

What a Covenant!

Rev. John Allen

Most Sundays over the last six years I have offered a version of this blessing at the close of our service.

And today at the close of our service I will offer it once more.

These are ancient words of blessing, some of the oldest we know.

They are words of blessing that were spoken by Priests in the Temple generations before Jesus was born.

A blessing that was no doubt offered to Jesus himself as part of his Jewish faith.

Today, it is a common blessing in Churches around the world, and it is a blessing still used by Jews to this day.

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 face upon you, and give you peace.

In Jewish practice there is a distinctive hand gesture that accompanies this blessing... a Priest in the Temple would raise their hands like this as they offered the blessing to the people.

And this is just a little trivia for any Star Trek fans out there, but this was the source from which Leonard Nemoy derived Spock's famous Vulcan Salute.

And though I certainly do want you all to live long, and prosper.

The blessing I really want to leave you with, is the blessing I have left you with week after week.

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 face upon you, and give you peace.

A blessing is a word of hope.

I offer this blessing because of what I hope for you. I hope that you know God's love and peace in the place and among one another. That you will encounter God's grace and providence.

And then there is this business about God's face shining on you.

Which is certainly a poetic turn that nudges us toward something otherwise ineffable, it turns us out of ourselves and towards the mystery of the Holy One...

But our faith also teaches us that every person is made in God's image. That each of us bear the divine imprint. And so I think there is a more practical and simple way to understand how God's face might shine on us, and that is that our faces radiate the presence of God to one another.

You might think of every face you see as a mirror, reflecting a glint of God's glory into your eyes.

Which is one of the reasons why, as you have heard me say many times before, it is so important that faith is something we do together. Something that we do in connection and in relationship with one another.

And not just with one another in this room, but with the knowledge that every human face, our neighbors, strangers, those beyond what we typically consider to be the bounds of our community, all of those faces are faces through which God's love and grace might shine upon us.

As I have reflected on the years of my ministry here in Milton, there are some wonderful, measurable, and lasting things that we have done and built together. I am grateful for that good and faithful work we have done together.

But what is most memorable to me, what I expect is the most meaningful in the larger scheme of things, and what I suspect is most pleasing to God, I would characterize as these glimmers.

They happened in this room as week after week I had the privilege of sitting in this place and watching your faces shine in response to a beautiful piece of music.

They happened in hospital rooms, where I had the privilege of sitting with you holding the hands of those we loved as they breathed their last, witnessing in acute and tender holiness how God had shone in their lives.

They happened in bible studies when one of your stories or experiences sparked a new insight that drew us deeper into faith.

They happened in confirmation classes when eyes enlivened at a faith that felt suddenly more accessible and true.

Our church is rooted in covenant, in a commitment to stand in relationship with one another, when it is easy, and especially when it is hard. To share together both the joys, and the costs of Christian discipleship.

It is a commitment to deal graciously and honestly with one another, to listen deeply to the truth of one another's lives, and to persevere in seeking the presence of the Spirit in one another's voices, and the presence of God in one another's faces.

The purpose of this covenanted life is not just that it is a kinder way to be to one another. The purpose is not gentility, or mere politeness.

The purpose is to preserve so that, with and in one another, we might truly witness the ways that God's love is made real in our midst, even if just in glimmers and flashes.

A blessing is a word of hope.

And this is my blessing, my hope, for you.

May God's face shine on you.

And this is how you have blessed me.

I carry with me such gratitude for the privilege and gift it has been to be your pastor. For the generous hospitality that you have extended to me and which I have seen you extend to one another. I have been blessed by your welcome.

I carry with me gratitude for the ways you have challenged me, for the moments which have been uncomfortable and uneasy. I believe that discomfort can be a tangible sign of the presence of God, and I have so grateful for those times when you have been willing to hang on with me to a hard question to find the blessing that might lie in it.

I carry with me gratitude for the way you have deepened my faith. I have found in relationship with you new understandings and expressions of how God works in our lives. I have heard you witness to the power that God's presence has had in your life in ways that inspire my own journey of faith.

It is an odd and extraordinary thing that we do together in this community.

But at its heart it is this: we draw our circle ever wider, and we turn toward one another openly and in love, so that we might catch that little glint of light.

The next surprising way that God's face will shine upon us.