

Worth the wait: The rare blessing of a benediction

by [Joanna Harader](#) in the [August 3, 2016](#) issue



Photo by Pavle Marjanovic

As a child in church, I sat through the organ hymns and incomprehensible sermons, my scrawny backside squirming on the hard pew. I followed the order of worship in the bulletin, mentally checking off each item. My eyes were on the prize: the benediction. I loved the benediction because it meant that the service was over. I could get up, talk to my friends, and then go to Grandpa's house for lunch.

As a pastor, I still love the benediction. I won't lie: it's still partly because it signals the end of worship and an impending meal. But that's no longer the only reason. I realize now how unique these words of blessing are in a world where words swirl around us all the time—words spoken and sung and written, words from the mouths of friends and strangers and people on television, words on pages and billboards and screens.

Many of these words are aimed at getting us to do things. Advertisements want us to buy products; spouses want us to take out the trash. Other words give us information. Probably too much information—about the stock market and the latest police shooting and political instability in the Middle East and the recent celebrity wedding. Some of it we want to know; some of it we should know; some of it just takes up valuable psychic space.

There are hostile words out there, too—words that accuse and condemn and berate and scold. People claim power with these acidic words; they make money from them; they run for office with them. There are also lovely words that share stories

and open up our spirits and connect us with one another. And there are words that make us laugh.

We do not suffer from a lack of words. But it is rare, at least in my experience, to receive words of pure blessing. For most people, worship is the unique space where they can hear such words—words that do not ask them to do anything, offer new information, point out problems or distract from them. Worship is the sacred space of words that simply bless.

Even in worship, we have to wait for it. All through the service I speak words, words, and more words: ancient words from scripture and announcements about the upcoming week, words of prayer and of proclamation, scripted words and off-the-cuff ones. I speak words for the children, for the adults, and for God; some of the words I speak are probably just for myself.

Then, finally, we stand. And we receive—or we are lucky enough to give—a blessing. These final holy words are part prayer, asking God to be with each person. They are part reminder: God is, in fact, with us. They are part longing, speaking aloud the reality we want to be true. They are mere words, but they are necessary and powerful words.

Children know the power of a blessing. One Sunday during children's time, I simply offered a blessing to each child who gathered up at the front of the sanctuary. I placed my hand on each head, one at a time: "Lisa, know that God loves you now and always." There were about a dozen children that morning, and I had never seen them so focused and still. There was no fidgeting or whispering, just waiting and absorbing: "God loves you now and always."

We adults could take a lesson from the children about how to receive a blessing. Every once in awhile I try to help the adults get there. I say a few words before the benediction: "This blessing is a gift. Let these words settle into you. Carry these words with you—because you just might need these words in the midst of all the other words that will bombard you this week."

Sometimes there is a moment when we adults kind of get it. But mostly we aren't as comfortable as the children are with words that demand nothing of us and take nothing from us. We are not well practiced at simply basking in the love God wishes to pour out upon us through the words of benediction. No, we adults are not baskers.

And we adults know a blessing is not a magic spell. Saying “peace” does not make a teenager stop fighting with her parents. Saying “joy” does not erase the grief of a father’s death. The word *hope* does not automatically lift the spirits of a woman who has been unemployed for eight months. The benediction does not offer an easy fix to our problems. But it reminds us of the presence of God and our faith community, and this reminder helps. Having these good words to carry with us through the week—sometimes this helps, just a little.

At least once a week we have the opportunity to receive these sacred words that provide just a bit of shelter from all the other words swirling around us. It is a privilege to hear them and a deeper privilege to speak them over people we love: the Sunday school teacher who brought her class into worship late because they had been down at the river looking for rocks and bugs. The 80-year-old woman who dances at our church talent shows. The young couple whose baby will be born any day now. The teenager about to graduate and move away. The man just diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease. His wife.

The benediction signals that church is done and lunch is close at hand. It is also a deep gift: offered through the flawed and sacred worshiping body, given and received with holy gratitude.