

Can that story be true? That the blessing we just heard came to Moses directly from God? You know, I think many of us at one time or another have read Bible stories, especially those in the Old Testament, and asked ourselves that question – can that be true? Because so many of the stories are mysterious and puzzling, and test the limits of our faith. Did Abraham really take his son to the altar to be sacrificed? Was Jonah really swallowed by a whale for three days? Did Noah really build an ark capable of carrying two of every animal on the earth? Did God, like in today's reading, regularly talk to Moses? Obviously none of us were eyewitness to these events, and so we have to learn how to live into the mystery surrounding our beautiful faith. And questions like those I just mentioned are really unwelcomed because they suggest a limit to our capacity to know and to understand.

But one way to answer those questions is through science. Specifically, the sciences of anthropology and archaeology. After all, God gave us a brain and he expects us to use it. Now, anthropology is the systematic study of humanity, with the goal of understanding our origins and our distinctiveness as a species. And archaeology is the study of past human civilizations. All that may sound somewhat complicated, but still, what does make our species distinctive, apart from all other living creatures? Well, many things. Things like the fact that we wear clothing, our speech, our writing capabilities, our critical reasoning, even things like the ability to make fire and use tools. And, of course, there's humankind's belief in a power greater than itself, God. That's why so many archaeologists and anthropologists spend time in and around the Holy Land and the cradle of civilization. Because that's where the belief in our God, the One God, all started many thousand years ago. And one of the greatest archaeological finds of all time occurred in 1995 at an excavation site on a hill overlooking the Hinnon Valley in Israel, just southwest of Jerusalem. Scientists found several burial chambers dating back to the seventh century before Christ. Think about it – we're talking 2,700 years ago. And one of the larger tombs was found almost intact with over one thousand objects in it. Things like small pottery vessels, artifacts of iron and bronze including arrowheads, needles and pins; ivory objects; glass bottles; and jewelry, including earrings of gold and silver. But the most important of all the objects found in this tomb was a small silver amulet, designed in the shape of a scroll, measuring only one and a half inches in length, and one half inch in diameter. The amulet was obviously meant to be worn around the neck of an individual as a very personal ornament. Even thousands of years ago, individuals cared about how

they were clothed. Obviously trying to present themselves in an attractive manner. In fact, in the Bible, there are many references to the things people wore on their bodies. Things like pendants and bracelets and scarves and headdresses and sashes and nose rings and festive robes and cloaks and handbags and veils and turbans. But, I'm getting ahead of myself. So let's go back to my earlier comment, about the most important thing that makes us distinctive as a species - our belief in God.

In today's scripture we hear one of the most famous blessings of the Bible. A blessing God gave directly to Moses for the people of Israel in the year 1400 BC. That's 3,400 years ago! "May the Lord bless you and keep you; may the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; may the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace." Now before I go any further, I think it's important for us to understand what a blessing is, because blessings were deeply rooted in Jewish culture. A blessing is the act of declaring God's favor and goodness upon others. Let me say that again – a blessing is the act of declaring God's favor and goodness upon others. And, the blessing is not just the desire for the good effect the words convey, but it also has the power to bring them to pass. Now blessings started with God blessing Abraham when Abraham agreed to leave his country and worship the One God in the Promised Land. There's also the story of Isaac and his sons Jacob and Esau. And how Jacob deceived Isaac and stole Esau's blessing, and how taking that blessing from his brother caused a series of near disastrous consequences. There are many more examples of blessings in the Bible, and they all provide a glimpse into the near magical power of a blessing. So let's look more closely at today's blessing, which, as I indicated, is one of the most quoted and best loved passages of the Bible, and consider its implication on our lives.

