

God Be With You

Numbers 6:22-27 & 1 Corinthians 1:1-9

September 1, 2024

First Presbyterian, Luling

With Rachel ice skating in College Station, I've been spending a lot of time there and have glimpsed the mountain of traditions at Texas A&M. I don't pretend to understand them, and this is neither an endorsement nor a condemnation of A&M nor Aggies. The tradition that I have come across most often is the prolific use of "Howdy" as a greeting. Now I certainly know other people who are not Aggies who use "Howdy" regularly. My dad is one of them. But people all over College Station use it. Cashiers at gas stations, ice skating instructors use it to open emails, servers at restaurants. To the extent that I'd ever thought about it, "Howdy" was just another way to say hello, one with a distinct regional flair.

"Howdy," it turns out, comes from a phrase used in 16th century England, "How do ye?" as a way to inquire about someone's health. Similar to "How do you do?" which also bridges the space between a greeting and an inquiry about how someone is actually doing. We use the phrase "How are you?" in exactly the same way. Anyway, "How do ye?" gradually got smushed down into present-day "Howdy," and it lost any pretense at asking someone how they are. It's just a greeting.

Similarly, "Goodbye" is a contraction of a much older phrase. Middle Ages English had the phrase "God be with ye," to say to people at times of parting. It got smushed down just like Howdy, into "goodbye." Every time we telling someone goodbye then, we're really saying, "God be with you." It even works in other languages. In Spanish, Adios, is A (to) and Dios (God). French is similar, though my French is nonexistent--Adieu is "to God" also.

We're here today, after 7 years and 8 months together officially, but a history that dates back to Easter Sunday in 2011, which works out to be 13 and a half years ago. We've been through a lot. Funerals of dear, dear friends and family. A handful of baptisms. Countless Sundays gathered around this communion table, and countless more gathered around the tables in the Fellowship Hall. A pandemic that stretched us in ways we could not have imagined. Departures of other dear friends. Gardening advice, cat advice, fried okra advice. I believe this is the only pulpit I will ever stand in and tell a story about moonshine. That's probably a once in a career moment. There have been an abundance of ordinary times made holy.

<> And now it's time for us to tell each other goodbye. God be with you. God be with me. God be with us.

Choosing a Scripture passage for today was hard. The lectionary just wasn't working for me. This passage from Numbers is a blessing for the Nazirites, people who made special vows to follow the Law more strictly and stringently, at least for a time. We might think of them as somewhat analogous to monks and nuns, but only somewhat similar. These people took on vows and practices that would be difficult, more difficult than following the Law like the rest of the Israelite people were expected to do. As they embarked on this period of enhanced commitment, they received this blessing. Almost like a commencement address, a marking of their new status.

We are embarking on a new status, as we say goodbye, so hear this Nazirite blessing as a blessing to us: May the Lord bless you and keep you. May 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.

The other passage is not the beginning or end of a relationship, but the middle. Paul has a complicated relationship with the Corinthians. Sometimes they please him and other times they frustrate him to no end. He writes this letter to them in response to some inquiries they had made of him. He opens with a traditional statement of thanksgiving for them. Similar statements appear in almost all of his letters except Galatians, and he was really unhappy with them. This is what he says, and it's like a blessing of gratitude all wrapped up with words of encouragement for where they feel lacking. Receive it, too, as a blessing to you this morning.

"I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind—just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you—so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful."

Ever since I knew I would be leaving, I've thought about what I want to preach about today. What have I not told you that I should have? What words of encouragement do you need? What words of thanksgiving? What have I left out? What do I need to remind you of?

That was going to be a long sermon. Instead, I have to trust that over the years, the Holy Spirit has used me to share with you exactly what you need to

hear. Preaching is a mystery, the way it works. I say words, and you hear words, and they are not always the same words. Something happens in the middle. The Holy Spirit gets ahold of the words, and you hear a message you need to hear. I hear things come out of my mouth that I need to hear, and I didn't really plan to say them.

Where I have been lacking, I ask your forgiveness, and where I have said something that stirred you, I'm grateful that the Spirit has used me.

Along with the Nazirite blessing and the thanksgiving blessing from Paul, there's one more blessing I want to share with you, and after that I'll have just one more thing to say.

It took me a while to track this down. I've shared a version of it with the Session years ago, and it turns out what I shared was not the full thing and I attributed it to the wrong author. So here is the blessing, as originally given, by Benedictine Sister Ruth Marlene Fox, of North Dakota. She offered this prayer at a graduation breakfast for the senior class at Dickinson State University sometime in the 1980s, and she called it a Non-traditional Blessing. A blessing written for young people, and pertinent for all of us. Here it is.

May God bless you with discontent with easy answers, half-truths, superficial relationships, so that you will live from deep within your heart. May God bless you with anger at injustice, oppression, abuse, and exploitation of people, so that you will work for justice, equality, and peace. May God bless you with tears to shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation and war, so that you will reach out your hand to comfort them and to change their pain to joy. May God bless you with the foolishness to think you can make a difference in this world, so that you will do the things which others tell you cannot be done. If you have the courage to accept these blessings, then God will also bless you with: happiness—because you will know that you have made life better for others; inner peace—because you will have worked to secure an outer peace for others; laughter—because your heart will be light; faithful friends—because they will recognize your worth as a person. These blessings are yours—not for the asking, but for the giving—from One who wants to be your companion, our God, who lives and reigns, forever and ever. Amen.¹

The one more thing I have to say is goodbye. God be with you, dear friends. I love you, and I will not forget you. You have shaped me as a minister and as a person, and I am better for having known you. God will be with you, and God will

¹ <https://www.thesacredbraid.com/2016/07/22/a-non-traditional-blessing/>

be with me, and God will be with the church of Jesus Christ, now and forever. God be with you. Amen.