How many of you sit through the credits at the end of a movie? Chances are you haven’t. As soon as the credits start rolling that’s usually when we gather our coats and our popcorn buckets and start making our way toward the aisle. And with good reason. Not only is it hard to read that small print, in most cases the credits don’t tell us anything we need to know. At first the stars of the movie are listed (as if we didn’t know who those were already) and then comes a long list of every person who had anything to do with the making of that movie: camera operators, stuntmen, the audio guys, the makeup artists, even the catering service. Is this information you really need or want to know? Not usually. That’s why most people head out of the theatre long before the credits are done rolling.

Perhaps one of the last things we do in worship feels a bit like the rolling of the credits after a movie. When I speak the Benediction and say, “The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you. The Lord look on you with favor and give you peace,” do you start positioning yourself for a quick exit as you mentally make note of the things you need to gather before you leave this place? If so, I hope that today’s sermon will slow you down because the Benediction is nothing like movie credits. Today, we’ll learn that the Benediction proclaims important promises from God: a promise of protection, a promise of grace, and a promise of peace.

It’s important to understand that the Benediction is not something the church made up. These words were given by God himself to Moses. God said: “Tell Aaron and his sons, ‘This is how you are to bless the Israelites. Say to them: 24 “The LORD bless you and keep you…’ 27 “So they will put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them” (Numbers 6:23, 24a, 27). It seems that Aaron was supposed to speak the Benediction at the end of worship, just like we do. In other words, God wanted this to be his last word to his people. With that in mind, isn’t the content of the Benediction surprising? Wouldn’t you expect God to send us on our way as a teacher might? “OK class, that was the bell. But before you get up and leave, write down your homework assignment: read pages 3-304 and do the worksheet!” Shouldn’t God’s last words to us also be about the work he wants us to do? Nor does God sound like a parent who barks out the door to his son who is going out with friends: “Behave yourself!” God doesn’t even sound like a coach who, in the pregame pep talk, will remind his players of all the things he taught them in the previous week and say something like: “It’s up to you guys now. If you hustle and play hard, we can win this game.” No. God doesn’t say anything like that. He doesn’t burden us but blesses us as we go on our way.

Look at the first blessing. If we translated the Benediction literally it would read: “The Lord will keep on blessing and protecting you.” The Israelites must have especially appreciated this promise. They had seen God do amazing things like part the Red Sea so they could escape slavery in Egypt. They had eaten bread that had miraculously fallen from heaven. They had followed God through the wilderness as he led them as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. That was great, but would God continue to be with them even after they entered the Promised Land and faced well-fortified cities and a warlike people? Yes! That was God’s enduring promise conveyed through the Benediction.

We’re in a similar situation when we get to the Benediction during our Sunday morning liturgy. Like the Israelites, we have had the opportunity to witness and experience some amazing things during the hour we have spent in God’s house. He has
spoken to us through his Word and Sacrament. He has reassured us of his love and forgiveness. He has strengthened us. He has listened to our prayers and praises. Now we’re ready to leave God’s house and enter “the real world” once again where we face temptation and heartache. But before we go, God promises continuing protection.

He refers to protecting us by using the word “keep you”. But is this promise of protection really kept? Did everyone who received the Benediction last week make it through these past seven days without getting sick or suffering any other hardship? If not, does this mean that the Benediction is nothing more than a pious wish?

If I were to say, “I keep a garden,” it means more than I have a garden. It means (or at least it should mean) that I care for a garden. There are some people in the Midwest who keep a garden by building a high fence around it so the deer can’t get at the tasty plants within. In the same way through the Blessing, God promises to build a fence around you to guard and protect you. We know of course that this doesn’t mean we’ll never scrape our knee or have to undergo radiation treatment some day. It does mean that the Lord will never leave our side. It means that he is always moderating the hurt that comes our way. As it says in Isaiah, “when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you.”

But “keeping” a garden doesn’t just mean shutting pests out, it also means getting rid of pests within like weeds. And just as a gardener will use a sharp spade to attack weeds, God sometimes uses sharp tools like hardships to dig below the surface and to get at our self-sufficiency and pride. He does this because he loves us and wants to weed out that which would choke our trust in Jesus.