First, look at how this blessing begins. Verse 24 immediately starts with, "May the Lord bless you." You! Meaning you ____, and you ____, and you ____, and you ____, and (pointing) you and you and you and you. Just think of how magnificently special that is – God's favor and goodness is upon you. And just consider all your "blessings" for a moment. Blessings like your family and loved ones, the measure of health you have, the work and hobbies that occupy you, your gifts and talents, music to appreciate, a home to enjoy, this church – John Wesley, friends... and so much more. And as wonderful as all that is, God's ultimate favor and goodness is found in him giving us his son, Jesus Christ. Because through Jesus, we are offered God's love, and peace, and pardon, and eternal life... what a gift – that we are promised something better, greater - heaven, at the end of our mortal journey. But I want to make a critical point here. It's also important to remember that God's blessings not only consist of all of life's

richness, but at times, also of some of life's adversities. Let's go back to Jacob for a moment. Because of some of Jacob's ill-advised choices he had to wrestle one night with God. And before God leaves, Jacob says to God, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." And God gave Jacob a limp. Now, can a limp, a deformity, be a blessing? Well, for Jacob, it was – because it changed his walk with God. it changed his walk with people, and it helped to make him a God-following man.¹ You see, as a believer, when adversity comes, God can use it to conform us, so that we might trust more in God's will for our lives and bring us closer to God. We may not like to hear that, but if we think back on times of trials in our lives, we know that statement to be true. May the Lord bless you.

Verse 24 continues, "May the Lord keep you." Again, think about what this means – God keeping you. It means we are watched and cared for every moment of the day. I think Psalm 121 best describes this assurance of God's help, guidance, support. *I lift up my eyes to the hills, where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth. He will not let your foot be moved... The Lord is your keeper... The Lord will keep you from all evil, he will keep your life. The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in, from this time on and for evermore."* May the Lord keep you.

In verse 25 and 26 we read, "May the Lord make his face shine upon you... may the Lord lift his countenance upon you." Think of a time when you looked at the face of someone you love and they looked back at you with intensity, with bright eyes, a shining smile, and a countenance that said, 'I love you immensely.' Well, that's like God making his face shine on you. You see, God does not frown or look angrily at us. God looks on us with splendor and goodness and with his loving favor. May the Lord make his face shine upon you.

Verse 25 also says, "May God be gracious to you." Gracious – forgiving, patient, merciful and full of grace. Grace, which is God's unmerited favor and love toward us. We who do not deserve anything at all. And here's the thing. When we consider that we don't deserve anything, yet God has given us everything, how can it be that we are not more gracious toward others? So you see, this blessing actually moves us to be a blessing to others. May God be gracious to you.

¹ "Bless You, Receiving and Sharing the Blessings of the Lord", Warren Wiersbe

And in verse 26 we hear, "May God give you peace." Peace. This is the crowning blessing that we and all humankind yearn for. His peace flooding our hearts and minds and lives.² And the Hebrew word for peace, "Shalom," has a broad, rich meaning. It includes good health, security, inner harmony, wellness, and long life. May God give you peace.

So, did God really give Moses this wonderful blessing? I think so. Why? Well, let me go back to that amulet found at the archaeological site in Israel. I didn't mention it at first, but that amulet was, in fact, a scroll of rolled paper-thin silver, carefully and skillfully etched with this blessing. "The Lord bless you and keep you"... and I wonder if the anonymous silversmith who made the amulet realized that he was recording the very words that Almighty God gave to Moses? "The Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you"... did he know that his work would survive thousands and thousands of years until one day be discovered by modern day archaeologists? "The Lord lift up his countenance upon you"... did this artisan know that what he inscribed on a scrap of silver would, in the 21st century become the oldest known record of any written Scripture text? And give you peace... and did he know that we here today, in the John Wesley United Methodist Church would still want that very same blessing for ourselves, declaring God's promise of safekeeping and grace and peace in our lives?³

Yes indeed, all this is mystifying and puzzling stuff, and we will never find all the answers we want this side of heaven. The mystery of our faith is beyond our ability to grasp it fully. But I'm confident that in due time, in God's heavenly kingdom, we will know everything we need to know. In the meanwhile, like an amulet around our neck, let us wear his blessing upon our hearts, until that day we see God face to face. Amen.

² Words of Life, Francis Dixon

³ Bless the Blessor, Men's Devotional Bible