



Sermons at Burke Presbyterian Church

SHARE THE WORD

A Ministry of Burke Presbyterian Church
The Second Sunday after Pentecost
Isaiah 52:7-12

Burke, Virginia
June 18, 2017

Messengers on the Move
The Rev. Meg Peery McLaughlin

Prayer of Illumination:

Spirit of the Living God, draw close now.

Let this, your Word, be on our lips and in our hearts, and let all other words slip away. May there be one voice we hear today: the voice of truth and grace. Amen.

Scripture: Isaiah 52:7-12

⁷ *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.'*

⁸ *Listen! Your sentinels lift up their voices,
together they sing for joy;
for in plain sight they see
the return of the Lord to Zion.*

⁹ *Break forth together into singing,
you ruins of Jerusalem;
for the Lord has comforted his people,
he has redeemed Jerusalem.*

¹⁰ *The Lord has bared his holy arm
before the eyes of all the nations;
and all the ends of the earth shall see
the salvation of our God.*

¹¹ *Depart, depart, go out from there!
Touch no unclean thing;
go out from the midst of it, purify yourselves,
you who carry the vessels of the Lord.*

¹² *For you shall not go out in haste,
and you shall not go in flight;
for the Lord will go before you,
and the God of Israel will be your rearguard.*

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Sermon:

This week, after some incident in our home---(there are many), our dear Naomi was sitting under the dining room table in a huff. "I don't like consequences" she said.

I was trying to hold my ground, but man, do I agree with her. Consequences are painful.

They are the background of our reading today. God's people, Israel, are enduring the fall out of their actions. Instead of worshiping God, the people of Israel worshipped other things: security and comfort, image and power.

And their promised land, their sacred home, was ransacked and conquered. This time in their history is often called the Babylonian Exile.

The prophet Isaiah has a lot to say about that, and in this part, we get to hear this awesome poem that proclaims that God's people are going to get a second chance; they are going to get a homecoming: a new day is dawning.

It isn't surprising that the one who brings this message of grace, the one who carries forth this announcement of their salvation, is such a welcomed sight. How beautiful are the feet of the messenger who bring good tidings of peace.

Indeed. Handel's *Messiah* turns that line into a beautiful soprano solo. Mendelsohn has turned it into piece of music as well. It's no wonder such a line has become art. For a glowy, swelling song, matches the feeling of finally seeing relief crest a hill.

I remember Burke's former Associate pastor, Maryann, making a comment to me once when I was struggling as a solo parent to all three, waiting for Jarrett to return from Kenya or Montreat or somewhere.

Look to the East! she said.

It was a reference to the Lord of the Rings trilogy, when Helm's Deep is in deep trouble, and at dawn on the 5th day of their version of exile, Gandalf crests the mountain, staff in hand.

His white horse rises up on its hind legs against the sunrise. How beautiful are the feet of the messengers who bring words of peace. How beautiful are the feet of the messengers who make it so we can breathe again. How beautiful are the feet of the messengers who coax us out from under the table, assuring us that we will not have to bear our much deserved consequences forever. How beautiful the feet.

This week I took a young candidate for ordination out for a meal.
I'm his shepherd in this process and we were touching base about his calling.
He is a 3rd. Billy Kluttz the 3rd. The first Billy Kluttz is in his nineties. And Billy the 3rd is the only one with the name who is not working in the family lumber business.
Billy is headed home this weekend to spend time with his family and I asked what they would do. He smiled a shy smile.
And said, "Well, our whole family will be getting a pedicure at Southpark Mall."

He explained. His grandfather can't reach his feet anymore. And his grandmother can't see well enough to help her husband clip his toenails. So, finally convinced he needs help, he relented. Embarrassed, the grandfather will only go to a salon one town over and only if his family will sit in the front chairs so no one will recognize him. So this weekend, three generations of Kluttzes: two lumber men and one would-be preacher, will be having their callouses scrubbed, their nails shaped, their cuticles softened, their toes moisturized and massaged.

How beautiful are the feet! I can see Jarrett squirming in his seat right now. There would be no way in God's green earth that he would sit for a pedicure. Too sensitive. Did you know that not only are a quarter of the bones in our body in our feet, but our feet have 8000 nerve endings?

