

Holy Name
 St. Stephen's
 The Rev. Richard Schaper
 January 1, 2017
 Happy New Year!

This is probably the only morning that we will worship at St Stephen's this year with our New Year's Resolutions still intact and unbroken.... But coming to church to seek forgiveness is a good thing to do—whether we need it yet or not.

Although we focus on this day on what is NEW—a new year—I want to begin by telling you about something that is old, very old—in fact, very, very old.

One thing that seemed very old to me when I was growing up was my pastor. When I was a youngster, every worship service concluded with Pastor Zetzer raising his hands and pronouncing this benediction:

“The Lord bless you and keep you;
 The Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;
 The Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.”

These are same words that I, too, customarily use when offering a benediction. Probably you already recognize that these words of blessing come directly from today's first scripture lesson, from the book of Numbers in the Hebrew scriptures.

Now I want to tell you a story about these words that may imbue the benediction with even greater meaning....

When I took a sabbatical from parish ministry some years ago, I used it to take a course of study in the Holy Land, at Tantur Ecumenical Institute which lies just south of Jerusalem on the Bethlehem road. —In fact the Tantur campus lies right at the border between Israel and the West Bank, and it was not unusual to hear gunfire from the military checkpoint.

One of my professors was an archeologist who several years earlier had led an archeological dig in the caves that lie just outside the southern wall that surrounds the Holy City. There are numerous ancient tombs here that had been cut into the sandstone in the usual pattern that was still used at the time of Jesus: there was a slab on which the body would be placed and at the feet an excavated hole (or “ossuary”) into which, after the flesh had decomposed, the bones would be scraped to free the slab up for the next cadaver.

Virtually all of these tombs had been opened and robbed of any valuables centuries and centuries ago. Nevertheless, the aim of this grant-funded 10-week archeological dig was to thoroughly survey and document this set of tombs. At the very end of the 10th week of work—on what was to be the final day—these workers made an extraordinary discovery: they discovered an ossuary that had never been opened! This tomb had last been used, they believed, many centuries before

the common era. Yet this small pit of human remains had remained sealed and unopened since that time.

The immediate problem the workers faced was that it was the very last day of the scheduled dig and the archeologists all had flights home the following day. Not only that, it was Friday afternoon and the sun was preparing to set, which meant that not only would it be dark, but the Sabbath was soon upon them and all work must come to a halt.

The lead archeologist refused to abandon the work right at this climactic moment, so he stretched light-proof tarps over the work area and worked clandestinely by lamp light as they opened up to ossuary to see what it might hold.

Among the powdered bone they came up a tiny brittle object in the shape of a miniature soda straw segment that was as long as your thumb nail is wide. This object was very carefully packaged and brought to the Hebrew University laboratory. Upon closer examination it was determined that what they had found was a miniature scroll of metal foil. No one dared to attempt to unroll the brittle foil. Based upon carbon dating of the surrounding bone fragments, it was thought to date from approximately 600 BCE, the time immediately preceding the Babylonian Captivity.

Who could find a way to open the scroll without causing the extremely fragile and brittle metal foil to disintegrate into dust?

Approximately one year after a global Request For Proposal on how the scroll might salvaged and opened, the tiny scroll was delicately and painstakingly unrolled at a University in Germany. Opening up the tiny scroll revealed several lines of a Hebrew script that was so ancient that no one could decipher it. Detailed photographs of the script were published around the world on the chance that someone might be able to unlock its meaning. One professor of ancient history at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem became quite obsessed with this task and worked on it, day and night, for month after month.

One day when the staff of the university was enjoying a picnic, one of the secretaries asked the professor what it was that he was working on, so he told her about this tiny ancient scroll with the writing that no one could read. "All I have been able to determine," he told her, "is that there are three lines, and each line begins with same word."

"Oh," she told him, "That is the sixth chapter of the book of Numbers."

He was stunned. "How do you know that?" he asked her.

"I know that because when I was a child growing up in Eastern Europe, we children were not permitted to leave the house until we had presented ourselves to our grandfather, who would place his hand on our heads and say:

"The Lord bless you and keep you;

The Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;

The Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.”

This tiny scroll-- which now you may see in a glass case in the Hebrew University-- constitutes the most ancient record that we have of any of the words of Holy Scripture. There are no other manuscripts that reach back near this far as does this silver scroll.

Undoubtedly some ancient Israelite before Israelites were carried off by King Nebaccanezar to Babylon wore these words of blessing as an amulet around his or her neck, much the way that you would wear a cross. The formula of scroll's blessing is believed to reflect the form of benediction that was being used at that time in King Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem, and was apparently adopted by devout Jews for domestic blessings as well.

Numbers 6:22-27

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, Thus you shall bless the Israelites: You shall say to them,

The LORD bless you and keep you;
the LORD make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;
the LORD lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.

So they shall put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them.

“So shall they put my name on” them, says the Lord. To pronounce this blessing was to put the very name of God upon a person—to impart some inner essence of the Divine upon the person being blessed. Part of God's being was now being placed upon them and would go with them wherever they went. No wonder the pious Jewish grandfather would wish to so protect, arm and bless his vulnerable grandchildren before they might leave the relative safety of their home to enter the risky world around them.

When we are baptized, then also God's name is placed upon us. The water is poured over us with the Trinitarian formula: “In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit”. Then, dipping his finger in the chrism, the priest makes the sign of the cross on the forehead: “And you are sealed with the Holy Spirit forever.”

But there are myriad other ways also in which we also put God's name-- God's essence-- on other people. This is so because God's name is Love. And so whenever we place love upon someone, whenever we show a sign of kindness, we are placing God's name upon them and making God “incarnate.” With this expression of compassion, we are enfleshing the Holy Name, as supremely God did in and through Jesus, whose birth we have been celebrating.

St. John put it so succinctly when he said, “God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.” (I John 4: 16)

When, at the conclusion of worship, the presider lifts up his hands and pronounces especially these words of benediction, we place ourselves at the near end of an unbroken river of faithful people that goes back all the way through the centuries even beyond the time of Christ to those who worshipped God in the first Temple in Jerusalem.

I don't know about you, but I for one find great comfort in knowing that I am not alone in my faith. I take great comfort in recognizing that the way of prayer into which I have been introduced is not something that was devised yesterday and made up to see if it fits. Rather, these are prayers that God's people have successfully used to express their communion with the Transcendent down through countless ages and ages and we are a part of this same community.

This continuity with the ancient past is true of some other forms of our worship, as it is true of Jewish and Muslim worship—but it is supremely true of these words of benediction that on this first day of January constitute our first reading from scripture.

To place God's name upon one another is the work of Christmas.

In the words of San Francisco African-American poet and civil right leader Howard Thurman,

When the song of the angels is stilled,
when the star in the sky is gone,
when the kings and princes are home,
when the shepherds are back with their flocks,
the work of Christmas begins:
to find the lost,
to heal the broken,
to feed the hungry,
to release the prisoner,
to rebuild the nations,
to bring peace among the people,
to make music in the heart.

This is how we place the Holy Name of God on one another.