

Wilderness Blessing

1 Corinthians 13; Numbers 6:22-27

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These are some of my favorite verses in all of Scripture. The words are beautiful, poetic and comforting. I've relished pronouncing them at the end of worship and loved hearing them sung in this space in recent months. And yet, as much as I appreciate these verses, the book of Numbers hasn't been front and center in much of my preaching or teaching. Even the title is less than attention grabbing: Numbers. Where does this ho-hum descriptor even originate? Well, I am glad you asked. It derives from the census lists of each of the tribes of Israel. Does that make you sit on the edge of your seat?

The Hebrew title is more compelling: "*In the Wilderness.*" This is the story of the Israelites after their escape from Egypt as they make their way to the Promised Land. The book isn't linear. The structure, the genre, the outline, all are jumbled and hodge podge and that's appropriate given the subject matter. Perhaps we can relate because those wilderness times, like a global pandemic, a scary diagnosis, a divorce, a job loss, the death of a loved one, they don't come with a road map, a guidebook, or step by step directions from Siri. This book is about God's people navigating liminal space, attempting to keep the faith, not lose hope, and keep going children as the days in the wilderness turn to months and the months turn to years and the sameness of the manna gets tiresome and the competence of the leaders, and even the goodness of God, are questioned.

This messy, complicated, painful context is the occasion for these beautiful words. We're in the part of the book where the people are being prepared to embark on their journey. They are on the cusp of the unknown and Moses is being told how to make everyone ready for what will prove to be a difficult trip. People are counted, organized, and given instructions for how to maintain the rituals that mark them as God's chosen people. Then we get this Priestly Blessing, some of the oldest verses in Scripture.

Listen to this description of it in Harper's Bible Commentary:

Blessing refers to God's gifts of prosperity, land, health, the presence of God, and all the other things that make life possible and full (Deut 28:2-14). God's keeping of his people involves guarding and protecting them from evil (Ps. 121:7-8). The second line...uses the metaphor of light to refer to God's face as it shines benevolently upon God's people. This shining of God's face results in his being gracious and delivering the people in times of trouble (PS. 67:1)

...The goal of God's blessing is summed up by the final word of the benediction, Hebrew shalom or "peace." Shalom refers to more than simply the absence of conflict. It encompasses all of God's good gifts of health, prosperity, well-being and salvation. (Page 187)

This is so beautiful and encouraging, but let's keep in mind what's coming: The people will complain. God will get mad. Even Moses will grumble. Rebellion ensues not once but repeatedly. Miriam dies. Aaron dies. There are military conflicts with various outcomes. The journey ahead will test the people to their limits and beyond. Clearly, the Israelites are going to need these words of blessing pronounced over and over again if they are going to make it to the Promised Land and be the people they are called to be on the way and once they arrive.

This priestly blessing is a wilderness blessing, and we need to be reminded of it, too.

Old Testament professor Richard Boyce says this, *"...the priestly benediction, properly interpreted, is the last piece of equipment offered to every Israelite before the journey begins. ...more important than bread or water, it is relational at its core."* (Westminster Bible Companion, Leviticus and Numbers, page 126)

When we're sloggng our way through the wilderness, we need to know we are not alone. We need the reassurance of God's presence. We need to be reminded that we are kept, regarded, valued, beloved and given the gift of peace that passes understanding. And we need our fellow travelers to pronounced and embody that word of grace so that we can keep the faith and keep going when the journey gets hard. We, the priesthood of believers are tasked with reminding the people of God that they are blessed and beloved – even in the wilderness.

This week I had the joy of reconnecting with some of my colleagues from the *Presbyterian Outlook*. As we were catching up one of them asked me if I'd heard about the high school principal in Guildford County who sings to his students every graduation. I had not, so she sent me the link to the story of principal Marcus Gause. This year he asked the students what they wanted him to sing, and the valedictorian requested Whitney Houston's "I will Always Love You." The video shows him singing his heart out as he points around the Greensboro Coliseum at his students. It is deeply moving to see his affection for them, and their heart felt response in return. The story goes on to report:

Gause is no stranger to spreading the love. This is what he says during announcements every morning at Andrews High:

"If no one has told you they love you today, it would be my privilege and my pleasure to be the first to let you know that somebody loves you in red raider country and that somebody is me."

(<https://www.wfmynews2.com/article/life/andrews-high-principal-serenades-class-of-2021-singing-i-will-always-love-you/83-28edc8f8-328b-4c56-b7b4-2160c05605e0>)

Principal Gause is pronouncing a priestly blessing into the wilderness journey that is high school. And this story reminded me of another gifted educator: Dr. Jesse Turner. He was my daughters' high school principal for several years and a person who blessed many, including my girls. He relentlessly reminded those in his care that they were valuable and beloved.

Each morning, always dressed in a dark suit complete with bow tie, he enthusiastically greeted students as they entered the building. He was renowned for his *Turner Time* videos, produced by the students with music, rap and rhymes that talked of compassion, community and his commitment to the Monticello Mustang Family. In his morning announcements he reminded that family to take care of each other, be kind to one another, remember, he would say: "I love you and you are my babies."

He referred to these high school students as his babies, with utter sincerity and not one ounce of irony. And he showed them that he really was there for them, all of them, the ones who came to school in head-to-toe camo, the children of migrant farm workers and the kids of UVA professors, all of them his babies. I discovered a recent article about Dr. Turner. It read in part:

He became the principal of Monticello High School in 2012. During his leadership, Monticello earned the National School Boards Association's prestigious Magna Award for academic innovation and excellence. He made his relationships with students a high priority, including hosting "Turner Time," a highly popular weekly television interview show featuring students. Among the school's other signature achievements while Turner was principal was a 100% on-time graduation rate for Black students.

He is quoted in the article:

"I became an educator because I deeply believe we have a collective responsibility to help our young people succeed. That's why I am in this profession."

(<https://www.k12albemarle.org/our-departments/communications/news-board/~board/newsroom/post/dr-jesse-turner-returning-to-albemarle-as-director-of-student-services>)

Dr. Turner recognizes that young people, all people, succeed when they know they have someone who loves and supports them, who believes in them and whose face lights up when they see them. And like the principal at Andrews High, he isn't afraid to declare that blessing publicly and frequently.

We need to be reminded whose and who we are especially when we are in the wilderness. We need this reassurance of our blessedness because we've been wandering for a while now. We've done the counting, set the capacity limits, gone over the camp rules about masks and keeping clean. We've complained and grumbled along the way, gotten weary of the restrictions, wondered where the pillar of fire is leading us, but I pray that through it all, we've known that we are blessed, blessed by the presence and peace of our God, blessed by the gift of this

community, blessed to take care of each other, be kind, love one another, because we know that we are one people, God's people, one family, even if we're in different tribes.

My friends, as we continue on the Way, never forget, you are God's babies and no matter how challenging the wilderness gets, you are blessed and kept, God smiles on you and because of you, God sees you, treasures you and offers you the gift of *Shalom*, peace.

And if no one has told you they love you today. It would be my privilege and my pleasure to be the first to let you know that somebody in First Presbyterian Church loves you and that somebody is me. You are not alone. God is here for you no matter what happens in the wilderness or how long it takes us to get to the Promised Land. God is with you, and we are with you, too.