

Salvation Seen

In the name of him who is the Word made flesh, dear friends in Christ: We are always waiting to hear news. Six or so weeks back it was how did the election turn out? This last week it was how did the Electoral College cast their votes? Beyond that on a day to day basis it's how did my favorite sports team do? How well did my child do on that test? What were the results of someone's medical exam or surgery? Did this person have her baby yet? And if so, is it a boy or a girl? We're always waiting in eager anticipation to hear news of something.

And of course these days through miracles of modern technology we can get that sort of information almost the moment it happens. But this morning I want you to back up with me to a time before there were cell phones, text messages, and tweets; before telephones, radio, and telegraphs; before newspapers even, all the way back to a time when news arrived primarily by messenger. Then cities and their rulers would have designated runners who would be dispatched to convey messages to other places and in return, to receive and bring back news from afar. People in ancient times were just as eager as us to hear the latest news. What were the results of a distant battle? Did we win or lose? Has the merchant fleet returned? And if so, what trade goods have they brought back? Is the old king still ruling? Or is his son ruling in his place? Inquiring minds wanted to know.

And what would have heightened the anticipation is when a watchman on the city wall sighted an approaching messenger in the distance. He'd call it out from the watchtower, and everyone would know that we're about to get some news. And all would wonder will it be good or bad?

This is the backdrop to understanding today's reading from Isaiah in which the prophet declares, "How beautiful upon the mountain are the feet of him who brings good news". It's an extremely odd thing to say. I've mentioned before that in the ancient Mideastern world and especially among God's chosen people, feet were regarded as offensive and unsightly. People were ashamed of their feet. And you can understand why: people usually went barefoot or wore open sandals, which means that their feet were in constant contact with the filthy ground – ground covered with dust, grit, animal dung (they lived awfully close to their livestock back then) ... you get the idea. You can imagine if you lived your whole life like that what your feet would look like: thickly calloused, cracked, with grime ground in so deeply no amount of soaking could eliminate. And the moment you did wash your feet, as soon as you stood up they'd be dirty again. So, yeah, they didn't go for feet very much.

But here Isaiah describes the runner's feet as beautiful. To his original audience it would have sounded like an oxymoron. How can someone's nasty feet be attractive? The point is that if the runner's message is good enough news, then everything about the messenger is good too – even his otherwise disgusting feet. No, perhaps *especially* his otherwise disgusting feet, because that's what he's using to bring the good news to us. So yes, if he's carrying the right news, we'll welcome him dirty feet and all.

But this raises another question: how does the watchman know whether the news the courier brings is good? He hasn't heard it yet. And yet Isaiah has him declaring the runner's feet to be beautiful while he's still coming down the mountain a great way off. So, how does the watchman know? The answer is that he can see it in the runner's step. An untrained eye

wouldn't be able to detect it, but an experienced watchman could. He'd see right away whether the approaching runner had a happy spring in his stride because he had good news to share, or if he was plodding along like he was carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders because he had to report a disaster. It happens that these watchmen that Isaiah speaks of can tell that this approaching messenger is going to deliver the best news of all.

You see, Isaiah has some very specific good news in mind when he wrote this prophecy. That requires some explanation. So here goes: approximately the first two thirds of Isaiah's extensive writings warn of the Lord's coming judgment against the nation of Judah for their idolatry, their sinfulness, and their ongoing rebellion against the Lord. Repeatedly God's people are warned that he's had enough of it, and that as a consequence of their perpetual unfaithfulness, he's going to throw them out of their inheritance in the Promised Land and put them into exile in a country far away. And to give you an idea just how patient the Lord was with them and how much time he gave them to turn from their ways and repent, Isaiah wrote his prophecies more than 100 years before this threatened judgment was actually carried out.

But when it finally did, the people who went into exile were devastated. Their homeland was destroyed. Jerusalem and the Temple of the Lord lay in ruins. Thousands had been slaughtered. And here they were confined to what amounted to penal colonies in a foreign land. It seemed to them that the Lord had cast them off forever; that, or he was too weak to prevent them from being taken into captivity. Either way, they felt that they had no home, no God, and no hope in the world.

