



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA

Rev. Scott E. Schul

Christmas Day, December 25, 2017

Sermon Title: “Beautiful Feet, Beautiful Hands”

Sermon Text: Isaiah 52:7-10

Is there anything in this world more wonderful, inspiring, and reassuring than holding a newborn baby? What joy! One of the first things I notice on a new baby are the hands with their tiny fingers, and the feet with those little miniature toes. I marvel as the baby wraps his or her tiny fingers around my own. And I am in awe as those tiny toes peak out from under the blanket, as legs kick and squirm. Babies are so wonderfully made. The majesty of God’s creation really hits home with me as I observe it in the astonishing miracle of a newborn infant.

I wonder what Joseph and Mary thought as they held their newborn son. I can scarcely imagine the jumble of emotions after all they had been through. Angels, shepherds, miraculous births – how overwhelming it must have been. That, plus the intense physical exertion and exhaustion Mary endured in childbirth, must have left them all too tired for words.

And so as I imagine the holy family, I picture them weary but happy; worn out and yet peaceful. I see them sitting together in silence, and I see two very proud parents gazing lovingly at their newborn son. How wonderful are those hands! Joseph imagines the tools Jesus will hold and wield as he apprentices in carpentry under Joseph’s skilled and watchful eye. And how wonderful are those feet! Mary smiles to herself as she imagines the sound of those little feet as they patter around the family home, carrying Jesus into all sorts of adorable mischief.

If this meditation upon Jesus’s hands and feet sounds a little like an echo of today’s first lesson from the prophet Isaiah, it is intentional. “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.’” These are the words the inhabitants of a royal city in ancient days might have exclaimed as they waited in suspense for a messenger to arrive with good news of their king’s battlefield victory, and the resulting prospect of peace and salvation.

Today, we would express our joy at receiving good news in more modern terms. “How beautiful is the email that tells me that I got the job!” Or “How beautiful is the overnight express letter which confirms that I’ve been accepted into my number one choice for grad school.” Or maybe we’d say, “How beautiful is the cell phone call I received to confirm that my loved one, traveling in bad weather, arrived safely at her destination.”

Indeed, a military victory, a job offer, a school acceptance, or a safe arrival *is* good news worthy of celebration, and beautiful are the means that bring that good news to us. But the good news we celebrate this Christmas Day is even bigger and better because it’s more than an

accomplishment or an event. It's a *person*, Jesus, the Son of God, born in the humblest of circumstances in Bethlehem, to a young woman named Mary.

How beautiful are the infant Jesus's feet because he is not only the *messenger* of good news; he IS himself the message of good news! And that message is the promise of victory over sin, death, and the devil. That message is the opportunity for a fresh start as, in God's infinite love and mercy, we receive forgiveness, encouragement, new direction, assurance, and hope. And that message – delivered in the most unexpected form of a tiny, vulnerable baby in a feeding trough – is the promise that when we take our final breath, we do not reach our end, but instead stand at the threshold of a new beginning, because our Lord promises to gather us together again around his endless, eternal table, where we will be united both with our loved ones and the Holy Trinity in a cosmic embrace so beautiful as to be beyond our ability to describe.

But can one person really do all that? After all, we've invested our hope in people before – people who we think will solve our problems, heal our ills, and change the world for the better. We place our faith in prophets and politicians; scientists and soldiers; athletes and artists. Some of them disappoint us immediately. Others *do* manage to lead, reassure, protect, entertain, and inspire us, but only for a brief while.

We who call ourselves Christians, however, do not invest our dreams in just *any* person. We who claim to follow that ancient way of living, believing, and being described by the early apostles as The Way do not place our hope, and trust, and faith, in an ordinary human. On *all* days – but *especially* Christmas Day – we celebrate the Good News of Jesus, the Messiah, the Christ, who has come to us in the flesh, fully human, fully divine. Born in obscurity to Mary and adopted into the lineage of his guardian Joseph, this tiny baby has changed the world and all eternity.

How beautiful are those feet and hands of the infant Jesus. Those feet will carry him to a tiny, insignificant town, Nazareth, where he will learn a trade, be tutored in the faith by his mother and father, run and play, make friends, experience disappointment and heartache, and even bleed when he scrapes a knee or cuts a finger. There at the Empire's edge, in the quiet insignificance of Nazareth, did anyone besides Mary and Joseph foresee anything remarkable as this baby became a toddler, a boy, and a man?

With the benefit of hindsight, and guided by Holy Scripture, we certainly know how remarkable this baby would become. Those beautiful hands and fingers would *create*, using the tools of his father Joseph. They would *unroll* ancient scrolls to *reveal* his full identity and mission to everyone. Those hands and fingers would *bless* and *heal* the servants of powerful leaders, as well as the outcasts considered by society to be worse than dead. And those hands and fingers would feed thousands, teach the importance of servant leadership by washing dirty feet, and turn common bread and wine into divine flesh and blood. Likewise, how beautiful are those feet that would transport Jesus around the familiar and comforting shores of the Sea of Galilee, to enclaves of worldly imperial power in places like Caesarea Philippi, and finally to the gates of Jerusalem, where his ancestor David once reigned.

How especially beautiful were those hands and those feet, as they willingly submitted to being bound, and then pierced with nails so that Jesus might win the ultimate victory for us. What did Mary think of those hands and feet while she wailed and mourned, and *his* pain became *her* pain, there at the foot of the cross? Those hands and feet were filled with so much love and righteousness that not even the grave could contain them. They would rise again with Jesus, who would use them to reassure Thomas, restore Peter, and walk alongside *us* in the pain, confusion, and doubt of our Emmaus roads.

On this Christmas Day, Jesus invites us to praise and honor those hands and feet of his, for in them salvation is revealed. Forgiveness is granted. And hope is rekindled. But just as those hands and feet carried Jesus from the manger to the cross and, today, to this altar, he calls us to a journey as well. You see, *our* hands and *our* feet are now extensions of *his*. He gave them to us so that we would use them as he did, to bless, to comfort, to reassure, to reconcile, to serve, and to love. For now, my friends, *we* are the messengers – messengers of the Good News that changes everything. And so as Isaiah wrote so many centuries ago, sing for joy! Our Lord has come to us, and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation