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The Beauty of Suffering

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Let me make this point again. It is not the process of industrialization or democratic ideology or social change that transforms us for God's purposes in the world—it is the power of God's Holy Spirit in any age, in any social world. It is the Spirit of God that equips men and women for ministry for God. Today we claim the promise of the Holy Spirit poured out upon us, but we have not fully received and embraced the gifts of the Spirit as given to men and women without distinction. In far too many of our churches women still sit in their silent worlds, unable to find their voices—even to speak God's name in prayer in the assembly of the saints.

I can only speak to my own experience in a *cappella* Churches of Christ. As a daughter of the Stone-Campbell heritage I could never have envisioned that my voice would be heard in this beautiful and historic church building. Even now, I often hear the invitation that “anyone who wants to may pray,” and I know that “anyone” does not mean me. The promise of God is so far-reaching and incredulous that I have to ask, “Does all flesh really mean me?” And I hear the angel say to Mary and to me, “nothing will be impossible with God” (Luke 1.37).

We are raising up sons and daughters with hearts for God and hearts for ministry. Are we providing opportunities for both our sons and our daughters to use their gifts of prophesy? I am most privileged to be preaching to you tonight. But in Malibu, California, I would not be invited to preach in my own home congregation. We have work to do to fully embrace the gifts of our women in our churches. So I ask us again, can we envision a world in which the Spirit of God is poured out upon all flesh and our sons' and our daughters' voices are heard proclaiming the word of the Lord?

Perhaps the more burning question is, will we raise up prophets from among our sons and our daughters? Did you notice? The word of the Lord came to Joel, Son of Pethuel. We live in a noisy world and our children are distracted by so many things. Above the surface noise of their lives, can they hear the sacred voice that is calling? Can they, amid the distractions, see the world God envisions for them and hear the word God speaks to and through them. Our sons and daughters need places of prayer and meditation, places for reflection and inquiry and for the study of God's word so they might in turn speak into *our* ethical present and call *us* to the world envisioned for us by God. They need us to receive and honor their gifts, to receive and listen to the word the Lord speaks through them, so that neither our sons nor our daughters have to ask, “Does all flesh mean me?”

Can we hear the ancient prophesy afresh? Can we envision a world that freely receives the outpouring of God's Spirit? Can we envision God's future where we stand together as one new humanity (and this is particularly true of the divides that separate us in the Stone-Campbell Movement), no longer divided by our gender, our status, our place in the world, or our religious past, but empowered by the Spirit of God? Can we affirm tonight the promise that when God's Spirit is poured out on all flesh our sons and our daughters without distinction will prophesy, our old ones will dream dreams, and our young ones will see visions? Can we tonight hear and believe the word of the Lord?



The Beauty of Suffering

SARA BARTON AND JOSH GRAVES

This sermon was delivered by Sara Barton and Josh Graves at the Rochester Church of Christ, where Sara serves as the Minister for Small Groups and Josh serves as the Minister to Young Adults. In addition, Sara is the Campus Minister and Josh is an adjunct professor of religion at Rochester College.

Sara: A few years ago, I read an article titled, “The Foot is The New Hand.” The article stated that the industry that cares for feet is now as lucrative as the industry that cares for hands. Today we may purchase scrubs, lotions, and pedicure sets to pamper our toes and feet. Some customers now go into the salon just for a pedicure and are more concerned with how beautiful their feet are than their hands.

I looked at my feet in dismay. They stood no chance. I had just run the Detroit Marathon, and if you've never seen real runner's feet, you've never seen how ugly feet can get. Feet pounding the pavement for twenty-six miles take a beating. At some races, there are ugly feet contests in addition to the actual contest of running. These contests honor male and female winners with the ugliest feet, as well as winners in the black toenail division.

My first marathon, I lost two toenails. I was a new, ignorant runner, and I wore really bad shoes. The second time I ran a marathon, I got better shoes; and I didn't lose toenails. Instead they just got black and bruised and incredibly hard. Calluses, blisters, dirt and grime: it's not a pretty picture.

Josh: I can relate to Sara's description. A few years ago I ran my first marathon. I had calluses in places on my feet I had never paid attention to before. My heels were worn down. Blisters bulged out of the tops of my toes. My toenails still have not recovered.

Sara: Sorry if we just ruined your lunch. But, perhaps I have sufficiently brought a picture to your mind of ugly feet. That was my goal. Keep that picture in your mind as we read from Isaiah 52.

How beautiful on the mountains
are the feet of those who bring good news,
who proclaim peace,
who bring good tidings,
who proclaim salvation,
who say to Zion,
"Your God reigns!"

This passage comes at an integral time in Israel's history. Israel's army was fighting, but not on the home front. They were fighting far away. Israel waited expectantly for news of battle, but this was before the convenience of Anderson Cooper reporting for CNN from Babylon. For ancient Israel, there were no telephones or e-mail messages or fax machines. Battles took place far from home, and those at home could do nothing but wait and pray. When an army won or lost in battle, there were messengers who ran for days or weeks to bring back news.

