

Text: Numbers 6: 22-27
Title: Through the Lattice
Date: 07.24.11
Roger Allen Nelson

Spock on Star Trek is a Jew.

Well, actually Spock is a Vulcan, but Leonard Nimoy, who played Spock on Star Trek, grew up going to temple, learning Hebrew, and living into the faith and traditions of Judaism. So, while filming a scene where Spock meets another Vulcan there was a discussion about how Vulcans would greet one another and Leonard Nimoy remembered a symbol he saw growing up in his Boston synagogue.

Once a year, the men of the congregation who were priests, descendants of Aaron, would place their prayer shawls over their heads, raise their hands, and.... And, as Leonard Nimoy remembers it:

They were very loud, ecstatic, almost like at a revival meeting, and they were shouting this prayer in Hebrew, "May the Lord bless and keep you..." but I had no idea at the time what they're saying. My father said, "Don't look." And everybody's got their heads covered with their prayer shawls or their hands over their eyes. And I see these guys with their heads covered with their shawls but out from underneath they have their hands up. It was chilling, spooky and cool.

What Nimoy saw, peeking out from under his father's prayer shawl, was the priests stretching their arms forward, holding their hands together palms-down with their fingers joined as pairs, then separated from one another, so there are 5 spaces with their hands joined together, each hand forming the Hebrew letter *shin*, the first letter of *Shaddai* ~ Lord.

And, this priestly blessing is traced back to the instructions God gave Moses in order to bless the Israelites. The blessing is passed down from God to Moses, to Aaron, to Aaron's descendents, to the people, to Nimoy, to the Vulcans....

Nimoy turned that two handed blessing into the one handed Vulcan blessing, "Live long and prosper."

Truth be told there is a wonderful biblical image behind this symbol of blessing.

In Deuteronomy 26 there is a cry for a blessing:

I have obeyed the Lord my God; I have done everything you commanded. Look down from heaven, your holy dwelling place, and bless your people Israel and the land you have given us as you promised on oath to our ancestors, a land flowing with milk and honey.

God responds by blessing the people through the priests ~ as if God is behind them. So, the hand symbol forms a sort of lattice. A reference to the Song of Songs 2:9.

*My beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag.
Look, he stands behind our wall,
gazing through the windows,
peering through the lattice.*

And the glory of God shines through the spaces between the fingers.
And God peeks through the lattice like a lover longing for his love.
And the blessing and peace of God is passed on to his people.
And the name of God is put on his people.
And the covenant promises of God are confirmed.

It is a powerful beautiful image.

What Nimoy called, “chilly, spooky and cool.” The blessing of God is not in the priests, or in their hands, but it is in God who is “behind them.” The symbol is a physical, sacramental reminder that the blessing of God is given ~ signed and sealed. The symbol, the image, the physicality of it all gets at our deepest longing that
God would come close,
turn his face toward us,
bless us,
give us a lasting peace.

Don Wanderhope is the main character in the Peter DeVries novel, The Blood of the Lamb. Wanderhope, the product of a Dutch Calvinist home, drifts farther and farther from faith with a lifetime of brokenness and grief. When his twelve year old daughter is diagnosed with leukemia it is more than he can bear. He begins a long and painful lament, raging against God for such innocent suffering, until finally, at the edge of hopelessness, he asks God's permission simply to despair. But, there is a haunting unforgettable scene.

Wanderhope visits his daughter's hospital room as she is dying. She is lying there fully intubated and surrounded by countless monitors. A nurse, trying to be comforting says, “All her dreams are pleasant.” The nurse leaves....

He is alone with his daughter in the last moments of her life.

Empty.

He has nothing to left to give, nothing to offer.

He is momentarily empty of rage or cynicism or faith.

Then from somewhere beyond despair he moves to the side of the bed and whispers:

*The Lord bless thee and keep thee;
The Lord make his face shine upon thee;
The Lord lift up his countenance upon thee, and give thee peace.*

And, he touches her arms, the prints of the needles, caresses her head, bends down to kiss her cheek and whispers, "Oh, my Lamb."

