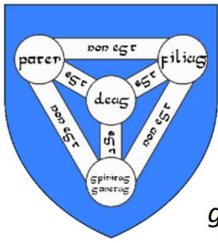


God's Presence in Your Life

Numbers 6:22 – 27



Aaron's Blessing

22The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, 23"Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, Thus you shall bless the people of Israel: you shall say to them, 24The Lord bless you and keep you; 25the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; 26the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.

One of the first things we humans do when we come into the world is seek eye contact with other people. According to the advice found in parenting guides, this marks a crucial developmental milestone for a newborn. The bond between parent and child must grow, and for this to happen, eye contact is essential. It constitutes the very first step toward a healthy relationship. If it is absent, the child may be deprived of a vital foundation for their development. Thus, the eye contact established at the very beginning of life holds significance for one's entire life. Even as adults, the gaze of others remains important. For us humans, it is of critical importance how—or in what light—others perceive us. Consequently, we go to great lengths to ensure we present a favorable appearance to those around us. And when we encounter disapproving looks from others, it wounds us deeply in our souls.

But what of our standing in the eyes of God? For many people, God is simply—and quite literally—absent. The notion that He might actually possess a face—and, furthermore, keep a watchful eye upon us—is, to them, utterly inconceivable. Yet, it is also possible for someone to believe firmly in God, while simultaneously feeling that He has hidden His face—that He has lost sight of, or simply forgotten, their private life and personal destiny. Much like the Psalmist, who prays in Psalm 44:25: "Why do You hide Your face and forget our misery and oppression?"

The situation was much the same for the people of Israel. As they wandered through the wilderness, they came to believe that God had forgotten them and had turned His face away. And very quickly, their disappointment morphed into an outright rejection of God. Consequently, they sought out other gods. They hoped that the Golden Calf would grant them the desires of their hearts. Naturally, all of this had dire consequences; it not only altered God's gaze upon His people but also utterly fractured the relationship between the Israelites and God. After numerous other errors and disappointments on the part of the Israelites—and after they had complained endlessly and repeatedly about God's perceived absence—God entrusted Moses with a special commission. Moses was to instruct Aaron to place the name of God tangibly upon the people. And these were the words:

THE LORD BLESS YOU AND KEEP YOU. THE LORD MAKE HIS FACE SHINE UPON YOU AND BE GRACIOUS TO YOU. THE LORD LIFT UP HIS COUNTENANCE UPON YOU AND GIVE YOU PEACE.

It seems to me that this benevolent gaze of God—right in the midst of the wilderness journey—is particularly revealing. Precisely in those places where people have lost sight of God, it is vital to place God's face upon them as something tangible. During their wandering in the wilderness, the Israelites repeatedly believed that God had abandoned them and was leading them along a meaningless path. And this feeling—of being forsaken by God—accompanies us still, to this very day. Even though God keeps us clearly within His sight, we humans cannot see God. And because this is so, we are missing something essential. We are much like a small child who cannot establish a healthy bond with their parents because they cannot find that eye contact. We have kept ourselves distant from God for so long—and so as a matter of course—that we not only refuse to recognize Him but are no longer even capable of recognizing Him. And if we cannot recognize God, something fundamental is missing from our lives. We cannot even recognize ourselves! We do not know why we are here, nor where we are supposed to be heading at all. If, on a pitch-black night, I were to suddenly switch off the light, it would be so dark around me that I could not even see my own hand right in front of me. I could not recognize myself—let alone anything else that might be in the room. And

what is it like to be blind from birth? In that case, one does not even know how to conceive of the world. That is, in truth, the case for all of us! In God's eyes, we are born blind. We cannot see ourselves as we truly are—and we are even less able to recognize God. We have turned our backs on the living God and act as if He did not exist. The sad reality is that, ultimately, we human beings end up believing in nothing other than the few kilograms of flesh that constitute our bodies. We must then drag this body—with varying degrees of success—through life, until, finally, it is all over. We hand the body over to a funeral home so that it may vanish beneath the earth or into an urn, ideally without causing much of a stir. This is what life without God looks like.

Nevertheless: Even though we cannot see God, His face remains ceaselessly turned toward us. God has focused His entire purpose and His entire love upon us—much like the parents of a newborn child. Even if it seems as though God is far removed from us, this is merely how it appears to our eyes. And even if we cannot comprehend God, that is far from meaning that God does not comprehend us. While we cannot see through God, He can certainly see through us. He knows of our many insecurities. He knows of our doubts. He knows our deepest worries. Yet not in such a way that He sits in His high heaven, laughing at how foolish and obtuse we are. No; this high, sublime God—who seems so distant from us—turns toward us with benevolence, despite our estrangement from Him. And He is very near to us. He is not indifferent to what happens to us, to our lives, or to our world. And for this reason, He causes His face to shine upon us. The face belongs to the very personhood of God. The Israelites were granted the assurance that God's face would be with them and among them. When God bestows His countenance upon us, that is not merely a memento—like a photograph of a long-departed relative. Rather, through His countenance, God is actively and personally present. He radiates His kindness and His love, thereby endowing our entire lives with meaning and purpose. He protects us, ensuring that not a single hair falls from our heads without His express permission. The Hebrew language encapsulates all of this in a single word: **Shalom**—Peace. This signifies a peace that encompasses not only our spiritual lives but also our physical well-being. Through God's face, it is revealed to us that God loves us. He desires our flourishing.

The astonishing truth is that God also desires for **us** to see **Him**. In the ancient people of Israel, I perceive a veritable chain of relationship—extending from God, to Moses, to Aaron, and finally to the people. This is the path by which God brings His face to us human beings. God desires for us to behold His face, and He creates pathways to make this possible. And perhaps this is precisely the mystery of this Sunday—Trinity Sunday. When we ask, "How does God look upon us?" the answer is not abstract. The Father turns His face toward us. He did so in the wilderness with Israel, and He does so likewise in the midst of your own ordinary life. And when Jesus comes to us, the relationship is no longer mediated through Moses and Aaron but established directly. In Jesus, we see the face of God incarnate. For through Jesus, God takes on a human face. And it is the Holy Spirit who carries this face of Jesus into our hearts, enabling us to truly receive Him. Father, Son, and Spirit. This is no theological riddle. It is God, looking upon us and loving us from three sides.

And we can pass this love on to the many people who do not know God. How can one put such love into words? If I return to the parents with their newborn child—what do such mothers and fathers actually say to their children? Things like: "Goochy, goochy, goo!"—simply gibberish. Yet the child understands every word! And God's blessing? Isn't that also something that cannot truly be put into words, yet we still understand that He loves us? Isn't God's blessing, above all else, written in the language of love? Oh, how deeply we human beings need this love! Especially at those times when people have lost eye contact with God. There is so much that is terrible in our world. There is also so much that is threatening in our own lives. And right then, God's blessing simply comes toward us and pours out His love! God's blessing—it simply must happen. And it does happen! God does not merely speak **to** us; He comes **to** us! He does this through Jesus. And Jesus is not merely a hero of the past whom we revere. He lives—and He loves you! Through the Holy Spirit, He is close to you. Thus, God Himself is close to you—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—and causes His face to shine upon you.

May God bless you and us! Amen.