

June 3, 2018  
3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Pentecost

# Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

“The Places We Go”

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Note: During our summer series, "Word," members of the Covenant family will choose a scripture passage and share how it has been or become God's Word for them. On June 3, our first participant in the series was Jules Tryk.

Numbers 6:24-26 English Standard Version (ESV)

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[a] upon you and give you peace.

Jules's Reflection:

I. The word, "keep," was an incredible comfort to me at my father's funeral. Our minister closed the service with this passage. At 12, I felt lost and vulnerable, and I was reminded that I was God's, and He would keep me, safe in his hands, and secure in His love.

II. The college staff of Ghost Ranch ended the summer with a camping trip to Mesa Verde. While doing the dishes, someone started singing the setting with the sevenfold amen, and, good Presbyterians all, we all knew it and chimed in. We sang until dark, and I could physically feel God's graciousness surrounding us.\*

III. I was caught up again by this passage at the funeral of one of my college roommates. Meredith had suffered from a hereditary disease that left her completely paralyzed. We could do little to ease her suffering, and we gathered to mourn the death of our friend, a wife, sister, daughter, and mother, at the age of 41. Her husband and son sang in their church choir, and they chose John Rutter's setting of this passage as their farewell. This time, I was overcome by the realization that God had, indeed, granted her peace.

\*NOTE: About a half hour after we started singing, a man came hurrying down the path. When he saw us, he said, "Praise the Lord! I heard the music and wondered if I was being called to Jesus!" He joined us for s'mores at the campfire before returning to his campsite.

## *The Places We Go*

Miles away from In a recent article in the *Christian Century*, the Rev. Craig Barnes reflects on the shockingly bad advice often conferred upon college graduates this time of year by the big-name speakers brought in for the task. Not long ago, at his daughter's college graduation, he was shocked to hear the speaker say the same thing Barnes had heard at his own college graduation: "You are among the brightest and best we have ever seen. Set your goals high. Dream your own dreams. Chase your own star, and you can be whatever you want to be."

Now maybe this doesn't sound like such terrible advice actually, it probably sounds like advice we've given to people we love or been given by people who clearly have our best interest at heart. But Barnes points out that viewing this advice through a theological lens quickly reveals its flaws. "Among the best and brightest?" Hardly. Pretty much every class of graduates is as fundamentally flawed as all the classes before them. "Chase your own star?" Well, even when they chased God's own star, the magi looking for Jesus got hopelessly lost.

"You can be whatever you want to be"? According to Barnes, that is the worst lie of all, because embedded in that statement is the suggestion that it is up to us to assemble the life we want, to make good choices, to work hard, and to enjoy the subsequent rewards.<sup>1</sup>

You don't have to get too far into adulthood to learn that the journey of life is littered with choices that seemed good at the time but led to disastrous ends, hard work that accomplished little in the way of results, so-called rewards – material. Otherwise – that turned out to be much less satisfying than we had anticipated, and events that completely derail us that we have no control over at all. And once we make that discovery in our life's the journey, then what? How do we make sense of it spiritually and theologically if we were raised to believe that we can do and be whatever we want if only we work hard enough?

Well, it is at just that point when spending a little time with the verses Jules chose for us today could be the very thing we need. This beloved benediction, frequently used to end Jewish and Christian worship services, was given to God's people at a time when they discovered the limits of trying to control their own journey. With God that marked the end of one season and the beginning of another. After the Exodus from Egypt, when God freed the Israelites from a life

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/faith-matters/you-can-be-whatever-you-wish-and-other-myths>

of slavery, the Israelites spent nearly a year at Mt. Sinai. During that year, Moses received the Ten Commandments and taught them to the people.

While Moses was up on the mountain getting those commandments, the people rebelled by creating and worshiping a golden calf. At the point in the story where today's passage appears, the people are preparing to leave Mt. Sinai and continue their journey through the wilderness toward the promised land. Moses gave this blessing to Aaron and his sons, who were the priests of the people, and it was designed to be used daily on their journey. Every single day, the people would hear, "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."