But here's the thing. Isaiah claims the beauty of feet, not because of some fetish, or because of the state of your foot care, but because of who they carry.

How beautiful are the feet that carry messengers,
how beautiful are the hammer-toed, bunion covered, plantar fasciitis ridden feet that bear the *messengers, the people* who announce peace, who bring good news, who say 'Your God reigns.'

Your God reigns.
Not your captors where you sit in exile.
Your God reigns.
Not your guilt over your poor choices.

Your God reigns.
Your hopelessness over the state of the nation does not.
Your God reigns.
Even when apathy seems to be the far more practical choice.
Your God reigns.
Rather than your grief over all you've lost.
Though your fear for the future tries it's damndest,
Your God reigns.

The message that those feet carry is not trivial, but vital.
A saving word. One I know I need. I think we all do.

And how does Isaiah have the confidence to say this?
He says, it's because of what God has done in the past,
and so we can be sure about what God will do in the future.
And Isaiah says: the Lord has comforted his people,
God has redeemed them.
The Lord has bared his holy arm, the prophet says.

I want to stay with that phrase a moment. The Lord has bared his holy arm.

I can tell you this week, I wanted God to bare his arm again.

This week I wanted God to show me muscle.

To smash down the gun violence this week
that rattled the bipartisan ball practice in our back yard,
and a Chicago school yard where a seven year old was having a class picnic,
a San Francisco UPS facility where people were trying to earn a living.

This week, I can tell you how much I wanted God to bare his arm,
show me muscle and push back the consistent persistent racial tension we carry in us.

The verdict on Philando Castile's death,
the name calling from Bill Maher,
the hate crimes that dot the nation like a pox,
and the slow simmer of mistrust and misunderstanding that poisons us all.

This week, I can tell you how much I wanted God to bare his arm,
show me muscle, and throw a block for the people I know,
the people I love
who face unemployment,
try to dig out from depression,
who have fractured families
or overwhelming diagnoses.

That's how I want God to reign. To get forceful. To flex.

But God's reign is different from the reigns we know.
God's ways are not our ways.

When the text says God bears his arm.
The Hebrew verb there is literally strip off.
So you can read it more like,
God rolls up her sleeves.

And I don't know about you, but the last time I rolled up my sleeves,
was to fish a stuffed animal out of a messy creek bed at the playground.

We roll up our sleeves, when we are about to get dirty.
When we've decided not to stay by the sidelines, but to get in there,
no matter the cost.

Like Crystal Griner and David Bailey who responded to the baseball shooting.
Like the protestors who held signs in the Minnesota streets when the verdict on Castile came
down, signs that simply said: "This hurts."
Like the friends who sit with the sick and discouraged,
and maybe rage with them, or maybe cry with them,
but never ever leave them.

God is like that. God always has been.

God is the one who gets down in the mess of life and doesn't avoid, no matter how painful life is.
God doesn't mimic our normal way of fixing things with force and violence,
but rather, God rolls up God's sleeves. God bares his holy arm.

It's why when God decided to show us the fullness of love,
God didn't use muscle, but baby fat instead;
sending a helpless vulnerable boy to Palestine,
to be born in a stable, and to grow up to show us a different kind of reign.

When messengers come along in our lives and remind us that God reigns.
We can't help but say their feet are beautiful.
When we learn that God's reign will plumb the depths of all our mess—
then we can't help but hug the messengers,
which is what we did this morning in worship
as we commissioned 9 BPC families as they move away.

But we don't have to be leaving this soil
to be messengers on the move.
And all of us would do well to remember the last promise of this scripture.

The Lord will go before you,
and God will be your rearguard.

In other words, none of you can wander from the bounds of God's reign,
none of you can escape the scope of God's love.

Now I can't promise you that you won't stub your toe,
there are no guarantees, faith doesn't protect us like that,
but it does promise
that wherever you go to beat down paths of peace,
and wherever you tread roads that remind folks of God's steadfast love,
wherever your feet take you,
God will surround.
God will sustain.
God will go before.
God will go behind.
God will roll up God's sleeves.

So, friends, look to the East.
Relief is coming.
And beautiful are the feet of ones who bear that good news.

Friends, look down at our own toes,
remember you have been sent to remind the world
that our God reigns.
Alleluia. Amen.