But this is where the last third or so of Isaiah's prophecy kicks in. Isaiah had foretold the coming exile as a judgment against God's people, yes; but he also prophesied that the exile would end. After a long time, some seventy years to be precise, after the discipline he'd reluctantly applied to them had done its work and they were sufficiently contrite and humble, the Lord would return to his people and rescue them. He would bring them out of captivity and restore them to their homeland. He would resurrect their nation. He would allow them to rebuild the Temple. He'd place his special presence there in their midst. Once again they would live in his forgiveness and grace as his blessed and chosen people. And the whole world would marvel when they saw how the Lord brought salvation to them.

This is the good news that Isaiah foresees coming to the people in exile: it's over. The Lord your God reigns. He's in control of all things. He did this to you for a necessary purpose. But he has not cast you off forever. No indeed, he has now returned to save you from your distress and reestablish you in Zion (another term for Jerusalem).

And what we need to grasp here is that it hasn't happened yet. From the perspective of the exiles, at this point all we see are the feet of the runner in the distance carrying the good news to us. But that's enough. It's enough to set all the watchmen singing for joy. Why? Because they know what it means. In practical terms a whole string of events is involved that will take place over a period of months and years. First comes the fall of Babylon, the empire that put us in exile. Then comes the decree of Cyrus, the Persian emperor who defeated Babylon and who gave the order for the exiles to be allowed to return to Judah. Then we've got to pack up our things, move back to our homeland, and begin to rebuild. It will take a lot of time and effort. But the point is that we see our salvation already in the feet of the runner – those nasty, dirty *and yet exquisitely beautiful* feet.

And this is why this is such a fitting text for today. You see, the salvation Isaiah speaks of points ahead to a far greater salvation, the end of an exile far worse and of much longer

duration. It's an exile that began when our first parents were driven from the garden of God on account of their rebellion. It's an exile in which their descendants and we too have lived our entire lives under the curse of sin and death. But it's an exile the Lord promised to end. He promised to end it through One born the Seed of Woman who would crush the serpent's head, the One whose birth we celebrate today.

What do we actually see? A piteously poor and temporarily homeless couple with their newborn child laid in a feed trough instead of a cradle. It's not much to look at. No, I expect most of us would look away. We don't care to see that kind of poverty and misery. It makes us uncomfortable. It offends us; kind of like dirty feet offended the ancients. And yet, if our eyes are properly trained, there we see our salvation.

The shepherds saw it. Heavenly messengers brought the good news to them. They told them what they'd see: a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. They went and did see. They looked at a baby. But what they saw was the Savior, Christ the Lord. They worshipped him and rejoiced in a complete salvation that they hadn't seen yet. But they saw enough to know that God's plan of salvation was unfolding precisely on his schedule.

In the days and years that followed, others would see it. There were the Magi who came from the east to pay him honor. There was old Simeon and the prophetess Anna in the Temple, who saw in the infant Jesus the Glory of the Lord and the Light to the Gentiles. These looked at a poor baby and saw the Lord's salvation.

John saw it too. He was the Lord's messenger to bear witness of the good news – that the Light had come into the world. Through his testimony others came to see that Light, though to be certain, he was never much to look at. Isaiah foretells that he had no form or beauty that anyone should desire him. And when he barred his holy arms to actually work the Lord's salvation, every one of us would have averted our eyes from the sight in disgust and horror. Crucifixion is ugly business. And yet there we see our salvation in a beaten, bloody, and broken corpse – the Word made flesh to suffer and die for our sins in order to restore us to paradise.

And today we will see that salvation again. No, it won't be much to look at: a wafer of bread, a sip of wine. And yet in, with, and under that bread and wine the flesh and blood of the Savior, Christ the Lord, given and shed for our redemption. O come, let us adore him. And let us rejoice in the salvation we have seen. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!