

Beautiful Feet

A Sermon for Morning Worship
United Congregational Church, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
Sunday, December 8, 2019 ~ 2nd Sunday of Advent
Text: Isaiah 52:7-10

This text from Isaiah is one of my most favorite of the prophetic passages that are part of our Advent considerations in the Christian faith. Important to remember any time we read the Old Testament texts as Christians, especially at this time of year, is that as Christians we read these texts quite differently than do our Jewish brothers and sisters and they are the ones for whom this text was originally written, not us. That matters, especially in these days when anti-Semitism is on the rise around the world and, all too often, the words of their own religious texts are used as weapons against them as anti-Semites try to justify their hate using the Bible as cover. But, that is a sermon for another day.

What I want us to remember today as we read these prophetic texts from Isaiah this Advent season is that the prophets we so often quote during Advent were not writing about Jesus, even though we as Christians find Jesus in their words. No, they were writing about the coming of a real king, a temporal king, who would rescue them from whatever disaster had befallen them. In the case of Isaiah, and this text in particular, that would be their defeat at the hands of the Babylonians and the carting off to Babylon of all the leadership of the Israelites to better control them and their rebellious tendencies. The captives in Babylon

were looking for rescue from their plight by a powerful new king provided to them by God – a real life human being who would fix all the mistakes they had made. They were not anticipating a divine Savior and Isaiah's words, for them, were not about such a thing although they did believe that their deliverance from their situation would be through the direct intervention of God in their circumstances. They believed that their God was and is still today active in history, in their every day lives. That is where our faith in the God of Abraham directly connects with that of our brothers and sisters of the Jewish faith. After all, as we too often forget, Jesus was a Jew to the moment he died on the cross. Christianity as a religion took shape because of what happened after Jesus died and rose once more.

But, as Isaiah was writing the wonderful words we read just a little while ago, the people he was writing for were in desperate need of some good news. They needed to know that God heard their anguished prayers for deliverance. They needed to know that, somehow, some way, divine help was on the way to them, and to the friends and family left to languish in the ruins of Jerusalem. They needed to know that something was going to change as a result of God's hearing their prayers, acknowledging their deepest longings, and doing something. And Isaiah did not disappoint.

Imagine, then, how these words from Isaiah sounded to the ears of the captives in Babylon and the wretched survivors trying to eke out a living in the ruins of Jerusalem:

“How beautiful upon the mountains
are the feet of the messenger who announces peace,
who brings good news, who announces salvation,
who says to Zion, ‘Your God reigns.’”

Do not lose hope, Isaiah is telling the people. Do not lose your faith in our amazing God who acts in history! God hears you and God will act! And when God does act, it will be nothing short of what we need. God will bring peace. God will save us from all that we are enduring now. God will demonstrate that God is God and we are God’s people.

Aren’t those exactly the same words, more than 3000 years after they were written, that we long to hear in our lives, in our own world, today? Of course they are. We long for peace. We long for good news – quite literally. We long to be saved from the mess this world is in, all of it the result of human actions, or inactions as the case may be. We long for God to be God and fix it all! But, dear friends, God doesn’t work that way. God doesn’t fix our problems. God companions us, walks with us, guides us, helps us as *we fix* our own problems. After all, isn’t that what any parent does? Don’t we want our children to learn how to handle their own problems? When they are learning to tie their shoes, we

can only show them how – a zillion times perhaps – but it is their little fingers which must tie the bow on the sneaker. Either that or destine them to wear Velcro sneakers the rest of their lives. When they are in school and taking exams – in middle school, in high school, in college or grad school – they have to do the work to prepare for the exam and successfully complete it. We can't do it for them, although we know some high profile parents tried to skip this step and that didn't go so well for anyone involved. Instead of fixing something they perceived to be a problem, they made everything so much worse, destroying lives in the process.

Unfortunately, that tendency to make things worse is an all too human one. Arrogance – that all too human tendency to think our way to do whatever is the one and only way to do it – has been getting us in trouble since the dawn of humanity. Selfishness – that human propensity to think of what we want to see happen in a given situation as paramount – has brought so much heartache into the world, into our lives, all too frequently. Thoughtlessness – that tendency to be so preoccupied with our own stuff that we just don't see the impact of what we're doing on others, the hurt and pain we cause inadvertently – this too is real and mucking up our lives every day, more than we realize.

