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Numbers 6:22–27 ESV, abridged

²² The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ²³ “Thus you shall bless the people of Israel: you shall say to them,

²⁴ The LORD bless you and keep you;

²⁵ the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;

²⁶ the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.

²⁷ “So shall they put my name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them.”

God’s face shining on me.

A while back, I spoke with a terminally ill man. He was about to leave the hospital because he didn’t want to die there. He wasn’t scared. He had turned down a treatment that would have extended his life for a brief period, maybe a handful of months, but would have left him very uncomfortable. I am, as usual, changing details of this story to protect his privacy. Jack told me that all he wanted was to spend the last few weeks of his life living in a clean place and having enough to eat. The hospital had arranged this for him. You see, he was homeless and totally broke. He said that he liked the idea that he wasn’t leaving much behind and was excited because he knew that the next step of his journey would be much better than the one that was ending. Jack wasn’t bitter. He was calm, even happy. Then he grew serious and he asked me if I thought he was a failure for not doing

anything important with his life. He said that he hadn't done anything for the world. I told him that he was a good man, that he had taken almost nothing from the world, that I was sure he was leaving a very tiny carbon footprint, that he hadn't added much to the pile of dead electronics laying around the world, that he didn't entertain himself with gadgets assembled by people earning a buck a day, and he didn't have a closet full of clothes sewn by children, and that if we all lived the way he had been living, the forests and many species of this world would be far healthier. Jack laughed at this. I then told him that he had certainly given much love to the people in his life. Then he said that he had asked to speak with a chaplain for a special reason. Jack wanted me to give him a benediction before he began the last, short segment of his life on earth. I immediately thought of the passage that we're looking at today.

The Book of Numbers has a boring name, making us think that it perhaps contains a bunch of historical details. When we see that name, we don't want to immediately dive into the book. But in truth, the name is very misleading. In the original Hebrew, this book had a name that meant *Into the Wilderness or Desert*. This is actually a better name, as the book describes the Israelites wanderings in the desert before they enter the Promised Land. The reason the book is now called Numbers is because it begins by describing the numbers of people counted

in a census taken by Moses. This book begins with the Israelites at Mount Sinai and ends with them approaching Canaan, which will become Israel. For context, remember that the Book of Numbers is the fourth book of the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament, with Pent, of course, being a Greek prefix meaning five. Jews call these five books the Torah. Traditionally, Moses is assumed to be the author of all five books, although virtually no scholars believe this to be the case. There is strong evidence that the Pentateuch was written by many people over an extremely long period of time, and that it was reworked and edited countless times.

So, let's get back to the Book of Numbers, the story of the Israelites' wandering from Mount Sinai to the Promised Land. Here is our quote: *The LORD spoke to Moses, saying,* ²³ *“Thus you shall bless the people of Israel: you shall say to them,* ²⁴ *The LORD bless you and keep you;* ²⁵ *the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;* ²⁶ *the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.* ²⁷ *“So shall they put my name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them.”* This is probably the most well-known passage in the Book of Numbers. These are God's words, God's blessing, which is to be proclaimed to the Israelites. Today, both Jewish and Christian faith communities use this in worship services. This is called the Aaronic blessing, because the family of Aaron

was a priestly family anointed by Moses, as God directed on Mount Sinai. Aaron was a brother of Moses. Aaron is considered the very first priest of ancient Israel. So, this blessing, this priestly blessing, was given to the people who would soon inhabit Israel; it was given in order to assure them of God's dependability. He will always be with them. In this prayer, God blesses the Israelites, shines his face on them, and offers them peace. The word that is translated as "peace" is shalom, and it has a much deeper meaning: it suggests prosperity, longevity, happiness, safety, and security. Those are the promises of God to God's people. This prayer has been found on scrolls in burial caves that date back to 600 B.C. This is indeed a very ancient prayer in wide use for thousands of years.

This blessing is actually a benediction, and it has traditionally been used at the end of Jewish and Christian services. It is given as a benediction in Chapter 6 of Numbers, where our quote comes from. What's ending is the period of planning, of getting ready to set out on the journey to the promised land. The Israelites are about to set out on their trip from Mount Sinai to the Promised Land. The Israelites had spent about two months traveling from Egypt to Mt. Sinai. Then they lived at Mt. Sinai for about one year. When this benediction was given to them, at Mt. Sinai, they still have forty years of living in the desert ahead of them. An entirely different generation of Israelites would be alive at the end of

the journey. The benediction was to mark the end of the period of preparation; it is God's promise that God will be with them every step of the way, and that God will march into the promised land with that next generation. That's what a real benediction is about: it sends people off on an unknown journey. A benediction marks the bestowal of divine favor on those who are embarking on a life transition.

