

“How Beautiful On The Mountains Are The Feet”

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

February 21, 2021-PM Service

Reverend Peter Jonker

Isaiah 52:1-10

So I usually don't spend a lot of time thinking about feet, but verse 7 of our passage changed that this week,

“How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news.” This passage got me thinking about feet in general, and *beautiful* feet in particular.

You can do a lot these days to make your feet beautiful. You can go to a nail salon and have your feet pampered. Bathed in a foot spa, rubbed with lotion. De-calloused. You can have your cuticles cleaned up and your nails painted until your feet are smooth, sweet smelling, wondrous things. Beautiful feet. Many females enjoy pedicures. It is my understanding that more and more men are getting them. This sounds completely horrifying to me. I can't imagine paying for this. But this is me speaking, not the Lord. There are people I love who have a very different opinion on the matter.

Another group of people who spend a lot of time thinking about their feet are people who walk the Appalachian trail. The Appalachian trail is a 2,200 miles long trail that runs from Georgia to Maine. Every summer hundreds of people try to walk all or part of its length. The real aficionados try to walk the whole trail in one year. They're called thru hikers and they are fastidious about their feet. On the trails with all the miles and all the up and down, feet take a pounding, so if you go to the websites you will find all kinds of advice about how to keep your feet from becoming torn apart by the trail. Pay money for a really good pair of hiking boots, they say. Break those hiking boots in before you start, and break them in not just over flat ground; break them in on hills so you get exactly the right wear. Wear socks, but not just any socks, pay the big money for the really good socks. As you walk, as soon as you feel a warm spot on your foot, stop and put a pad on that spot to prevent blisters. Air out your feet at every opportunity. Put baby powder on your feet. Use corn starch. Use rubbing alcohol. Bring a pumice. Bring lotion. Lots of people give a variety of advice. Whatever the specific advice, experienced hikers agree: your feet are your most valuable and your most vulnerable asset while you are on the trail

As I researched all this foot care advice, I saw a good number of cautionary photographs of people who had not taken precautions, who had not taken care of their feet, and they were not pretty. Enormous blisters in a stunning array of reds and yellows and purples and blacks. People with feet that looked like hamburger. These were not nice pictures. These were not beautiful feet. Here's a question. When Isaiah talks about beautiful feet in verse 7, do the feet he has in mind look like nail salon feet, or do they look like those blistered feet of the Appalachian trail hiker? It's the latter. I am completely sure that the feet of the messenger looked more like the broken, blistered and bruised feet of an Appalachian trail hiker. How can I be so sure?

Well, here is the context: God's people are in captivity in Babylon. They are suffering under Babylonian oppression. Jerusalem, their city is a ruin and they are miserable slaves, and they have been slaves for years. But now something wonderful has happened. God has sent the Persian king as his servant, and Babylon has been conquered. God is changing things. A new wind is blowing. And Isaiah 52 announces this new beginning by describing a runner, a messenger going to Jerusalem to share the news with the remnant still living in the ruined city. The messenger makes the epic journey from Babylon to Jerusalem to proclaim God's salvation: "*Burst into songs of joy together you ruins of Jerusalem, for the Lord has comforted his people!*" The exiles will be returning soon.

It is a long way from Babylon to Jerusalem. According to all the modern maps, that's a journey of about 1600 miles. 1600 miles through deserts, over mountains, and along rocky terrain. It's not quite as long as the Appalachian trail, but it's close. And I promise you that this ancient through hiker did not have gore-tex boots and expensive hiking socks. He did not have foot powder and lotion and arch supports. The man who brought the message from the captives to Jerusalem probably came stumbling into Jerusalem on feet that were blistered, calloused, dirty and sore. His feet would have been an absolute mess.

And yet to the prophet, because of the good news that those feet brought, because of the announcement of God's salvation, because of the hope that they sang in the midst of the ruined walls of the city, those cracked, bleeding and twisted feet were the most beautiful feet he had ever seen. No foot spa, no pedicure has ever made feet look that good.

Clearly, the prophet obviously has a different aesthetic, a different standard of what counts for beautiful. For the prophet it's not the beauty of a fashion model, it's the

beauty of sacrifice. *Those feet are beautiful because they represent good news brought to hurting people at great personal cost.*

The Bible scholars here, and there are many of you, will know that this passage is quoted in the New Testament. Do you remember where? Romans. Paul quotes it in Romans 10:15. He quotes it in the middle of a big discussion about the need for both Jews and Gentiles to hear the good news about Jesus. God has sent his Son to the world. Salvation and liberation have been proclaimed. This is way bigger than the fall of Babylon! People all over the world need to know about this! And Paul knows that the only way the people will hear this good news is if someone goes and tells them. Someone needs to be a messenger. Someone needs to make the journey and tell the people what God has done in Christ. Just like back in Babylon, we need messengers says Paul, and *'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news.'*

