



NAME OF JESUS SERMON

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It's about time: January 1st is the start of a new calendar year. Tax deduction possibilities for 2011 are done; medical deductibles start again at zero. We need to get used to writing 2012. And everyone's got a fresh new pack of offering envelopes— 'the gift that keeps on giving'!

It's also about family: January 1 is "The Name of Jesus" and rarely turns up on Sunday. (In the old red book, it was called "Circumcision of Jesus," but I suspect that prompted too many awkward questions to Sunday School teachers. "What does that big word mean, teacher?" "Umm...ask your father, dear!")

At any rate, January 1 recalls Jesus' family following the requirement that Jewish boys 8 days old be circumcised into the special people of God, marked in the flesh with the sign of the covenant. It was also the time of official naming: this child of Mary shall be called Jesus (actually Yeshua), as the angel of the Lord instructed both Mary and Joseph.

Sure, January 1 is about chronological time (from the Greek word *chronos*)—the tick of the clock and dropping of the ball to indicate the passing of another 365 revolutions of the earth. But it is, more importantly I think, about *kairos*, God's time, not tied to the clock tick, but more to the heart beat, tied to pulse, to life and readiness, relationship and welcome. *Chronos* time is necessary for TV schedules, for plane departures and arrivals, for marking the football quarters. But *kairos* tells you when it's time to pop the question, when to change life's direction, when the flower's about to bloom, when the baby's ready for delivery. Clocks don't much matter when the time is right, when the situation's ripe. With *kairos*, things just happen!

In 1979, in a burial cave beneath the church of St. Andrew in Jerusalem, archaeologist Gabriel Barclay discovered a tiny artifact, a piece of thin silver rolled into a cylinder. It was

determined to be from the 7th Century BC, the time of the prophet Jeremiah. Engraved in fine script on this scroll are these words from Numbers, so familiar to us:

The Lord bless you and keep you,

The Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you,

The Lord look upon you with favor and give you peace.”

The scroll was likely made to be worn around someone’s neck as an amulet, a tangible blessing that would go wherever the wearer went.

That blessing was first given by God through Moses to Aaron for the people of God. After 40 long years of ‘chronos’ through the wilderness, it was finally ‘kairos’ time! They were ready to enter the Promised Land, where Moses could not go, and so he prepared his successor with what they needed for the future, for their new life in their new home.

Those few verses were an extraordinary gift, truly, one that continues to bless us (literally!) to this very day. But, as is so often the case, familiarity may obscure the richness of its treasure. So, let’s take a closer look!

“The Lord bless and keep you” is the promise of God to provide what we need for life and strength, for health and security. It recognizes that our true needs (as distinct from our ‘wish lists’!) are always from God, who is the source of goodness and life. What we have is never our own doing or accomplishment. It is always gift, received from God’s gracious hand.

“The Lord make his face to shine on you” connects us to the glory of God, lighting up the darkness of this world with his presence. When the ancient Israelites heard these words, they would remember the blazing glory of God on Mt. Sinai, the pillar of fire lighting their way through the wilderness, the blessing of a sunrise chasing night’s shadows, the warmth of Spring’s sun, promising new growth after the winter’s killing cold.

For us, the blessing may also remind us of phrases such as, “She brightened the room when she walked in,” or “His face lit up when he saw them.” Can we imagine God’s face lighting up as he enters this space, or brightening a hospital room, our nighttime prayers, or the funeral home? The Lord’s ‘shining face’ has to do with the gift of relationship, the gift of one’s life/joy/blessing being offered to another. Think of a cherished family experience—perhaps

one this past week—when the presence of one to another was the very best present of all. That’s what happens when God’s face shines on us!

“The Lord look upon you with favor, and give you peace.” Here comes the promise of eye-to-eye contact, a person’s eyes often called the ‘window to their soul.’ While elsewhere in the Old Testament is the warning that the look of God will kill you (Mt. Sinai, remember?!), here it is the face of love. It is our Creator/Redeemer God—so devoted to our care and well-being.

We all know the experience of walking down a busy street, with a blur of faces passing by, none of them much mattering to us. But then, we chance upon someone dear to us: eyes lock, smiles beam, leading to an embrace or kiss. More important than the dozens of others that passed you by, here are eyes that know you, cherish you, open up to you. That’s the face of God this benediction brings to us! And with that blessed look comes God’s promise: “So they shall put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them.”