This blessing is a profound but straightforward promise for every stage of our life's journey. First and foremost is the implicit promise that God is with us. For the Israelites to hear this blessing, each day was a reminder that there is no situation so dire, no failure so terrible, no stage of the journey so difficult that God does not bless and keep them in the midst of it. God's presence is as fixed as the sun that rises every day to provide light for the journey.

And this blessing wasn't reserved only for days when they made significant progress or when the people got along with each other particularly well. It was a blessing they heard on their best days and their worst days and every day in between promising that God's presence is constant in whatever journey we take. Notice: God doesn't send the Israelites into the wilderness and then meet up with them again once they finally get to the promised land. God is with them God is with us every step of the way.

Second, this blessing promises that God is with us not in some kind of distant and objective way, but in a way that is up close and personal. It speaks of God in human terms God's face shines on us, God lifts God's countenance up to look at us, and in that gaze, God surrounds us with love and protection and beauty and forgiveness and peace. This is not a passive God who waits to see how well we follow God's ways before offering us love; this is God who pours out love upon us before we've done anything at all to deserve it.

David Brooks is a writer who relentlessly advocates for the importance and power of relationships to bind our society together. In one article, he described Thursday night dinners that take place in the home of a couple who have chosen to welcome to their table adolescents from the public schools, friends of

their son who often don't have a stable home where they can eat and sleep. This couple is committed to offering these kids unconditional welcome and a place to share their gifts.

That doesn't mean it's a table without rules: those who eat are not only expected to use their best manners and respect one another but also to leave their cell phones at the door. But the primary rule is what David Brooks calls "complete intolerance of social distance." He quotes a youth activist who tells him, "Programs don't save kids' lives, relationships do. What young people, especially those in poverty, need, is somebody willing to walk through the shadow of the valley of adolescence with them." Brooks concludes: "Souls are not saved in bundles. Love is the necessary force."<sup>2</sup> Souls are not saved in bundles. Love saves them, and love is extended from one person to another, and most effectively, to one person at a time, in just the way this blessing describes, face to face. Because there is one more important thing to know about this blessing that guided the Israelites, Jules, and countless others through barren deserts of doubts and fear and grief: although today's blessing was given to the Israelites as a people, it is addressed to an individual, not a group. The Lord bless you and keep you in Hebrew; this is not the plural "you" but the single "you." This blessing is evidence of God's complete intolerance of social distance. It is God, drawing alongside us, surrounding us as naturally and completely as light and air, promising that for every step of every journey, from beginning to end, God is with us.

Lloyd Douglas loves to tell a story from his college years when he lived in a boarding house. An elderly retired music teacher lived on the first floor, where he was bound to a wheelchair. Every morning, Douglas would stick his head in the door of the teacher's apartment and ask the same question, "Well, what's the good news?" The old man would pick up his tuning fork, tap it on the side of the wheelchair and say, "That's middle C! It was middle C yesterday; it will be middle C tomorrow; it will be middle C a thousand years from now. The tenor upstairs sings flat. The piano across the hall is out of tune, but, my friend, that is middle C."<sup>3</sup> Children grow up. Students graduate and move on. Nations rise and fall. Technologies come and go. Wars are won and lost. The church's influence waxes and wanes. The economy twists and turns. And all political parties have their moment in the sun.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/18/opinion/the-power-of-a-dinner-table.html>

<sup>3</sup> Max Lucado, *Traveling Light*. Thomas Nelson, December 21, 2010.

But one thing remains constant: the patient, persistent, presence of God, whose love is the most powerful force in the world. Where on your journey do you find yourself today? Are you on the cusp of an ending that is also a beginning? Are you being thrust into a wilderness that holds only the faintest hope of a far-off promised land? Are you in the midst of what feels like an endless struggle? Or are things going pretty well and you are confident and secure that you've got everything you need for the journey? Well, no matter where you are, no matter what places your journey takes you, know that this blessing is for you, and no matter what your circumstances, that this promise holds true: God is with you, God is for you, God's love surrounds you and strengthens you, God's presence and love makes a difference, for you and for the world, today and every day of your journey.

Amen.