



**From the Pulpit: April 28, 2024**

The Fifth Sunday of Easter

**The Reverend Dr. Katie Snipes Lancaster**

Numbers 6:22–26

***What’s Saving Your Life Right Now? IV The Practice of Pronouncing Blessings: Benediction***

*The Lord said to Moses “Tell Aaron and his sons, ‘This is how you are to bless the Israelites. Say to them:*

*The Lord bless you  
and keep you;  
the Lord make his face shine on  
you  
and be gracious to you;  
the Lord turn his face toward you  
and give you peace.”*

*“The blessing  
of the  
wilderness was  
held dear”*

what happens to a wilderness people. A community in isolation, uncertainty, and living off the grid. We know enough from the book of Exodus to step into the book of Numbers. They are in the wilderness of

their own choosing. But it is only by their own choosing in so far as they were choosing to escape unlivable circumstances. People only go into the desert if they have to. And they had to. The groan of injustice was too heavy to bear any longer. With no real chance of escape, and no chance of survival, there they are in the wilderness. And today’s text comes 26 months into the wilder-

**A**s we consider the practice of blessing, I would like to tell you three stories today. A first story about buried silver. A second about whispered words. A third about tears in a ballroom.

ness. Second century theologian Origen of Alexandria says that the book of Numbers is a book for those in need of guidance through the wilderness, for those who had once known God-domesticated to those who now know God-in-the-wild.

The first story is about buried silver and finding ancient treasures. Here’s how it begins. The book of Numbers has a reputation for being boring. If you’re trying to read the bible all the way through, like I thought I would in third grade, the book of Numbers might be your stumbling block, the biggest hurdle, a snag in your well formed plan. The book of Numbers is called the book of Numbers because of the census. It begins with a census of 600,000 men of fighting age. Tribe after tribe. Ancestry.com is great and all, but the ancient regiments of men divided into even more ancient clans with names unpronounceable to you might do you in. But. hear me out. In Hebrew the book of Numbers is not called the book of Numbers. It is called “In the Wilderness.” Same text, different name. And somehow it changes everything. Now I’m not watching for some tally or calculation, I’m watching for the wilderness. I’m watching to see

Whatever God-infused thing happened in the wild, whatever blessing unfolded, it was held dear. Enter two pieces of buried silver.

In 1979, archaeologist Gabriel Barkay was excavating the funeral site of Ketef Hinnom in West Jerusalem, and came across a small piece of silver amid the debris pottery and other artifacts. He describes them as about the size of a filter on a cigarette, it being the tobacco heyday of the 1970s and all. Two pieces of silver about the size of a pencil eraser, the size of a tic tac, the size of a ladybug. It wasn’t solid silver, but instead, a silver scroll. Unroll it and in tiny script are the words of the blessing I read to you today. It is from 600 BCE.

Think of the artistry. Who pounded the silver? Who chose which blessing to include? Who took a small carving tool to write the text? Who rolled the silver into a small amulet? Who wore the amulet with its holy blessing?

The blessing of the wilderness was held dear, embraced, honored, retained, remembered, condensed, and passed on. The blessing of the wilderness, or rather the blessing in the wilderness, was transmitted, entrusted, bestowed generation to generation, so that we might hear it. “May YHWH bless you and keep you.”

Two small pieces of silver. Evidence that 26 centuries ago, these words were a gift and guide.<sup>1</sup>

This blessing in the wilderness is shared in the context of story. Moses, a big brother to the priest Aaron, has been organizing the people in the wilderness: Earning his MBA at Mt. Sinai Desert University, he begins to take census, arrange the young men into division, manage quarantines when diseases crop up for the health and safety of the desert wanderers. He sets up a system of restitution for wrongdoing. He designs a way to manage marital disputes. He establishes Mt. Sinai Desert Seminary to ordain priests. He basically establishes “order, leadership, assignment of duties, calculator of available resources, organization of community, and future planning” for the 600,000 men and their families, something like two million people.

The book of Numbers outlines this establishment of order and in the midst of it all Moses tells his brother, the priest Aaron, “Here is how you should teach your seminary students to bless people.” And so from Moses to Aaron to the priests, to the small silver necklaces in West Jerusalem 2,600 years ago to our ears today, we hear these words.

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<sup>1</sup>Jeremy D. Smoak, “Words Unseen: The power of hidden writing”. *Biblical Archeology Review*, January/February 2018.