But when God lets hardship into our lives it’s easy to think that he’s mad at us. That’s why it’s worth calling to mind the second part of the Blessing: “The Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you” (Numbers 6:25). This may have surprised Moses. After all, God had once told him that no one may see his face and live. It’s true. We sinners can never stand in the righteous light of God any more than you can stand in the middle of a raging campfire without getting seriously hurt. So why would we want God’s face to shine on us if we are sinners? How can God grin when he sees and knows all the rotten things we do in a week? Our loved ones certainly wouldn’t crack half a smile if they knew the sinful thoughts we entertain. Like what we really thought about cleaning the garage, or the supper served us yesterday.

But God does smile when he looks at us. He smiles because standing at our side he sees his Son Jesus who paid for our sins. It’s a little like how the restaurant owner of a five-star establishment would smile at the shabbily dressed man standing in his foyer because with him is a regular customer, a customer who makes it a habit of buying lunch for people living on the street. Of course most restaurant owners might only smile briefly at the shabbily dressed man and then spend the rest of the time talking to the regular customer. Not God. That truth is brought out in the third part of the Blessing: “The Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace” (Numbers 6:26). God doesn’t just tolerate us for Jesus’ sake. He really loves us and so he turns his face, his full attention to us. Picture a father lifting his toddler in the air and looking up at him with a broad smile. The child squeals with delight because she has Dad’s full attention.

You too have God’s full attention. You really do. What you don’t see from the English translation is that the word “you” throughout the Benediction is singular. Although Aaron the high priest was to speak this blessing to the whole Israelite nation, all
two million of them, God thought of them as individuals. This is why I work hard to make eye contact with everyone in church when I speak the Blessing. I want you to know that God is speaking directly to you. God wants to bless you, he wants to protect you, be gracious to you, and give you peace.

Peace? God wants you and me to be at peace? So why doesn’t he just give us each a million dollars and be done with it? Wouldn’t we be at peace then? That’s what the world thinks. But those who already have a million dollars are not so much at peace as they are on edge. What if the stock market crashes and they lose their million dollars? Or what if they get sick so they can’t enjoy the money? Money does not give you peace, nor does good health. Real peace comes from knowing that a loving God is in charge of your life. And that’s the promise God gives you each time you hear the Benediction. It’s a promise that brings calm to our life even if we’re in the midst of a storm. Just as Jesus could sleep soundly in a storm-tossed boat because he knew his loving heavenly Father was in control, so you and I can go to sleep tonight without any worries because our loving heavenly Father is in control of our lives too.

Let me make one other point about this peace which God promises us. We have such peace only because of the forgiveness Jesus won for us. As I said earlier, God really ought to send us home with a kick to our backside for all the times we have disobeyed him. Instead he sends us home with words of comfort because the cross of Christ has made peace between God and us. Since we’re at peace with God, we can also be at peace with one another. How can I bask in God’s love and in his smile but scowl at others around me…no matter what it is that they have done? The peace we experience here in church during our worship services is not only meant for us; it’s meant for all. And we who have experienced that peace will want to be the first to share it. Through your actions and attitudes you can carry God’s benediction outside these walls to your families, to your neighbors, to everyone.

Years ago, at a jail service at the Berkshire House of Correction, in Pittsfield, MA, I asked the inmates what the favorite part of the worship service was for them. I thought they would say, Oh, I like it when there is guitar music and you bring in someone to sing. Or maybe, they would say, “Oh, its gotta be the sermon.” But no these inmates unanimously said, they loved the benediction as the best part of the worship service. Amazing. In about fifteen minutes you will hear the Benediction again. Don’t let those just words roll off you like the credits on the screen at the end of a movie. These are words that have been spoken for 3500 years! But they’re not just ancient words; they are divine promises. So don’t look at the Benediction as merely a signal that church is almost over and that you should start gathering your things. God has something important to say to you as you leave his house. He gives you a promise of protection, grace, and peace. Believe those promises and leave his house with joy confident that his blessings will continue to follow you. Amen.