

HEARTBEATS Staying Connected 8/23/2024
The Mizpah Benediction

Dear Friends in CHRIST,

Recently we changed the congregational response at the end of our worship services. Previously, after the pastor said, “Go in peace. Serve the LORD,” or “Go in peace. You are the Body of CHRIST,” or other similar encouragement, the congregational response was, “Thanks be to GOD.” Now, however, we’ve been using the response, “May the LORD keep watch between you and me when we are away from each other.”

There’s been some struggle to say the words correctly. “Thanks be to GOD” is so much easier. But being challenged a bit might be a good thing. Changes like this help not to take the parts of the worship order for granted. They push us to think about what we are saying about GOD, ourselves, and our community. “Go in peace. Serve the LORD” reminds us, first, that we go with the peace that comes from our relationship with GOD. And second, it urges us to serve others as GOD in JESUS served and serves us. “Go in peace. You are the Body of CHRIST” again sends us with the peace of GOD and encourages us to recognize that as followers of CHRIST, we represent HIM in all that we do.

But “May the LORD keep watch between you and me when we are away from each other” seems different. It’s longer and more difficult to say when you’re not used to it. This saying is known as the Mizpah Benediction. It is recorded in Genesis 31:49 when Jacob’s uncle and father-in-law Laban (yes, Jacob married his cousins) says goodbye to Jacob and his daughters. The place of blessing was marked with a cairn or pile of rocks as a “watchtower” or *mizpah* in Hebrew. This was Laban’s parting prayer to his daughters and grandchildren as they parted for what might be a long time or forever.

Today, Mizpah coins are made with the saying, but broken in half for each individual to take a part to remember the other. Sometimes it’s romantic partners when one or both leave for a time. Sometimes it is by very close friends when they are parting.

When we say it in worship, the benediction recognizes that our community separates for a time, but we do not forget each other and that we have concern for one another. It is not just the congregation speaking to the pastor. Rather it is all the people speaking to each other. The Mizpah Benediction recognizes that we go with GOD, the LORD, who keeps watch over each of us during the time we are apart. And, again, it expresses our concern for the goodwill of each other until we are once again gathered, whether it be for a few days, a week, or longer.

St. Andrew used to close its worship service with the Mizpah Benediction in times past. When it came up in our Wednesday online Bible study of Genesis, several commented on the congregation’s history with the prayer. Using this closing benediction in worship for a time again seemed like a good thing to do. It will not be forever. We will change again. But for now, we can express our love for each other and hope for reunion as we part, always praying that GOD will care for us and keep us well until we are together once again.

In CHRIST's love,
Pastor Jeffrey