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Story two. Whispered words.

Poet and theologian John O’Donohue loves blessings, but can’t quite choose a metaphor. Blessings are anchors he says. Blessings open doors. Blessings are a fresh well. Blessings embrace. Blessings call forth. A blessing is not a poem he

says. Poems are too oblique. “A blessing is direct address, driven by immediacy and care.”<sup>2</sup> There is a need. A need for the divine. A need for change. A need for safety. A need for comfort. A need for wholeness. A need to move toward or beyond.

Jan Richardson says that blessings are an act of profound help.

Barbara Brown Taylor says that blessings “see what is, and pronounce it good.”<sup>3</sup> She says you need no ordination, no training, no faith in God even, to pronounce a blessing. “see what is, and pronounce it good.” In Hebrew, the root b-r-k means both to kneel and to bless, implying something embodied. It brings you to your knees. “When I fall on my knees, with my face to the rising sun, O Lord, have mercy on me.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>O’Donohue, John. *To Bless the Space Between Us*. Crown Publishing Group, 2007

<sup>3</sup>Brown Taylor, Barbara. *An Altar in the World*. HarperOne, 2009.

<sup>4</sup>Anonymous. “Let Us Break Bread.” *The New Century Hymnal*, edited by John Smith, 123. New York: Hymn Press, 2000.

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You can bless your own child. “See what is and pronounce it good.” You can bless your friend. “See what is and pronounce it good.” You can bless the stranger sitting next to you. “See what is and pronounce it good.” You can bless your enemy. “See what is and pronounce it good.” You can bless people as well as objects. Barbara Brown Taylor says that in her tradition, Episcopalians bless everything: church furniture, embroidered kneeling cushions, silverware. Hebrew prayer books bless the act of waking up and the act of setting out. They bless the day you see a comet and the day you wear new clothes. Bless the pastries. Bless the fruit. Bless the vegetables. Bless the bread. Bless the cup. Bless the water. Bless the font. Bless the baby. Bless the parents. Dr. Taylor says, “matter matters to God.” She says, everything is “Drenched in divine possibility.”

When her father was dying—a brain tumor followed by a seizure—she and her mom called 911 and he was rushed off to the hospital only to wait. It was a long wait in the direction of eternal life, not hours, but days, and his family gathered. Wife, daughter, son, son-in-law. The room grew crowded. Some lamented the hospital, its formalities, its inhospitable nature. Some wept. They all took turns walking to his bedside and kissing his forehead and whispering “I love you.” They took turns exiting the room and returning. Waiting. The afternoon before her father died, Dr. Taylor’s husband stood up and walked to his bedside. He bent low and whispered something in his ear no one else could hear. After a pause her father whispered back. Tears fell down their cheeks. When he sat back down next to her, she asked “what did you say?” He said “I asked him for a blessing.” Everything is “drenched in divine possibility,” she says. “See what is good and pronounce it good.”

Story Three. About tears in a hotel ballroom.

Nadia Bolz Weber is decidedly snarky. A firecracker. With laser focus she seeks out others like her: cynical, sharp-tongued, how would you describe it? Joyful but in an edgy way?

She’d roll her eyes at a description like that and seek someone like-minded to whisper a sarcastic comment to.

She found just that person at a denominational meeting. Bishop Bruce. He was higher up the hierarchy from her so it felt a little off-limits, but that made making him laugh even better. Denominational meetings take place in dismal conditions: under the fluorescent lights of hotel ballrooms with plastic tables, and styrofoam cups full of m&ms instead of in cathedrals of stained glass and hardwood pews, and glass cups full of the blessing of God. There they were side by side, when the next item on the agenda came up: can the Lutheran church bless the work of genetic research. Maybe there are snarky things to say in the lead up to any monotonous, overly procedural denominational meeting,

