

Foundations but No Footprints

Psalm 77:1-2, 11-20

2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14

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Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

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It is an odd and a unique detail we find near the end of Psalm 77. “Your path was through the sea, your path, through the mighty waters; yet your footprints were unseen.”ⁱ The Psalmist is recounting the Mighty Acts of God which delivered the Israelites out of Egyptian slavery into freedom in the Promised Land. Clearly God had led them. Clearly God had delivered them. Their escape from Egypt, their survival forty years in the wilderness, their entrance into the promised land of milk and honey, this is a God-Thing, not a human wit and wisdom, look what we’ve done thing. God saved the Israelites in spite of themselves. God was active, God was engaged. Yet, God did not show his footprints.

When I was in New Delhi, India, a few years ago visiting our mission partner Poonraj, who does amazing evangelistic work with the Untouchables in Bihar, poorest state in India, we visited on the way in New Delhi the great Jama Masjid Mosque, largest Mosque in India. After touring through the immense open air sanctuary during Friday noon prayers when thousands of Muslims were worshipping, we were taken over to a side building where, for a small cash offering, we were given the privilege of seeing the sandal of Mohammed.

There it was in a glass case, ancient leather ties, and frayed sole. This, we were told, was the actual foot wear of the prophet, Mohammed. Whether it was or not I have no idea. Well actually I have an idea, but I’m sticking with my story, I have no idea. What I do know is this; that the God who is active in our lives and in our world does not leave his shoes or his footprints for us to package and show and sell. God is more subtle. But God does give us his continuing presence through unique prophets like Elijah with his mantle, and his successor Elisha, who takes that same mantle and does the same powerful act of parting the waters of the Jordan. God’s presence continues in a new generation.

This story is about the transition of power from one prophet to the next. The time for Elijah’s departure has come. The time for Elisha, his successor to step forward and exercise the prophet’s lonely, unpopular role is at hand. As a sign, Elisha picks up the mantle of Elijah and puts it to work.

Many of you appreciated the preaching of Dr. Bill Carl, our Inspirational Series Preacher here at South Highland a few months ago. Before becoming President of Pittsburgh Seminary four years ago, Bill served as Sr. Pastor of First Presbyterian Church in downtown Dallas, Texas, for 25 years, succeeding Dr. John Anderson. Dr. Anderson was a venerated icon of great Presbyterian Pastors, a towering giant of the Church. He served as the last Moderator of the PCUS, the Southern Presbyterian Church before

reunion. He preached the reunion sermon at the worship service I attended in Atlanta during the General Assembly in 1983, when the North and the South finally came back together. Following John Anderson, Bill Carl knew he had mighty big shoes to fill.

They carried out their transition in Dallas like this, John's Pastorate overlapped with Bill's by a few months, during which they served as Co-Pastors together. Then came the day John fully retired. As a parting gift, John gave Bill a beautiful ministerial stole that the congregation had given him some years back on the occasion of a major anniversary of his long tenure at First Presbyterian. The Sunday before, John had worn this stole as he preached his last sermon. The next Sunday as Bill entered the sanctuary alone to preach and lead worship, now as the sole Sr. Pastor, he wore that stole. As he entered, a loud gasp rippled across the sanctuary. The congregation thought initially, what an affront! What impertinence! How dare he! They thought Bill had put on something that rightly belonged to another, until they came to understand that this was John's gift lovingly bestowed on his successor.

It is not uncommon for us to long wistfully for the great leaders of the past, and lament we have them no more. Where are the Washingtons and Lincolns and FDRs, and Reagans of the government? Where are the Martin Luthers and Jonathan Edwards and John Wesleys, and Billy Grahams of the church? We raise this cry over the dearth of leadership and long for those grand days of the past. Why doesn't God send us great leaders any more?

That is what the Psalmist is crying over. "I cry aloud to God, that he may hear me. Has his steadfast love ceased forever? Are his promises at an end for all time? Has God forgotten to be gracious? Has he in anger shut up his compassion?"ⁱⁱⁱ God seems to him in his personal situation to be very quiet and far away. A case of severe depression envelopes this poet.