But a benediction means more than just a blessing, the bestowal of favor by God. It's a promise of more than peace and prosperity and safety. A benediction is a promise that we can go forth into an unpredictable world, just like the Israelites entered into an unknown desert headed for a far away destination with the strength to live as true human beings, unique in that we are made in the image of God. That's the bottom line with a benediction. We are reminded as we begin a journey that we should have no fear – because we go forth as beings created in the image of God.

Let me get back to Jack, the terminally ill homeless man who asked me for a benediction. He was younger than me by about fifteen years. I asked Jack to tell me a little more about himself. He said that he had grown up in Los Angeles, and I told him that I was from southern California. We chatted about places with which we were both familiar, and I discovered that his childhood had been a bit like

mine. He was raised a Christian, did well in school, loved leaving the house on summer mornings and spending the day riding his bike around town, and had planned on going to college. But he had taken a year off to work and had gotten a promotion and had never gone to college. He was married briefly. But when Jack was still a very young man, things went south for him. He lost his job and never found another job with decent pay. He found himself on the street, and that is where he had been for over twenty years. Jack wandered around the southwest, living in Arizona and New Mexico, and wanting to get away from the heat, he then moved to Colorado one summer, and discovered that life on the street in the winter in Colorado can be brutal. Jack described waking up in a Boulder park with three inches of snow on him. He lived in the Boulder/Denver area for years and had been thinking about heading back to L.A. when he got the diagnosis of terminal cancer. Then I took Jack's hands and offered a benediction. I paraphrased the words that God instructed Moses to say to the people at Mt. Sinai, and I told him where it came from: *The Lord will bless you and keep you. The Lord's face will shine upon you and God will be gracious to you. God will lift you up and give you peace. God will always bless you.*

I told this man that it was an honor to give him a benediction before he went to spend the last bit of his time on earth in a motel. He was excited about

having a clean bed, a place to shower, a private bathroom, and not having to worry about anyone trying to beat him up and rob him in the night. He would eat three times a day. I asked Jack what he was going to do when he grew weaker and was unable to take care of himself. He was already thin and shaky. This man said that something had already been arranged. If he was still at the motel, a hospice organization would come to the motel and care for him. But he said that he was only going to have a month's worth of free rental at the motel, and he might live longer than that. In that case, he would be back on the street. He told me that he wasn't going to worry about it. Any journey that was worth taking, he told me, would have unpredictable events in them. If it was all planned out, if you knew exactly what was going to happen, it wouldn't be much of a journey at all.

I said another prayer with Jack, a spontaneous one where I asked God to lift him up, to give him a comfortable journey, one filled with happiness and peace. I asked God that at some point in this journey that he lift Jack up, and that God then hold Jack close to him for the rest of eternity. Then I told Jack that God would have be with him the whole way, no matter what happened. That was the one thing he could count on: the steady hand of God on his shoulder for every single step of his journey. He thanked me and said that was what he needed: a reminder that God would always be there with him.

The story of Numbers is the story of the Israelites wandering in the desert. They do *not* remain totally loyal to God and to their covenant with God during their journey. They briefly turn against Moses. Moses himself temporarily loses his faith in God. But God's continued presence with the people of God is never in question. Even their disobedience, their disloyalty, their lack of trust in God, does not stop God from delivering them to the Promised Land.

I am sure that Jack is now in the Promised Land. He still has God's face shining on him, and that hand will always be there. I know that I, too, will always have God's face shining on me. You all can be assured of the same thing. Please let me pray for you.

God, I cannot stand before my congregation today. We are physically separated from each other. I ask you to please walk with them every day. I ask you to bless them, to let your face shine on them, and that you give them peace, no matter what happens on their earthly journeys. Let them have one thing, and that is the confidence that they will never be without you, that you will be with them no matter what unexpected things happen in life. And may all of us be like Jack; may we be satisfied, and in fact happy, with only the basics in life. May we live in joy knowing only one thing for sure, and that is that indeed, we will always have God's face shining on us. Amen.