*“When we offer blessing, we pray into one another’s lives”*

but eventually the work gets personal, and there is a sense that the holy enters in, the administrivia becomes “drenched with divine possibility.” Up to the microphone comes a woman, her head wrapped in a scarf, words tumbling out: stage four cancer, genetic research, for me it’s too late, but for someone else. The room is silenced. The Spirit of God echoes across the grand ballroom of a conference center: it becomes a cathedral. Afterward someone walks up to Bishop Bruce, hands him an envelope and says, “tell her we are praying for her.” Nadia’s snarky comments dissipate. She has witnessed something innately personal. Does she shrug it off? Does she say something? Finally she takes a deep breath and becomes brave: “Is your wife sick?” she asks. Yes he says. Stage four lung cancer. Spread to the liver. They grow silent. The meeting resumes. Next to her, he sobs. Quietly. Afterward she asks “would you like me to pray for you? to anoint you with oil?” “Thank you, yes” he says. She commits to pray for him every day. To bless the ordinary. To bless the unexpected. To bless, amid the unexpected and untimely death of his wife. To bless, amid the pain. Nine weeks later she attends the funeral, hardly knowing Bishop Bruce. But now, having offered blessing, anointing with oil, she has cared for him in a way no one else has thought to do.

## —Prayers of the People— The Reverend Christine V. Hides

When we offer blessing, we pray into one another's lives, into the hardest most stuck places, where impossibility meets pain, and the possibility of blessing becomes the only way through.

Rewriting Jesus' beatitudes Nadia Bolz Weber says,

*"Blessed are they for whom death is not an abstraction.*

*Blessed are they who have buried their loved ones, for whom tears could fill an ocean.*

*Blessed are they who have loved enough to know what loss feels like.*

*Blessed are the mothers of the miscarried.*

*Blessed are they who don't have the luxury of taking things for granted anymore."<sup>5</sup>*

I do not know why you are here. I do not know what blessing you seek. I do not know the texture of it. If your heart is breaking from your daughter's impossible words, or if your body is in pain this year worse than the last, or if you have lost someone in a way that you may never heal, only become accustomed to the ache. I do not know. Is your situation brutal? Is it grace-filled? Are you angry? Are you hungry for more? Have you forgiven them? Is there room for more? Are you shut down? Are you lost in a way that will not lead back to what was? I do not know why you are here. I do not know what blessing you seek.

Everything is "drenched in divine possibility," says Dr. Taylor. May the light of God's countenance shine upon us. Amen.

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<sup>5</sup>Bolz-Weber, Nadia. *Accidental Saints: Finding God in All the Wrong People*. New York: Convergent Books, 2015.

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Eternal God, it is you whose face shines upon us. With steadfast love you redeem us, renew us, and inspire our awe. It is you, Lord, who crafted heaven and earth from plasma and stardust. Then, you blessed it saying: It is good.

So let us bless and be blessed by your creation. Bless the holy lilacs which bloom like a hand extended as a benediction, bless the sandhill cranes and their squawking praise. Bless the off course whooping crane and those who delivered her safely from Wilmette to Wisconsin. Bless the cicadas readying themselves under the soil, the mystery of their seventeen year cycle, and the cacophony that will accompany them. Bless the new life that bursts forth all around us.

In the midst of all your beauty, we seek your blessing upon the hard and tender places too. Bless those who gather peacefully to lift their voices for change. Bless those who disagree. Let there be nuance and critical thinking. Let there be common ground. Bless those who scramble for their daily bread, who hustle for a night's shelter, who live in a state of high alert for the war and violence that surround them. Bless all who make decisions in public halls of power and privately, behind closed doors. Let your wisdom and the call to care for the least and the lost be their guide. Bless those who seek healing. Hear their petitions. Bless these imperfect bodies we inhabit, the lumps and bumps, the scrapes and scars, the clouds that hover over our hearts and minds. Walk with us through the limitations we did not prepare for, the diagnosis we did not expect, the depression that lingers. Grant comfort and peace, strength, and skilled caregivers. Bless our first days and bless the last.

Bless the fullness of our lives, our joys and our hurts. Grant comfort to many in our congregation who grieve. Grant us the hope of your steadfast love which accompanies us from this life to the next.

Bless the end of school year bustle, the milestones which mark the way: tournaments and tests, admissions and celebrations, let there be abiding friendship. Let any disappointments be outnumbered by joys.

Bless our homes to be places of love and nurture. Grant us times of rest and reconnection. Gather us around tables and into conversation. Strengthen the bonds that connect us that we might have a sense of our belonging.

Lord bless this church, your congregation. Make this sacred place to be one in which we rejoice with the ancient hymn:

"Bless the Lord, O My Soul." Your steadfast love is from everlasting to everlasting. And so we pray as your son, Jesus Christ teaches us: Our Father.... Amen.