

## How Beautiful Are the Feet Mark 1:21-39

“How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news.” (NRSV) The word gospel means good news. When we talk about the gospel of Jesus Christ, what we are talking about is the good news about Jesus Christ. “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news.” Sometimes though, the good news doesn’t feel very good. The Bible contains many uplifting passages and verses. When you read them you feel like you have heard good news. But then there are those that come upon you by surprise, filled with reproach and threat. A college student is doing her devotions. She pushes herself to observe a quiet time each day, but it is hard. The ideal of who she should be stands in judgment of who she is. Today, she is feeling overwhelmed by her studies. She is disappointed in her performance and has doubts about her own worth. Her devotional reading takes her to the book of James, and in the book of James, these words. “But when you pray, you must believe and not doubt at all. Whoever doubts is like a wave in the sea that is driven and blown about by the wind. A person like that, unable to make up his mind and undecided in all that he does must not think that he will receive anything from the Lord.” (Jas 1:6-8 TEV) The intent of the passage seems clear to her. Only those with good faith, having no doubt (the ones who really don’t need help in the first place) can expect to find help from God. Those who are faltering or failing should be warned not to approach the Almighty, at least not until they are no longer double-minded. She comes to this time of quiet, hoping for guidance, but she sees no beautiful feet here. The news she reads is bad.

The late C.S. Lewis is one of the world’s most influential Christian writers. His writings for children, *The Narnia Tales*, have brought joy to millions of children. His works on Christian apologetics, *Mere Christianity*, *The Screwtape Letters*, *The Problem of Pain*, and many more still sell today. They have influenced many lives including my own. And yet C.S. Lewis came to a point in his life when he, too, wondered if the good news was really all that good after all. He was a bachelor until later in life. Then he met Joy Gresham, married her and fell in love with her. He did not know that life could be so filled with joy. He had never experienced anything like it. Joy Gresham (now Joy Lewis) was diagnosed with cancer. In just a few years, she was gone. He had written in his book *The Problem of Pain* that pain and suffering were not malicious or bad. They were God’s megaphone, to get people’s attention. Now that he was hurting, however, in a real way, not just in an abstract kind of way, the words meant nothing. To help him get through his grief he wrote a private diary each day. It has been published under the title *A Grief Observed*. Listen to his pain. “Meanwhile, where is God? This is one of the most disquieting symptoms. When you are happy, so happy that you have no sense of needing Him, so happy that you are tempted to feel His claims upon you as an interruption, if you remember yourself and turn to Him with gratitude and praise, you will be – or so it feels – welcomed with open arms. But go to him when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face,

and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that, silence. . . . Not that I am (I think) in much danger of ceasing to believe in God. The real danger is coming to believe such dreadful things about Him. The conclusion I dread is not 'So there's no God after all,' but 'So this is what God's really like Deceive yourself no longer.'" (*A Grief Observed* – pp 11-12)

The question wasn't whether God existed, but what kind of God is he after all. Maybe he is just disinterested. Maybe he doesn't care. Maybe he's cruel, and enjoys the suffering of his creatures. Maybe he is an unjust judge, or a reluctant neighbor. Maybe if you don't make the grade, he throws you out on your ear. Maybe God closes the doors of heaven to anyone who has second thoughts. Perhaps he is the God of the inquisition, who enforces obedience with all the tools of a tyrant. Perhaps he is capricious, rewarding the wicked and punishing the righteous. What kind of God?

Is the good news, really good? A college student doing her devotions begins to wonder. C.S. Lewis, who had brought magic into the lives of millions no longer could be sure. What is God really like?

And so we come to our scripture lesson for the day. The gospel writer wrote it down for a purpose. He wrote it so that, as it is read, the reader whoever he or she might see with their mind and heart God revealing himself in Jesus Christ. God draws back the curtain so that we can see into his heart. What is that heart like? Kind? Cruel? Threatening? Mark pulls back the curtain. What do you see? Jesus heals Peter's mother-in-law. Word spreads and the whole city gathers around. They bring their sick and those possessed by demons. He heals many of them. He teaches, and the people were amazed, Mark says, because he spoke as one who had authority. In other words, when Jesus spoke, things happened. People were healed. Demons were cast out. The Pharisees and teachers of the law relied on the law for their authority. But Christ's authority came from his relationship with others and his power.

