

**The Shining Face of God**  
(Psalm 67)  
**The Aaronic Blessing**

May 22, 2022

Among the most commonly used benedictions in churches today is the one that goes: “May God’s face shine on us and be gracious to us.”

They are words that you may have noticed in this morning’s psalm and it can also be found in Numbers Chapter 6. It is known as the “Aaronic” or “Priestly” benediction and it is the oldest example of a benediction in existence, discovered on silver amulets dating to 600 BC. 2600 years ago.

I know that I probably overuse this benediction. To my mind, there is something profound and stabilizing about repeating a benediction that is so ancient, so eloquent and that has been spoken over so many people through the ages. And so this morning, I’d like to share some of what these words mean to me.

**An Invisible God**

There was a time when I thought it strange that, on Sunday mornings people gathered together to sing praises to (in the words of Hymn #1 in the Black Hymnal), an “...invisible, God only wise.” It may be because I did not feel sufficiently touched by the presence of this invisible God. Because, by all appearances, there is nothing in a sanctuary on Sunday

mornings but people, objects and thin air. Where is this God whom the people are addressing? I don't see anything.

But once our hearts have been convincingly touched by God, it is no longer strange at all. Because then we carry with us a sense that there is something that exists in this world that is so beautiful and so wonderful that there is nothing of greater value. We have stumbled on what the Gospel of Matthew calls, "the treasure hidden in the field." And thereafter, we feel the need to return regularly to lift the lid on that treasure chest and drink in the glow of the gold that is God's love. We sense that gathering to be regularly bathed in the light of this invisible presence is key to our ability to live a good life.

### **"Let There Be Light"**

And one of the ways we can talk about God's presence with us is by talking about the "light" that seems to radiate from a human face or to shine forth from a person's eyes, when that person has been touched. That there is a superadded "light" that somehow makes the people around us beautiful to us, regardless of the whether their features are aged and worn, young and smooth, symmetrical or asymmetrical and regardless of, or perhaps because they behave in ways that defy our grasp and are therefore intriguing to us.

The Old Testament tells us that when Moses came down from the mountain after receiving the 10 Commandments and again when he encountered God in his tent, that his face shone, literally “gave off rays” as a result. And maybe there is some connection between this and the sense we have that a human being who has experienced exposure to God, somehow absorbs and then reflects that light in a way that is discernable to us.

And this not the only kind of light that seems to speak of God. There is also the light that comes through the trees or peeps out from over the hills when the sun is at a slant. Like the light from a person’s face it illuminates what we are seeing in a way that makes the ordinary, suddenly beautiful, in a way that somehow points wistfully and praisefully toward our invisible God.

### **Two Lights**

You may be interested to know that light has two separate origins in the Bible. That if we go back to the beginning of Genesis, we find that it is created twice, once in the third verse of Chapter 1, and a second time on the fourth day. You know the first instance well. God said

“Let there be light and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. And God called the light day and the darkness night.”

But then, a second time, on the fourth day of creation, when God creates the sun, moon and stars, light is created again.

This suggests that God has created two different kinds of light. There is an additional light that comes to us from the sun, moon, stars, lamps, flashlights and so on. And there is a first created light that does not come from any of these sources. It must be that this first created light provides a different kind of “illumination” that makes it possible for us to understand the words “day” and “night”, “light” and “darkness” in a different way. It is a light that makes possible a different kind of seeing.

### **The Installation Service**

Last Sunday at the installation service, as I watched all the various participants, which in one way or another was everybody, I felt the sense of God’s face shining upon me with that light, as I sat there taking in the proceedings, and then mingled with friends and congregants.

What a strange collection of people we are. David Neil, the Church and Ministry Committee Chair, large and affable, wearing flip-flops and

shorts! I haven't seen a worship leader in flip-flops since Hawaii. The choir led the way, with a well sung and perfectly chosen piece. Leslie's greeting expressed her pride in our congregation without a shred of pridefulness. LuAnn followed with her straight up delivery, and Beth Marshall with a soulful prayer, and Janet's warm and natural cadences that somehow make the readings easier to understand.

And then brother Mark accompanied by his son Amos, hunched over with long hair spilling over his guitar, let loose the inner Elvis with a rendition of "Precious Lord." Rev. Comstock, like a kindly lion, robed in his white mane, gave a mini lecture from the pulpit on how "churches are not businesses". Rev. Dr. Christine Fontaine gave us a short "You'd better take your medicine" pep talk, peppered with Old Testament imagery. "Treat this kid good, he is doing his best for you" was the gist of her message and I nodded in hearty agreement. Reverend Sherrill Willis also quietly saved the day by taking quick control of some flawed planning around the offering.

And then a smattering of folks from Heath came down out of the hills; a couple of very conservative who love me anyway, and a couple of progressives, who love me anyway. There were some friends and unexpected people too. All of us, both easy to love and easy to criticize.

It made me feel at home, because I know I'm easy to criticize and also eager to be loved.

As the service progressed, it seems to me that not only the second, but also the first kind of "light" was illuminating the scene; the light you can't see; the light that somehow makes a bunch of separate and unmatched puzzle pieces, suddenly come into focus as a beautiful picture; a gift straight from the playfully creative hand of God.

And it strikes me that when that light reveals to us this beauty that surrounds us, it is hard to find cruelty in our hearts. It is hard to hate, hard to be humorless. Those things flee, because they make no sense and have no place in what is being revealed to us when everything and everyone is radiating or revealed in this invisible light. I think it is a "heart-softening" light that shows us a world that is easier to forgive and easier to love.

### **God with Us**

The reading on which the installation sermon was based, was the story of Abraham at the Oaks of Mamre, where Abraham is confronted by three visitors. My brother Mark drew our attention to the fact that the story leaves us confused about whether the visitors are really three men or whether Abraham is really being visited by God. And I think

that he rightly concluded that the confusion is intentional; that there are situations in which the Bible wants us to confuse our visits with other people with visits from God. And we could go farther and say that when we see other people's faces, we sometimes experience it as though we are seeing God's face.

And we could also go beyond that and say that everything we have ever seen from the moment we first opened our eyes are different aspects of God's face. And you could further speculate that it is the ability to see by that first light that comes directly from God, that makes it possible for us to understand that what is before us is not something ordinary, but something special. By shining that first light into our hearts and out upon all we see, God's face is revealed to us as the expression of an underlying creativity that is wonderful and playful, a great sense of humor, an openness and generosity that allows us the free will with which to live into him fully or destroy ourselves, and an aching love and sorrow over our brokenness.

That's why I like this benediction. "May God's face shine on us." Because, God's face encompasses everything our eyes can see and because God has given us another kind of light that makes his face shine, and gives everything a precious meaning that is simply

unavailable to us, if we only judge things on the basis of what can be seen by the light of the sun, moon and stars.

Think what a blessing it is that God has not only given us each other, but has also given us these two lights. The one that reveals to us what is visible, and the other to reveal to us the invisible beauty of God's love that sustains us and gives meaning and purpose to our lives.