Enter Advent. I mean that literally – enter Advent! Step into the midst of this gift from God handed to us right in the midst of this crazy time of year when the values of our faith and the values

of the society, the world in which we live, clash head on. You don't need me to tell you that no matter our ages and personal circumstances, life in general these days is just over whelming -- too busy and too frantic creating a general sense of anxiety it's difficult to ignore or throw off. Dear friends, the truth is that we are in a type of captivity not all that dissimilar from those ancient people stuck in the walls of captivity in Babylon or the ruins of ancient Jerusalem. Life these days with its unrelenting political strife, its dire warnings about climate change, its economic uncertainty, its too much to do and not enough time to do it in mentality and – well you know what I mean. Life these days feels like something to escape instead of savor, something to endure instead of enjoy. Enter Advent. Enter Isaiah's life changing words to remind us there is a way forward.

“How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion – to us – your God reigns!” Hope is alive! Peace is possible and on its way to us, right here and now. ... Really? I don't think so, we fear. Nice to think about but I'm not so sure those are any more than pretty words, we say. Well, that's understandable. The world outside our doors can be a pretty miserable place at times. Meanness seems to be on the rise. Anger seems to simmer just below the surface. Anxiety about – well, everything – never quite leaves us.

Dear friends, it's so easy to think that. It's so easy to believe that. And, that is exactly why we have to be on the lookout for those beautiful feet Isaiah told us were coming. And, I'm here to tell you I saw them in spades yesterday and in all the days leading up to our incredible Christmas Bazaar. I witnessed your beautiful feet endlessly walking, climbing, running, stumbling through weeks and months of preparations. I saw the results of your forays into the wilder regions of your back yards in bad weather to harvest greens for us. I heard about the aching feet and backs of those who literally stood for hours on end to bake more pies, cookies and cakes than some bakeries have available for sale. I watched feet endlessly climbing the stairs here to move tables, cart merchandise, clean off spiderwebs, broom and vacuum floors, fix faucets, park cars, greet little ones and everyone as Santa and his helpers – well, you know what you did. I know what you did. God knows what you did. You gave it your all for this church, for this community of God's faithful gathered here in this place. You have been and still are the beautiful feet God promised us and you've been here all along! You just didn't know, didn't realize, didn't appreciate how very beautiful your feet are.

But, that being said, yours were not the only beautiful feet here yesterday. Nope. God sent us hundreds of extra beautiful feet yesterday in the form of our guests and visitors and customers for the Bazaar. God sent us all these extra beautiful

feet as tangible reminders of the people who so very much appreciated and enjoyed all your efforts, all those thousands of steps of your beautiful feet. Their beautiful feet remind us that what we do in this community through our bazaar is so very important and is about so much more than the money we raise to augment our budget. The Bazaar is truly a ministry of yours that long predates me as your pastor. It is a ministry of love to the community where you make Christmas possible for some people because our prices for everything are affordable. We are a bargain rich environment and, these days, that really matters. It is a ministry of hope that churches like ours exist, where faith and determination to walk in the footsteps of Jesus comes alive to people who may never walk into a church except to come to a bazaar. It is a ministry of joy as the beautiful live Christmas music bounced off the walls and the smell of pine and spiced tea and chili filled every nook and cranny of the building. And, make no mistake about it, yesterday was a ministry of peace to this community. It was a living demonstration of what is possible when people who are, after all, just people with their own ideas about how to do things, with throbbing feet and aching backs, with evergreen allergies and gluten sensitivities overcome all those reasons to step back and walk away from the church and instead embrace it with all their worth. Peace happens in the midst of our struggles and issues. Peace is not imposed upon us

from on high, like some *deus ex machina* intervention – some God machine suddenly popping up and fixing everything that’s wrong with our lives. Peace happens when ordinary people work to overcome differences in order to create something truly miraculous and spectacular – like a Christmas Bazaar that truly matters.

Dear friends, on behalf of our community, on behalf of this church, thank you for all you did yesterday. As pastor I get to hear a lot of comments you don’t – like all the people who tell me it just isn’t Christmas for them until they come to our Bazaar, like the joy of the little ones sitting on Santa’s lap, like the excitement of the families who make our bazaar the center of a family weekend. Did you know that happens? Well, it does, and not just for one family but for several. Dear friends, you did something truly miraculous yesterday. You made Christmas real for a whole lot of people and in the end, that’s the most important reason for the whole shebang. The money is nice and necessary, don’t get me wrong. But what really matters – what will outlast every dollar earned yesterday – is the Christmas miracle you created together with all your aching, beautiful feet that announced the reality of God in this place to a whole lot of people who needed to experience precisely that. Now, get some rest, please. Amen.