Here is the thing, though. Christ did not heal everyone. He healed many, the gospel writer tells us, not all. In the morning Jesus goes out to a private place to be alone. His disciples have to hunt him down. "Everyone is looking for you." But he doesn't go to them. Instead he goes on his way. The healings are good news, but healing did not come to all. Many Christians assume that because God is all powerful, that, if they just have faith, tragedy will not come across their doorstep. How different this is from the story of Daniel and the fiery furnace. The King of Babylon says, "Worship me, Daniel, or die in the furnace." Daniel says, "O king. I know that my God is able to save me from burning. Maybe he will, but maybe he won't." Daniel believes God can save him from burning. But he might not. Still, the only God his heart can worship is the compassionate, just, fair, holy, beautiful God that he has known all his life. He can no more change that than we can eat grass like cows. He might, in weakness, bow down to the king. But if he does, it's a lie, for in his heart he loves only one God. A man under threat of torture may say he hates his beloved. But it's a lie. The hard part is trying to make sense of it all, if healing doesn't come. Healing might come. It might not. Where is any good news in that?

The truth is that “God does not spare the redeemed from the harsh realities of life. Accidents do happen, and they can shake our world; disease and death are as real for Christians as from anyone else.” (*Eyes Wide Open*, Daniel Romanowski, p. 134) “Out of wedlock pregnancy, mental illness, alcoholism, debt, divorce, long-term memories of wounds, homosexuality estrangement, someone in jail, debilitating grief, Alzheimer’s disease, unemployment, major or chronic illness, financial difficulties, conflict with a child. It is the rare family that doesn’t struggle sooner or later with at least one of these situations.” (p 135.) And we wonder, are we looking into the heart of God?

Maybe God is a tyrant. Maybe good news isn’t so good after all. Just a life of difficulty here and hell to pay when we die. But then we hear the words. By the Holy Spirit becomes God’s true word and presence for us, and through them we see the curtain pulled back. God’s heart is on display. What do we see? Jesus is angry, not at the epileptic boy who thrashes around and falls into the fire, but at the spirit, which in this awful way hurts and defaces God’s good creation. We see a crowd of hungry people and Christ’s heart filled with compassion until he will not take no for an answer. He commands his disciples to feed them. We see a widow following a funeral procession carrying away her son. As her tears stream down her face, and for a moment we wonder if this tragedy doesn’t reflect the indifference of God or the cruelty of God. Maybe it is some sort of sick punishment for sin. Like C.S. Lewis “The conclusion [we] dread is not ‘So there’s no God after all,’ but ‘So this is what God’s really like.’” We read on, “When the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her.” (Luke 7:12) The gospel writer doesn’t tell us this, but I believe there were tears on Jesus’ face too. How beautiful are the feet of him who brings good news.

We listen as Christ calls to himself all who labor, and are heavy laden. Promises them rest. The depressed, the driven, the schizophrenic, the successful with lives too full for anything else but hurry. Christ calls to them. “Come to me, all you who labor and are heavy laden.” Just the words for a college student struggling with spiritual inadequacy and vocational uncertainty. But James has given his verdict. The double minded person is like a wave on the sand, tossed about by every wind that blows by and utterly useless. But wait, wait . . . there is another voice. It calls to her and says. That’s not right. I tell you, whoever comes to me I will not cast out. Whoever. No qualification, no stipulation. How beautiful are the feet of him who brings good news.

Jesus did not go back the next day, though everyone was looking for him. Why? He said, that he had to preach the message in other towns and village. The message needed to be heard. In every village in every town. Because in every nation there are people will not ever be healed physically. Their dead will not be made alive. They wonder if God is punishing them. They are there in every town, in every city, in every country. They need to see some beautiful feet and to hear the good news, which is the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

How hard it would be to share the gospel if it had to do with making the grade. How hard if it were about a list of virtues more difficult that we can ever achieve. If the gospel were about the standards we must meet. If it were about righteousness that we don’t have, it would not be good news at all. But the good

news is not about us, it about God in Christ. News that needs to be heard especially by those who will not be healed. Mark has drawn back the curtain, and we have seen the heart of God. The cat's out of the bag. We know the good news. Go and tell. Speak the good news to every nation. How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news. Christ's feet, your feet, mine.