

Aaron's Blessing

Sitting in church, Kathy gives the homilist the full impact of her gaze. She looks directly at him, face alert, smiling warmly, or — at the very least — with a thoughtful, responsive facial expression. You might think Kathy is a friend of the homilist, or enthralled by his message. In fact she acts the same way with every homilist and speaker, of whatever age, gender, spirituality, culture, and regardless of their talent. Being experienced in public speaking herself, she understands how difficult it is to stand before a group, the courage it takes to present a point of view, the energy it takes to prepare and deliver a talk. So she uses her facial expression to communicate support, encouragement, solidarity, compassion. She 'lifts up her face' as an everyday gift of love.

Who else do we know who 'lifts up their face'? How about God! At least that's how Scripture describes the divine love. Recall how the Psalms describe God's face as 'turning' and 'shining.' Recall how Moses' face shone after encountering the Lord's glory with unprecedented directness. Then there is that beautiful passage in the Book of Numbers known as 'Aaron's Blessing':

May the Lord bless you and keep you!

May the Lord shine his face upon you and favor you!

May the Lord lift up his face

toward you and grant you shalom! (Num. 6:24-26)

Lovely luminous imagery fills this blessing, along with poetic rhythm and a sense of comfort. The Lord draws near, with face lifted towards us in a gaze of pleasure and affection. Indeed, the text could read: 'May the Lord smile on you.' Note the pairs of divine actions: bless and keep, shine and favor, lift up and grant peace? Why might these actions be paired as they are? Ancient Jewish storytelling traditions (midrash) suggest that one action is consequential to the other. Thus if you receive a blessing (gift), then it needs to be kept (protected) or it may be lost or stolen from us. Then again, the three verses are sometimes interpreted as having an ascending order: a blessing of material goods (food, shelter), followed by a blessing of spiritual qualities, and finally the promise of shalom as the combination of the first two, i.e., peace in its fullest sense. The midrash highlights this climax through a series of statements about the greatness of peace and its fittingness as the 'seal' to the blessings. E.g., 'the blessings are of no avail unless peace goes with them... Great is peace, for it was given to the meek; as it says, But the humble shall inherit the land, and delight themselves in the abundance of peace (Ps. 37: 11). Great is peace, for it outweighs everything.' (Num. R. 11: 7)

In this last statement, can we hear echoes of the Beatitudes ('Blessed are the meek, for they

will inherit the earth')? We might ponder how Jesus, a faithful Jew, was influenced by these verses of blessing in the Hebrew Scriptures.

Aaron's Blessing is sometimes described as 'the Lord's Prayer of the Old Testament.' It is a prayer that lends itself beautifully to home spirituality practices. Here are three examples: First, if saying 'grace' at extended family gatherings is a source of tension because of the range of faith expressions, try praying Aaron's Blessing. While deeply rooted in our Scriptures it is unlikely to offend! Secondly, farewell visitors at the door, or relatives at the airport, by incorporating Aaron's Blessing into your goodbye hugs and words of endearment. Finally, bless young children before they sleep by laying hands upon them and praying Aaron's Blessing. Remind them that God is smiling at them, and check your own face: the medium is the message!

