

"All Things in Jesus' Name"

Name of Jesus
10:45 a.m. Sunday, January 1, 2012
The Reverend Nancy R. Easton
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church
Camp Hill, Pennsylvania

Numbers 6:22-27; Psalm 8; Luke 2:15-21

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

So often when we pray in corporate settings like this—in fact, nearly every time we pray—we conclude our prayers with something such as “for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord” or “in Jesus’ name we pray.” I find that even in my spontaneous prayer, I am drawn to conclude my petitions that same way: “in Jesus’ name...” Please don’t think it’s because I haven’t figured out a different way to end a prayer. Believe you me, there is nothing I appreciate more than fresh, new ways of doing Christian worship because I find new words and creative liturgies help me think about what I’m saying, and help me experience anew God’s grace and power and presence in worship. But I do like to end most of my prayers—corporate and individual—with words like “in the name of Jesus.” Call me a rampant traditionalist, if you will. Or **maybe** it’s because everything we say and do in this place, all things we pray for, any action we take as a congregation or me as a pastor or any of us as individuals—**all** these things ought to be done for the sake of our Lord, in Jesus’ name.

For when our prayers to God conclude with such words, something else is happening. We’re praying to a God who has a face and who has shown his face to us.

In my children’s baby books, I keep an example or two of their first drawings. Budding artists? Not really. They must have my genes in that department. There are those first attempts of putting crayon to paper—the slash marks of chubby crayons held unsteadily in tiny hands. Then there are those first recognizable people: Oversized heads, ears jutting out, nose slightly askew but a definitely large protuberance. Is there a reason why one of their first drawings is always a person? And a face? I think it says a lot about what is important to you and me—knowing someone else, seeing their face.

When we say “in the name of Jesus” we are reminding ourselves that God has a face that he has shown to us and directed toward us. How important this is.

In his book *If Grace Is So Amazing, Why Don’t We Like It?*, Donald McCullough tells about his relationship with his grandson Timothy. Timothy is 2 ½ years old, and lives nearly 500 miles away from his grandparents. McCullough and his wife call frequently, and listen as Timothy jibber-jabbers away. Most of the time they can barely make out the chatter of the child, but some of it is startlingly clear—and with

childlike insight. During one call, McCullough told Timothy they were sending a present to him in the mail, and that he should be expecting to receive it soon. Timothy asked, plain as day, "But would you bring it to me? I want you to come to my home."

That's when McCullough realized Timothy wanted **them** more than the present. Grandpa swallowed hard, his eyes welling up, as he tried to explain to Timothy that Grandma and Grandpa really did want to see him and cuddle with him and play games with him, but that they couldn't just yet because they lived a long way away. And from the other end of the phone line, a tiny, sad voice replied just above a whisper: "A long way away."

Timothy wanted, needed his grandparents right there in front of him. He didn't want grandparents "a long way away." Even if the most wonderful present could arrive in the mail, Timothy longed for the face of Grandpa and Grandma. For him, that would be the most wonderful present.

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 from our Old Testament book of Numbers traditionally has been used as a final blessing or benediction in Christian worship. Long-time Lutherans would recognize it from the various hymnals we've had over the decades. But I want you to **notice** something about that three-fold blessing. Two of its portions deal with the Lord God's face. The first portion simply calls upon God to bless and keep—in other words, to guard and watch over you. Next, there is a call for God's face to shine upon you. Maybe in contemporary lingo it would be more like "May God's eyes light up when he sees you!" Isn't that a wonderful notion? That God's face would radiate joy when he glimpses us? (Think of how you can tell when someone is happy to see you—you can **see** it in their face!) That portion of the blessing also calls upon God to be gracious—to be the giving, generous God of life we know God to be. But the third portion of the blessing also talks about God's face, using the word "countenance"—quite an old-fashioned term for face, and one we hardly use nowadays. To "lift up his countenance upon you" would mean God would look you straight in the eye. Now, perhaps that is frightening to contemplate. To be honest, when you and I feel most guilty about something, or when you and I are trying to hide who we really are from someone else, we usually avoid meeting their gaze, right? Because we're worried about the consequences, right? But the writer of this blessing makes clear he is calling for the Lord's gaze to meet yours, and in that gaze may you not experience guilt and fear, but real and profound peace.

It seems to me the writer of this blessing recognized the vital importance of God having a face, of our human need for a face to help nurture the kind of deep, intimate relationship with God that God wants to have with us.

And the blessing comes alive in all its truth in the birth of Jesus Christ. We read today the tail end of the Lucan Christmas story, plus the simple verse that follows. Here Luke announces how Jesus was brought to the temple when he was eight days old, and officially named the name given him by the Angel Gabriel back in chapter

1: Jesus, which means "God saves." The **name** for the face that we see tells us what the One who has that face **does**.

You see, the Lord God knows we humans need to see a face. Because we're certain that a God who is "a long way away" cannot know who we really are, and cannot help us in time of trouble, comfort us in our sorrow, strengthen us in our discipleship, or take us through our human death to new life.

This Jesus is the One whose face we know. This face radiates love, forgiveness and new life for us. This Jesus is the One whose life and death are indeed a blessing through and through.

Frankly, the incarnation of Jesus Christ—his birth in human flesh—is a remarkable and unexpected thing. In his book, McCullough writes, "You'd have to be God to come up with it... God chose to be un-Godlike, chose to put on flesh and become human, and the descent was both an act of humility that answered our pride and a pursuit of love that found us...If the Christmas story doesn't knock us flat with wonder, we'd better check our pulse."

Well, you're here in worship this New Year's Day, and so it is apparent that you have a pulse. That's good. Because a lot is happening in our worship today day: we are listening to God's holy word, praying for all needs, offering our offerings, singing songs of praise, and being sent out to serve, all ***in Jesus' name***.

And while we're at it, perhaps resolutions ought to be made. I'm not referring to the usual suspects—that 10-pound weight loss, the exercise program, the promise to clean out the clutter from the basement. I mean resolutions about our following the One whose face we know, whose face gazes upon you and me every day with love. Maybe it's a promise to spend more time in prayer...or offering your help as a volunteer in a local charity...or stepping out of your comfort zone and inviting a neighbor or co-worker to worship or some activity here at Trinity. I just want you, in this New Year, to give thought to what you might resolve to do this year ... in Jesus' name.

In this brand new year of 2012, may 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.

AMEN.

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