Those who watched for news might say, "Look! Here comes one of our military messengers!" This was before the days of Nike running shoes. These runners probably ran with bare feet.

Josh: Israelites waited for this messenger, some in watchtowers, their stomachs nervous and their palms sweaty. Perhaps their hearts beat rapidly as they waited to learn if the news was good or bad. Their eyes scanned the figure in the distance for any sign of victory or defeat in his demeanor. Then perhaps, this messenger used his last bit of energy to fall in front of those waiting for him and announce, "Peace." He announced, "Good news." He announced, "Victory." He announced the words they longed to hear, "God reigns."

This salvation business was not individually focused—it was news for the whole group. The people likely rejoiced in community as they picked up this tired guy and carried him to comfort. Perhaps they looked at his feet, which had traversed hundreds of miles, barefoot, over sand, and those feet could not have been anything but ugly.

Sara: And Israel said, "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.'"

The good news celebrated in Isaiah 52 was about military victory, but for Israel, it was also about salvation and their relationship with God. They saw military victory as a sign of God's love for them, of his favor in their lives, of his reign in the world. This was more than one military victory. This news solidified a message God had been trying to establish with his people.

God wanted Israel to know he loved them. He said, in the context leading up to chapter 52:

Even though you looked to other gods (48.5),
 Even though you put your trust in idols (48.14),
 Even though you rebelled from birth (48.8),
 Even though I must refine you with my discipline and justice (48.10),
 Even though you chose darkness over light (50.11),
 Even though I called and you did not answer me (50.2),
 Despite all of this, I love you Israel. I have not forsaken you. See, Israel, I have engraved you
 on the palms of my hands (49.16).

I love this image: God engraved the names of the people he loves on the palm of his hands.

Josh: God loves Israel, and he wants them to experience that love as a catalyst of his love and mercy for the rest of the world. They are not a privileged country club—they are to be witnesses to those who've not seen and heard the mighty deeds of YWHW.

So this news, brought by a messenger with ugly feet, was about more than military battle. The news said "Your God reigns." "Yahweh Malach." "God is king." This theme, "Yahweh Malach," is found throughout the Old Testament. Its importance to the life of Israel is evidenced throughout the Psalms as we see Israel incorporating God's reign into their worship.

But "Yahweh Malach" is not just an Old Testament phrase. Christians can identify with this news. The Gospels as they report the life of Jesus Christ on earth go beyond the Old Testament understanding of "Yahweh Malach," and further clarify what it means when we say, "The Lord reigns."

Jesus himself announces good news in Mark chapter 1. If you have a red-letter edition of your Bible, you'll see that the very first red letters in Mark's Gospel, the very first words of Jesus as recorded by Mark, are reminiscent of the same message that the messenger with beautiful feet brought to Israel. Listen to Mark 1.14–15. "After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. 'The time has come,' he said. 'The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!'" Jesus was saying, "God reigns."

Sara: That's the gospel. That's the good news, brought not from a mere messenger, but from God himself. There were many who did not understand it then, and there are many who do not understand it now. Jesus came to define the kingdom of God. Jesus came to show what it means when the Lord reigns, and it was and is a hard, controversial message. Look at Mark 15.16–20 and think about the mockery made of Jesus' definition of kingdom, of "*Yahweh Malach*."

The soldiers led Jesus away into the palace (that is, the Praetorium) and called together the whole company of soldiers. They put a purple robe on him, then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on him. And they began to call out to him, "Hail, king of the Jews!" Again and again they struck him on the head with a staff and spit on him. Falling on their knees, they paid homage to him. And when they had mocked him, they took off the purple robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him.

Josh: As we view the ancient mockery of Jesus' crucifixion, let's not fail to realize the mockery we often make of Jesus' definition of kingdom when we try to define it by American nationalism or Joel Osteen's brand of gospel or the doctrines that we crown king instead of Jesus himself. Jesus alone is our definition of kingdom.

That's still the gospel. That's still the good news. God reigns in our lives. For a Christian, that's more than a song we sing or a verse we read in the Bible. It's something that affects our lives in a profound way. If we are Christians, this is our message because it was the message of Jesus Christ, "The Lord reigns," "The kingdom of God is here." And, the way God chose to reveal his reign is found in a king crucified on a cross. That's the definition of kingdom, the definition of power, the definition of good news.

Sara: We all have battles going on in our lives, and sometimes we are tempted to think God isn't in the reigning business. Some of us have addictions to drugs or alcohol or pornography or to bulimia—and sometimes we wonder, “Where is God's reign in my life?” Some of us are fighting cancer, and it often seems that a disease reigns in place of the Lord. Sometimes, from the human perspective, it appears that cancer wears the crown.

Josh: Just recently, as a church, we buried a nineteen-year-old artist who succumbed to a long battle with a drug addiction. Many of you prayed for him and his family; those prayers took place just hours before he overdosed. That dark Monday morning, I walked into the apartment where his body lay cold and dead. And, it was difficult to see God's reign in that moment.

Many of us here today live in broken relationships, ongoing arguments, homes and lives where Satan seems to be toying with us. In the midst of the confusion of human relationships, even Christian relationships, it is often difficult to see God's reign.

