



Roanoke, Virginia
All Saints Sunday
November 3, 2019

“Benediction: The Open Moment”

Luke 2:14, I Corinthians 15:58, Jude 24-25, Revelation 22:21

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In a few minutes, when the ministers lead a *Prayer for the Saints*, a bell will be rung throughout the prayer. Each time: Just a note, just a moment: “[All is well.](#)”

The notes are sounded throughout the prayer. The notes are sounded throughout life. We hear something, see something, sense something, and we know for a moment—a moment that on the one hand is too short, and on the other hand is a note of eternity. Right in the thick of things, sometimes in the business of the planned and sometimes in the chaos of the unexpected, sometimes even in the midst of loss or grief, we have a moment of calm, of acceptance and peace because we hear it somehow: “[All will be well.](#)”

A young father, frankly scared to be a father, is given the baby to hold for the first time. A fist curls reflexively around the father’s little finger, and for that moment he hears it. “[It will be OK.](#)” And then he goes home with the baby and is scared again. A daughter holds the hand of her dying mother whose fist reflexively curls around her finger, and though she knows that it won’t be long, she hears it in that moment, “[All will be well.](#)”

The Roman Catholics might be onto something with their seven sacraments. Don’t worry, I’m a Presbyterian Protestant who embraces our tradition of celebrating only two sacraments: baptism and the Lord’s Supper. In a church history or theology class, I could tell you why. I could tell you how the Reformers revolted against the spiritual and psychological control the priest could have on a poor soul who thinks that without being baptized a baby is hell-bound, or that without the priests prescribing the way of penance and then declaring absolution, one has to live forever with the stain of a sin. I could tell you how the Reformers said that the sacraments should be instituted by Jesus in Scripture, and that both baptism and the Lord’s Supper proclaim all we need to know about grace and our salvation.



So, I'm good with our two sacraments. But I do appreciate the beauty of a sacramental system that finds ways to sound the notes of grace again and again throughout the life of the church. Once we're past the control issues and that medieval idea that priests have magical power to grant Passports into heaven, we can begin to appreciate their baked-in reminders that in any given moment in the middle of life, a note of eternity might be heard, and we somehow hear that all will be well.

- **Baptism:** before this child lives a life that will bring joys and sorrows, the bell is rung: “**This is a child of God. All will be well.**”
- **Eucharist.** On the night Christ was betrayed, Jesus says, “**My body, broken through my love—God’s love—of you.**” These words are said one last time during Last Rites when a final communion is served. The bell is rung: “**God’s love will not let you go.**”
- **Confirmation:** A teen, having studied the creeds of the ages, professes faith and accepts responsibility of joining the cloud of witnesses. A bell is rung: “**God has a place for you.**”
- **Reconciliation:** In a confessional booth, a shame is no longer carried alone, and then are heard words of guidance and then of grace. A bell is rung: “**By the grace of God, you are forgiven.**”
- **Anointing with Oil:** The sick—even the dying—are anointed with oil, and the bell rings: “**There is healing that ultimately comes to us all.**”
- **Marriage:** Vows are exchanged with the bell note’s reminder that God has made and keeps an eternal vow to us.
- **Ordination:** As priests, ministers, deacons, or elders kneel for the laying on of hands, they do so with some anxiety about what this will mean, and some who are watching are wondering what God wants them to do in life. And the bell is rung: “**God’s grace is sufficient.**”

Again, whether there are seven or there are two, the point is that we need to let the sacraments train us. The moments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper where God’s grace is proclaimed train us to listen and look for those moments in our lives. At any moment, even in the midst of worry, of sickness, of grief, we might be reminded that we are not alone, and all will be well.

Those moments are “benediction moments” I think. “Benediction” comes from two Latin root words; *bene* meaning “well” and *diction* meaning to speak. To utter a benediction then is to utter the affirmation, “**All is well.**” When the bell is truly rung, it is not the voice of forced piety—pretend to be strong and calm when you are not—or “placebo words,” to divert us. Heard rightly, a benediction is a moment when somehow, we hear the assurance of God.

- When washing dishes and seeing leaves drift by the window and the moment for no real reason at all is a moment of calming grace.
- When the voice on the phone says the words you wanted to hear far more than you were willing to admit. “**I’m sorry.**” Or, “**I’m past it. I forgive you.**”



Here is another way that Presbyterians are supposed to be reminded to listen for God's healing and calming word of Peace. We are a people of the Book. We read our Bible—the old Bibles in the pews, and someday soon the new Bibles that will replace them—and we find, from beginning to end, benedictions.

“God saw all that he had made, and it was good” is perhaps the first “All is well” note of scripture. And that bell rings several times in the first chapter of the Bible. “And it was good,” and “it was good,” “and it was good.”

You continue to find benedictions over and over again in the Old Testament. And you find them in the New Testament, as my scripture selections show. I chose my passages almost arbitrarily because there are so many benedictions in the Bible.

The first passage I chose comes from Luke's Gospel at the moment of the announcement of Christ's birth. Shepherds are out in the field keeping watch over their flock by night, doing their daily work. And suddenly they hear an anthem of heaven. “Unto you a child is born,” they say. This day. This bell's note reverberates because the angels keep singing. “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth *peace among all people with whom he is pleased.*”

No doubt the shepherds, after making their pilgrimage to see this child who is born and make known to those who are there all they had seen and heard, to return to their everyday lives of herding, shearing, treating and even butchering sheep; all the while managing their own aging and aching bodies. They'll be sick again. They'll be hurt again. And we can be sure they'll make mistakes they will regret again. They will die one day. But they heard the note sounded: “Peace! All will be well.”

Next, I paired a charge with a benediction. Both the charge and benediction are given for people living in a chaotic world of Roman rule. The charge comes from I Corinthians and is given to a community of believers in conflict. Paul urges the Christians to seek reconciliation, to stay strong, to not lose their way. “Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.”

But a charge needs a benediction. Paul offers benedictions in I Corinthians, and maybe I should have used one of them, but I jumped to the brief letter of Jude. Only one chapter, the letter doesn't say a lot in terms of words but it says a great deal in saying this for busy lives dealing with challenges: “Now to the one who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.”

And then the last passage I chose is the last verse of Revelation, the last verse of the entire Bible, and a perfect verse to be read on All Saints Sunday when we give thanks for lives that on this earth came to an end. At life's end, there are many reasons to celebrate and rejoice. But there are also with every life, regrets, unfulfilled potential, wonderful things that could have taken place without this betrayal or that illness or that harm done. The bell is rung. “By God's grace, all is forgiven. All is now complete. All is well.”

We also know, when we look over the names in the bulletin, that some lives are lived long and some are cut short. It reminds us that worldwide, we are not all given the same opportunity in life. There are those born in grinding poverty, or in a war zone, or in families that do not know



how to love. But when the bell is rung, maybe we can hear that note of eternity, that in the end the verse at the Bible's end is true for everyone: "The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints."

We are those saints, you know. That's how we Presbyterians see it anyway. None of us can expect to have a home with God based on merit. God's grace embraces, forgives and completes the life of each of us. In the end, all is well, because God's grace makes it so.

Naked we come into the world and naked we leave it. At the end we have nothing but God's grace. But all will be well, because in the end, God's grace is sufficient.

"The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints."

(The Word of the Lord! Thanks be to God!)