Of course Paul sees himself as that messenger. Paul's whole vocation was to be the messenger, to travel to places that were still in the captivity of sin and tell them the good news about what God had done in Jerusalem through Jesus. I believe that Paul identified with this messenger described in Isaiah. As Paul and his companions tromped all over Asia minor and Macedonia and Greece, I imagine Paul thought of that tired messenger journeying from Babylon on his tired feet, coming with this message of something God had done that would absolutely change everything. In fact, I can imagine a scene somewhere in Asia Minor, in the middle of one of the mission trips, Paul and his companions have just done a 20-mile day and they're sitting around an evening fire. They're taking off their sandals and stretching out their feet, wiggling the toes. Everyone's feet are pointed toward the fire for warmth and so they're all right out there for everyone to see in all their calloused, blistered, stinky glory. And I can imagine Paul looking at these busted feet, and getting a big smile on his face and saying to Silas, "How lovely on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, eh boys!" And everyone laughing.

It wouldn't just be a joke of course. It would be true. It would be a faithful citation of the passage, because those dirty dusty feet were beautiful in exactly the same way that the feet of the Babylonian messenger, they were beautiful with the same aesthetic: They weren't fashion model feet, *their blisters and bruises represent good news brought to broken people at great personal cost.* If Isaiah saw Paul's missionary feet, he absolutely would have said, how beautiful.

When you think of the feet of the messenger and their broken beauty, and when you think of the feet of Paul and their broken beauty, it's hard not to think of one more pair of Biblical feet. Jesus' feet. They were travelling feet too. He was always on the move from one town to the next and his reason for moving was also good news right? He came to tell people that the Kingdom of God was among them! And he went all over Galilee and Judea and even into Samaria declaring this message. And he too was exhausted by all that journeying. "*Foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the son of man has no place to lay his head.*" Jesus' feet would have looked a lot like Paul's.

But the people did not take to his message. They didn't receive it. They did not find it beautiful. In fact, when Jesus the messenger came into Jerusalem with his tired feet and his message of grace and hope and life, they were so angry at him that they seized him and they put him on trial and eventually they took the messenger and they drove nails through his hands and through his calloused and weary feet. They splintered his feet and hung him up to die.

You all know what happened after that of course. Three days later, on Easter morning Jesus got back on his feet and he walked out of the tomb and back into the world. He walked out of the tomb Lord of life. But maybe you don't remember what happens next. You probably remember that a variety of people ran into Jesus: The women at the tomb, Mary Magdalene, Peter, John – they hear the good news of the resurrection in one way or another. But do you remember what Matthew says the women did when they ran into Jesus on that Easter morning? Matthew says, they fell down and took hold of his feet. They worshipped him by taking hold of his feet (Matthew 28:9)

How do you think Jesus feet looked at that point? After all his hard travelling? After being split in two with the spikes? Pretty awful I'm guessing. I'm guessing that Jesus' feet made the feet of Isaiah's messenger look like the feet of a prom queen. But to those two women at that moment, as the power of the good news washed over them, as they realized that their friend was alive, as the reality of what God had just done began to dawn on them, these broken feet of Jesus were the most beautiful feet they had ever seen. And so they took hold of them. And they were beautiful with the same kind of beauty that was in Paul's feet and the Babylonian messenger's feet. *The bruises and wounds on those feet represented good news brought to needy people at great cost.* We have a name for this sort of beauty, this aesthetic: it's the beauty of Grace and it is powerful.

One day, when our journey is done, and we will come face to face with the risen Jesus, we too will be powerfully confronted with this broken beauty, this gracious aesthetic, and we too will fall down to worship at his feet.

You can still find lots of people who specialize in this upside down beauty of grace. I wonder if you know that we have a foot clinic here at LaGrave? We didn't start this ministry; it was started by Suzan Cousins. Suzan used to teach nursing at Calvin and, in her work with Heartside neighbors, she realized that one of the greatest needs of our homeless and poor neighbors was the need for better foot care. So she recruited some volunteer nursing students and others who would come once a month to our multipurpose room to minister to the feet of these poor neighbors. Suzan and her team trim nails, care for wounds, bandage sores. They wash and heal, all of it in the name of Jesus. These patients do not have beautiful feet, but they are helped with patience and joy. The ministry has expanded over the years. Volunteer hair care people come in and do haircuts. Lunch is served by still other volunteers. It's a festive atmosphere and it's crazy popular. Every third Tuesday of the month, people are lined up down the block at the North door of the building. It's a great ministry. People are helped, and the name of Jesus is lifted up.

So let me say, how beautiful in the MPR are the feet of those Calvin students who clean those feet. And how beautiful in the MPR are the hands of those stylists who cut those hairs. And how beautiful in the kitchen are the hands of those who make meals and clean the dishes afterwards. And how beautiful are the feet and the hands and the arms and the mouths of those who proclaim the good news of salvation through word and deed.

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