Sickness. Pollution. Waste of the earth's resources. War. Children who are soldiers. Michigan, a state with the highest unemployment rate in the nation this month. The media circus that surrounds Lindsay Lohan or Paris Hilton or Britney Spears is insane. Who reigns? The Lord or Satan?

Sara: Sometimes, in the midst of these battles, we need to close our eyes and envision the good news. As a believer, I hold on to the belief that the battles of this world are not the final answer. I hold onto the message that “Our God reigns.” And if we do not set our eyes on the life of Jesus Christ himself—his life, his death, his resurrection—we will not keep our eyes on the kingdom of God. We become like the soldiers who mocked and shamed Jesus. If he doesn't fit our idea of “king,” solving all our financial, health, personal and relational problems, we take him off his throne.

The Christian story calls us to look at what the world says is ludicrous: it's like looking at ugly feet and calling them beautiful. The Christian story calls us to look at a man on a cross, to believe that he is God, and to believe that through him, the kingdom of God has come near, that this story of a king who died on a cross 2000 years ago is a story that transforms our lives today.

In Isaiah 52, God used a messenger, ugly feet and all to proclaim “Your God reigns.” In the Gospel of Mark, we see Jesus as our messenger—ugly cross and all, ugly feet, ugly hands. Yet, we say, “Beautiful.”

Josh: There is an urban legend that needs to be laid to rest. The myth says that suffering cannot be beautiful. The gospel says, paradoxically, that suffering is the doorway to true and everlasting beauty—a beauty that transcends time, culture, and geographic location.

Mark has a controversial ending. Look in your Bible. The most reliable early manuscripts and other ancient witnesses do not have Mark 16.9–20. I used to find it a bit unsettling that “Go into all the World and preach the good news to all creation” isn't in the most reliable manuscripts. I always sort of wanted it to be there. It makes so much sense. But, let's give the other ending a chance. Listen as Sara reads 16.1–8, and envision the drama of this moment.

Sara:

When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus' body. Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb and they asked each other, “Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?” But when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed. “Don't be alarmed,” he said. “You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified.

He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.'"
Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.

Josh: What a dramatic ending. The Gospel of Mark started with a dramatic messenger, John the Baptist, pointing toward the Lord. The story ends with an angel pointing toward the Lord.¹

People pointing. That's the definition of messenger, I think. It seems to me, this sermon today is about messengers. So, like Isaiah's soldier messenger with ugly feet, like John the Baptist, like Mark the evangelist, like the angel in the tomb, like our ultimate messenger Jesus Christ, let's all leave here today, pointing. Let's point the world to an ugly scene of a death on a cross. A broken body. Blood running down. A crown of thorns and a sign that mocks the world's definition of "king." An ugly scene perhaps. Yet, we say, "Beautiful."

1. This point was inspired by Morna Hooker's teaching, "Believe and Follow: The Challenge of Mark's Ending," in *Preaching Mark's Unsettling Messiah*, eds. David Fleer and David Bland (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2006).



Where Is Your Faith? Luke 8.22–25

CORLEEN PARMELEE

Corleen Parmelee serves Pepperdine University as a senior staff member for the Center for Human Resources and holds a master's degree in dispute resolution from the Straus Institute of Dispute Resolution at Pepperdine's School of Law. Corleen presented this homily at the morning worship for Pepperdine's New Faculty Retreat, May 3, 2007, in Florence, Italy.

Oh, what truths to be found in a simple Bible story! How many times have we heard the story of Jesus calming the storm? How many times have we used it in Bible classes or for our children?

The first thing I notice about this story is the use of the wind and the rain. God knows us collectively as a civilization, knows of our strivings to control and organize our world. And yet, in our world of remarkable technology, the winds and the rain remain outside of our control. Those of us who have lived and worked in Malibu for any length of time can identify with the power unleashed in God's creation—the rains and storms that flood the roads, bring down the walls of cliffs, and send the surf surging; the fires that hide the sun and propel the winds and encircle us with flames; the quakes that jar the earth unexpectedly. God's world is not under our control, and our powerlessness helps us keep our perspective regarding both our relationship with God and our stature in comparison to him.

The disciples woke Jesus, saying, "Master, Master, we're going to drown!" I wonder what their purpose was in waking him. Were they just informing him, saying "Wake up!" so that he'd be aware he was drowning? Were they just running on adrenaline and letting that excess energy out through their mouths, as we are wont to do? Were they saying, "We're going to drown, do something!"? I've always assumed the last option, that they expected him to save them. But their reaction at the end of the passage, their amazement that even the winds and the water obey him, make me think that perhaps they did not expect to be saved from the storm.

Jesus did not use this opportunity to quiz them on the depth of their faith, to say, "I will do this if you have enough faith." His rebuke was to the wind and the raging waters, and calm was restored. God's faithfulness is not dependent on our faith or loyalty to him.

Calm was restored, and *then* Jesus asked, "Where is your faith?" I have always read that part of this passage as a rebuke; but as I read it in preparation for today, I see the question with new depth. After all, the