His last words to her.

The deepest longing ~ that God would bless, and keep, and give.

The heart of every prayer ~ that we have nothing to offer, save our desire that God would come close and turn his face toward us in mercy and peace.

Dear friends, maybe that is all that we have: the hope, the wish, the prayer that God would bless, and keep, and give. Maybe that is what we're left with: A God, elusive and distant, peering through the lattice. It certainly can certainly feel like that. It doesn't take a daughter dying of leukemia for it to seem like God is somewhere behind us. There. Not here.

There is something about that image that makes sense...

Last week we wrestled with the notion that contentment was found in being "in Christ" and that the infrastructure of Christ holds us come what may....

What I heard from people throughout the week was that the image was biblical and vivid and true, but contentment and a sense of peace is most often tied to the surface, to the circumstances, to the existential moment not to the ontological reality. Our experience is often one where God is distant, yearning, peering through the lattice....

And yet, the Christian gospel is that God in Christ steps through the lattice. God in Christ is not removed or watching from a distance, but God so desired communion (*koinonia*) with us that God emptied self (*kenosis*), even unto death, that we might be united with him.

We are in Christ.

God in Christ confirmed, fulfilled and embodied his covenant promise.

The gospel is that in Christ God has turned his face toward us, and come among us, in order that he might bless, keep, and give his peace.

Mark and Lisa were doing what many young parents do when wondering how to name their baby. They talked about names they liked; they talked about family names; they talked about biblical names; they talked about what names mean and what names carry. They settled on Karis Shalom. *Karis* ~ Greek for grace *Shalom* ~ Hebrew for peace. A beautiful name.

They settled on Karis Shalom in part because of a cross stitch done by Lisa's grandmother of the priestly blessing, hanging on the wall in the baby's room.

This morning we baptize Karis Shalom, not into a wistful hope that God might someday be her savior if she gets it right, we baptize Karis Shalom as a sign and seal that the covenant promise of God is fulfilled in Christ. We baptize Karis Shalom, not as an expression of dedication or as a day of thanksgiving with the Dykstras at center stage, but as a sacramental affirmation that God's grace is poured out in Christ....

before we knew anything of it,
before we believed,
before we sought,
before we loved.

We share in the grace and peace of God ~ even as Christ is our priest, our peace.
Thanks be to God.

Finally this:

The symbol of priests with hands raised over a congregation is passed along to protestant pastors who raise their hands at the end of a service of worship to pronounce a word of benediction. It is not just verbal filler while you fold up the order of worship, put away the hymnal, and gather your belongings. It is the last word of the dialogue between God and his people gathered in worship. It is the last word from God.

After we've done the best we can to glorify God through music,
after we've laid our petitions at God's feet and given our offerings,
after we've listened to scripture ~ read and preached,
after we've spoken liturgy and day dreamed,
after we've seen people we enjoy and people that annoy,
after we've checked our watches and thought about what comes next....
even rigid and timid pastors raise their arms, extend their hands, and offer the blessing of God.

It is not hopeful prayer,
it is not a wistful longing,
it is not mere formality,
it is the last word of God spoken to his gathered people.

If the first word of the covenant is: "I am your God and you are my people."

The last word is the affirmation of that covenant ~ God will bless, keep, shine, and give peace.

So, go ahead and have roast preacher for lunch. Go ahead munch on the music: what was too hard to sing, what was too slow, what wasn't fun enough, what touched some part of you, what was too lyrically insubstantial. Go ahead and wish that certain people didn't annoy you quite so much. But, before you finish your reflections on any given worship service, remember the benediction. Remember the good word that sends you back out into the world.

Go with God's blessing.
Go knowing that God has come close to you in Christ.
Go in the confidence that you are held by God in Christ.
Go in a grace that will never let you go.
Go in peace.

May the Lord bless and keep you.

Amen.

*Note: I am indebted to Scott Hoezee for the spirit or take on the ending.
I read a sermon where he did something similar.*