Elijah, you recall, went through such depression, as we heard last week. After his dramatic confrontation with the priests of Baal at Mt. Carmel where the One True God of Israel showed forth his power victoriously, Elijah flees from the wrath of Queen Jezebel. He feels lost and all alone, until God subtly shows him his presence. Not in the sound and light show of wind and earthquake and fire, but in a still quiet voice. According to Jim Truesdell – in a moth! God was not to be seen in the expected shock and awe at the holy mountain, but in a quiet, unexpected way.

When this time of transition comes, and it is clear to all, Elijah, his young disciple Elisha, and the whole prophetic company, that Elijah is about to be taken away, there is a certain feeling of dread. Can God continue his wondrous work without the great Elijah? Can young Elisha carry on his master's prophetic role for a new generation?

It helps the Psalmist, in his anguish, to reframe his perspective, by taking a larger view of God's actions in the past. The Psalm comes to a dramatic transition from the poor pitiful me lament in the first 10 verses, to a majestic hymn of praise in the last 10 verses. "I will call to mind the deeds of the Lord; I will remember your wonders of

old.”ⁱⁱⁱ And so he meditates upon God’s powerful, mysterious, unpredictable deliverance of the Israelites through the Sea when God used Moses to part the waters and lead the people through. “Your way was through the sea... you led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron.”^{iv} Still, “your footprints were unseen.” Deliverance – but no footprints!

What I want to encourage you today is to take hold of this larger view of God’s work in his creation and in your life remember, remember, remember, as you deal with difficulties and setbacks and fears. I want you to remember what God did back then, and trust God is still at it, active, involved, bringing change, renewal and hope now.

I

You see, I am convinced, **God is present and at work in our lives and in this vast universe but not showing his footprints.** As Elijah is talking and walking along with young Elisha on their final journey, it is a wistful moment. Three times Elijah tries to get Elisha to stop and let him go on alone. Three times Elisha declines, “I will not leave you.” So together they walk on. They come to the barrier of the Jordan River. Is this as far as they will get? Old Elijah just matter-of-factly takes his prophetic mantle, his cloak, rolls it up, throws it down, and *voilà*, the waters part, pretty neat, just like they did for Moses and the children of Israel, and Elijah and Elisha, walk through the dry river bed together. God clearly acting to make a way for them where there was no way.

God is still at it today. We cannot package God in a bottle. We cannot guarantee how or when God will act, but we can trust God will. There is the temptation to think that if only we could get conditions just right in America, prayer back in public schools, churches filled, vice snuffed out, you know – the casino gambling eliminated, God’s man in the Alabama Governor’s chair, then it will be clear to all that God is acting. But the trouble is that however hard we try, and to be sure there are laws and social mores that are more conducive for God to act than others, yet the fact remains, God is free to act when and how and where he will. God will not be coerced. God will not be mocked. God will not leave his footprints.

We see God at work not by footprints but by faith. “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.”^v It is the exercise of faith, not the test tube demonstration of proof, that enables God, that releases God to act. It is faith that enables God’s kingdom to grow. As Leslie Newbigin, the mid-20th century great English missionary to India and then bishop of the church of South India often said, “Every action of the Christian should be a prayer for the coming of God’s kingdom amid the dust and rubble of history.” I am convinced God is present and at work in the dust and rubble of history and in our lives. But do not think you will see his footprints. Or the original tablets of the Ten Commandments. Or the wood of the cross. Or Jesus’ burial shroud, thought this shroud of Turin continues to raise scientific insights and curiosity.

II

I am also convinced **The very fact that God does not show his footprints is itself proof that something supernatural is at work in defeating evil and bringing**

about good. Evil, you see, always leaves its footprints. Good does not. Evil, though it continues sometimes for a long time, has a limit, and leaves a trail. Whether it is Bernie Madoff and his pyramid scheme, or Adolph Hitler in his bunker, or Saddam Hussain in his hidey-hole, (and shall we mention Larry Langford and his sewer), and Ahab and Jezebel with their idol worship. Eventually the trail of evil is revealed, found out, uncovered and snuffed out. The internet has provided some marvelously uncomfortable footprints for evil in recent times, revealing secret conversations and intentions that wither away excuses offered. Evil always leaves footprints.