That story from ancient Israel may seem an odd piece of Scripture for this 8th day of Christmas, but I hope you’ve begun to see how this blessing takes shape in the gift of the Christ Child to us. The invisible, mysterious and ‘other worldly’ God is born to these ordinary peasant parents: teenage Mom and carpenter Dad. After centuries of waiting and longing and praying, the time is now right: Kairos!! So the Creator of the universe comes to stable and manger, to swaddling cloths and diaper. Israel’s fearsome warrior God drinks milk from his mother’s breast, coos and giggles on Joseph’s knee! Jesus looks into our eyes, then smiles/beams to capture our hearts.

This “incarnation” of our God is so incredibly disarming and intimate. These past weeks have filled us with the gospel details of it all, wonderful stuff, of course. But this morning I’m really struck by the simplicity of Paul’s account in his letter to the Galatians. There’s nothing about angels, shepherds, taxes, or magi. He writes simply this: “When the fullness of time (‘kairos’!) had come, God sent a Son born of woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children.”

Do you hear that?! God’s Son is born to bring us into his family. Paul goes on, “God sent the spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying ‘Abba!’” As you may know, “abba” is the

Aramaic word for daddy, often the first word a child utters: ‘Abba! Abba!,’ equivalent to our da-da or ma-ma. In Jesus’ language, it’s also the first word of what we’ve come to call “The Lord’s Prayer.” “When you pray,” Jesus says, “call ABBA,” literally “Daddy!” And as that prayer takes shape in us, it will go to work shaping and forming us, ever more deeply drawing us to him. Imagine his face lighting up when he sees us, looking deep into our eyes, urging us, “Don’t see yourself anymore as a slave. You are now my child!!”

In a world that can be so callous and impersonal, with religious expressions so often full of judgment and mistrust, I think that this family image—this intimacy—is a welcome and profound antidote. “Abba” invites us to see what it means to be members of God’s family, to belong to Jesus and so to belong to one another.

Perhaps you’ve noticed that I always begin my congregational letters, “Dear brothers and sisters.” I recall once, when I was in Latrobe, getting a pretty sharp retort from a member, asking me not to do that. “I am not your sister,” she insisted. I beg to differ. Like it or not, we are family, with Christ as brother and Lord God as Dad. Through the waters of baptism, we are adopted into that family, “christened” with Jesus’ name, made heirs to his kingdom, ‘one Lord, one faith, one God and Father of us all.’

In a time when politics, race, language, economics, and even religions encourage pitting ‘us’ against ‘them,’ Jesus moves us in the opposite direction, linking us together, children of God, with shared needs, hopes and dreams. In him, far more unites us than separates. In him, what joins us—God’s love and grace—matters far more than the differences, which are all so petty by comparison.

That sense of family extends, of course, far beyond this room, past our Trinity roster, and ELCA membership. We are baptized into—made members of—the whole body of Christ, with sisters and brothers around the world and throughout the ages. One Christian writer refers to it as God’s “kin-dom”! So commemoration days—we’ve had Stephen, John and the Holy Innocents this past week—are glimpses into our shared family album. And the needs and concerns of people all over the globe are family issues dear to us: those who are persecuted in

Egypt, hungering in Somalia, afflicted by AIDs and malaria in Southern Africa, homeless or unemployed in Reading. They are all kin!

God's blessing is sent to all. Because we are family, where the chance of climate, politics, or history stack the deck in favor of some and against others, it is up to us to right those wrongs, to give from God's abundance, to spread God's love. Because we are family, by God burdens are divided and joys are multiplied.

With that picture of God's family in mind, I pray that beginning this new year is much more than just another calendar page. I really do have a sense of God's kairos among us. This past year has been such an exciting one: beginning a relationship with the Reading/Berks Literacy Council (we now have members tutoring here every day of the week!); strengthening our connections to 10th and Penn school; having our new Minister of Music in place—thanks be to God!; taking on ministry support in Southern Africa.

And what a start 2012 has already! Tomorrow we host the installation of our new mayor and city council members; in a few weeks our vestry will launch "Vision 20-20," planning to engage us all in charting God's direction for the coming years; we expect to expand our media outreach with podcasts and blogging (and other things I know nothing about but expect to learn!); and, of course, we await the birth of our new organ (gestation period: 12 months).

It's about time; it's about family. At this moment in time, I have no doubt that God has extraordinary plans for this family—in the center of our hurting city, so connected to this challenged world.

May "the Lord bless us and keep us," so that we can share God's gifts gladly and generously. "The Lord make his face shine on us," so that we can reflect his light and love with dazzling brightness. "The Lord look on us with favor and give us peace," so that in creative and life-giving ways you and I can be for others the face of Jesus. In him, may the new year ahead not only be happy, but truly, richly, deeply blessed. Can I hear an amen?!