*] make your name great." It all points to the future. But the last clause isn't an "I will" or a "you will". It's what we call an imperative. It's a kind of command verb. It's the same as at the beginning of God's words to Abraham, where he says, "Go..." Here, the imperative verb is "Be..." "Be a blessing." Not "You will be..." but simply "Be..."

If we were to read this as close to a literal translation as possible, it would read like this:

"And I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great – be a blessing."

It sounds weird, doesn't it? It doesn't totally seem to make sense in English. So translators do what they can to make it make sense in English, without losing the meaning of the words. Those who translated for the NRSV, chose to add in, "so that you will..." Other translators chose to add in, "and you will..." Either way, the meaning is the same. The blessing God promises Abraham here isn't just for its own sake. Abraham's blessing is intended to extend out from him and his family to the world – to all the nations.

If you're not convinced, look at verse 3. It reads this way:

"I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse, *and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.*"

There are a number of challenges with this translation as well, but we don't need to go into them here. The point that's important to notice is that "all the families of the earth shall be blessed." In other words, "God's choice of Abraham will lead to blessings for all the families of the earth."^{vi} God will bless Abraham, but that blessing is intended to extend out from him and his family to all the families / all the clans / all the nations of the world.

That's the same thing that's going on in Psalm 67.

"May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us, *so that* your way may be known upon earth, your saving power among all nations."

There's a point to God's blessing, and the point is not simply the blessing itself. The point is God's larger mission in the world – God's mission of restoring all humanity – all creation – to perfect harmony. It's God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. That's what God has been about from the moment human beings chose sin instead of him. That's the good news – the gospel – Jesus preached and exemplified.

There's a point to God's blessing. It's about his love and his grace, but not just for me or you or those who follow God and his ways. The point of God's blessing is always that all the nations – all the people of the earth – will come to know him and praise him and revere him. That's what we read in Psalm 67. Hear it again in its entirety:

"May God be gracious to us and bless us
and make his face to shine upon us,
so that your way may be known upon earth,
your saving power among all nations.

Let the people praise you, O God;
let *all* the peoples praise you.

Let *the nations* be glad and sing for joy,
for you judge *the peoples* with equity
and guide *the nations* upon earth.

Let *the people* praise you, O God;
let *all* the peoples praise you.

The earth has yielded its increase;
God, our God, has blessed us.

May God continue to bless us;
let *all the ends of the earth* revere him."

How has God blessed you? How is God blessing you? How does that blessing contribute to God's mission in the world? I hope you might find some time this week to reflect deeply on these questions. How has or is God blessing you? How does that blessing contribute to God's mission in the world?

ⁱ Brian Windle. "[The Three Oldest Biblical Texts](#)." *Bible Archaeology Report*. February 6, 2019.

ⁱⁱ "[Why Americans say 'Bless you!' when they hear someone sneeze](#)." *MIT International Students Office*. N.D.

ⁱⁱⁱ Rolf Jacobson. "Commentary on Psalm 67:1-7." *Working Preacher*. (St. Paul, MN: Luther Seminary, August 2020).

^{iv} James Howell. "Commentary on Psalm 67." *Working Preacher*. (St. Paul, MN: Luther Seminary, May 2022).

^v *Ibid.*

^{vi} Terrence E. Fretheim. "The Book of Genesis: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections." *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 1. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 424.