In the Apocrypha, those inter-testamental Jewish books written after the conclusion of the Old Testament and before the New Testament, there is a short book called Bel and the Dragon. In it, Daniel the prophet confronts the pagan god Bel and his false priests before the King by means of a test. It was said that the statue of Bel in the Temple nightly ate the food offerings left for it, when actually it was the priests of Bel who sneaked in through a secret trap door with their families to eat it. Clever Daniel secretly has the floor of the temple sprinkled with ashes, after the evening food is set out. In the morning the food was gone, but the footprints of the priests and their families were detected in the ash. The footprints of evil always show up, while God's footprints for good cannot be found.

III

I am convinced also, **this God who leaves no footprints nevertheless gives us the resources we need to fulfill his plan for our lives.** “Your footprints were unseen, (yet) you led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron.”^{vi} This God led his people as a good shepherd through the wilderness to places of safety and nourishment. This God gives us what we need at each stage along the journey. This God who has performed mighty acts in the past is at work in the present and directing us into the future.

For many, Elijah's dramatic flight into heaven in a chariot of fire is considered the center of the story. It is not. The center of the story is what comes next. Elijah is gone, and now Elisha must carry on alone. No more Elijah. No going back to good ole days, only going forward. In Great Britain when the King or Queen dies, the heralds announce, “The King is dead! Long live the King!” Elisha picks up the mantle of his mentor that had fallen from him as he was carried up and strikes the water with it, asking, “Where is the God of Elijah? God shows him. Instantly “the water was parted to the one side and to the other, and Elisha walked through.” Still no footprints, but God is very much present and active and at work through Elisha. The prophetic power of Elijah now flowing through the prophet's son.

Shakespeare said, “There's a divinity that shapes our ends, Rough hew them how we will.” As I look back on my life I marvel at the mysterious ways God has been at work. Most of the time subtly. No footprints, but assuredly God has been there. Most of the time taking what seemed a casual situation and using it as a major turning point in the road. Working in Washington, D.C. for a summer and by the end of it dating a wonderful lady named Gayle. Stopping by a church in Memphis to meet with an

Associate Pastor about a summer internship in a large Memphis church that never came about, and then going to work for that same pastor in Tulsa, OK two years later in my first call. Running into an old family friend at a church conference in Dallas and his mother is on a search committee in Monroe, LA, the phone rings, visits are made, we are called to Monroe. Going to a college reunion in Nashville and detouring through Bowling Green, KY, for a casual visit in a businessman's office, then more visits and we are called to Bowling Green. Tom Buck, old fraternity brother calls one day, Dana is retiring. Thanks anyway, Tom, how are the kids? Later Larry Hagood calls and calls and calls, and shows up unannounced in Kentucky with a posse, announcing to folks there that he has come for the new pastor of South Highland, and we are called.

My all-time mentor in Ministry, Bryant Kirkland once told us in a preaching class at Princeton, "If you want to give God a good laugh, tell him where you won't go!" No footprints, only a story, told and retold across the generations.

Long ago in the days of Moses, God parted the waters and the people walked through. Again in the days of the great prophet Elijah, the waters parted and they walked through. Still again with his successor Elisha, the waters parted and he walked through. Finally Jesus did not part them. But rather went down into them in baptism like everyone of us but then he also walked on them and stilled them. Bring it down to your life. God is at work! You do not have God's footprints, but you have God's Word of promise, and you can count on that! And that is enough.

ⁱ Psalm 77:19

ⁱⁱ Psalm 77:1, 8-9.

ⁱⁱⁱ Psalm 77:11.

^{iv} Psalm 77:19-20.

^v Hebrews 11:1.

^{vi} Psalm 77:19-20.