

The Footsteps of the Messiah

Homily for December 9 and 10th.

This is John Perry, a parishioner of St Peter's. If you were to call John he would answer the phone with this greeting: "How can I make your day better?" I have never had someone answer the phone with this particular form a grace-filled reception. John has terminal cancer. He is hoping to make it through to Christmas but this is in the care and hands of God. John's phone greeting really does capture his heart. Although I can talk about trusting God, and can quote scripture and verse to support this biblical encouragement, John is a walking witness to this trust. I was with John on Thursday afternoon and left inspired after an hours' visit.

There is something about John..... he has a perspective on life that finds biblical expression in our readings today. He is able to hear the "Footsteps of the Messiah".

What do I mean by this? In our psalm we have this verse:

Righteousness will go before him and will make a path for his steps.

You might be asking, well what does that mean? Righteousness in the Bible is a code for God ordering a world that is so often disordered. Even though John is dying - his interior life is remarkably ordered, it is a place where God's righteousness is at home.

God's righteousness is characterized in the psalm with evocative phrases like:

- He will speak peace to his people
- His salvation is at hand so that glory may dwell in our land. Glory is another way of referring to God's presence.
- Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet
- Righteousness and peace will kiss each other
- Faithfulness will spring up from the ground and righteousness look down from the sky.

Such righteousness says the psalm makes a path for God steps.

This is a really cool verse because in ancient Jewish tradition, whenever you see the image of footsteps in the Psalms they interpreted that as a reference to the Messiah. There was a Jewish expression called the "Footsteps of the Messiah". Those were like the clues that the Messiah was coming. Just like if you might not see someone you can hear their footsteps maybe in the woods hunting or something — you hear someone's footsteps before you see their face — the Jews had this tradition that the footsteps of the Messiah was evidence that the Messiah was coming.

John hears the footsteps of the Messiah with the spiritual ears of his heart. Now John spends about 18 to 20 hours a day sleeping, because his body needs this much rest. He understands something that St Peter in the reading from his 2nd letter expresses so clearly. Everything in the physical world is transitory, even creation itself. St Peter says it like this:

The day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved by fire, and the earth and everything that is done in it will be disclosed.

By heavens St Peter means the physical universe and the elements refer to every aspect of the physical world we inhabit here below. But this is not all. Everything that has been done on the earth will be disclosed. There will be a kind of transparency where God will right every wrong because all disorder has to be brought into right order. To make his point, St Peter then summarizes what he just said by stating that since all things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought we to be?

Well, we should be those who are attentive to the Footsteps of the Messiah. Listen to how St Peter characterizes this?

We are to lead lives in holiness and godliness and while we wait for these things, strive to be found by him at peace.

Holiness and godliness are synonymous. John talked with me about this when he said:

“I try to tell my family, don’t worry so much about other people... and what they think. All is God and what really matters is what God thinks.”

People growing in holiness and godliness know that everything in the physical universe is decaying. And yet there is the hope of the future reign of God. The promise of a new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness will be at home.

I have rarely seen someone as expectant for death as John. He is like a child waiting for Christmas, because he trusts explicitly that the Messiah’s footsteps will usher in a far greater future.

There is another aspect to those who are able to hear the Footsteps of the Messiah. In the Gospel reading for today we hear these words: The beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ. I want to share with you a Greek Word. The word we translate as Good News is ***euangelion***. “Eu” in Greek is a prefix that just means “good”. Angelion — you can actually hear the English word “angel” in that — so ***euangelion*** means “good message” or “good news”. What after all is an angel? A messenger of the Good News. We get the word evangelize from that Greek root. To evangelize is to share the good news. This is something that is then highlighted in the rest of the passage in relation to John the Baptist. John the Baptist personifies the governing verse from the psalm:

Righteousness will go before him and will make a path for his steps.

John the Baptist called people to repentance. This word means to have a change of mind, to see things differently in light of the Footsteps of the Messiah. But notice this about John’s Good News. He proclaims it in the wilderness, the place where we live in this world. The wilderness is most completely captured in the Jewish imagination by the Exodus, something that happened around 1450 BC..... While delivered from Egypt the people of God spent 38 years wandering in the wilderness because they were unable to be attentive to the footsteps of God. They rebelled

against him, distrusted his leaders Aaron and Moses, and chose to be stubborn. But when we can hear and respond to the call to a change of mind, then our baptism, as represented by John's work in the Jordan, takes on a new dimension. We not only hear the good news but we want to then extend it to others. We too become messengers who like John Perry, in the wilderness of his terminal illness is saying:

Listen, do you hear? The Footsteps of the Messiah. The bad news of John cancer cannot suppress the good news, the euangelion of Jesus Christ.

When we hear the Footsteps of the Messiah we know that life in this world is transitory, and there is good news to share – which brings me to the third and last point of today's homily. Footsteps result in the Messiah's arrival. The Prophet Isaiah declares his arrival this way:

Say to the cities of Judah:

"Here is your God". Jesus is the God who will feed his flock like a shepherd, and gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep."

What a beautiful image that is prefaced at the beginning of Isaiah's poetry with this:

"Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her, that she has served her term."

One of the things John said to me on Thursday had to do with his perspective on life.

"We get into trouble when we think life in this world should be easy. It isn't, it is hard. There are so many challenges – but life is good."

As I left John and drove home I sensed the Holy Spirit prompting me to share his story today. He of course gave me permission to do so. Speaking of the Holy Spirit, remember how at the end of today's Gospel Jesus's cousin John says that the arrival of the Messiah will coincide with the Baptism of the Holy Spirit?

I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.

The Spirit is the very presence of Jesus in our lives, where we are infused with the love of God so that we become those who usher the Messiah's arrival because Jesus is present in us.

John Perry is for me a living example of a spirit-filled man because he welcomes Jesus daily into the heart of his suffering and dying – "All is God" John said. He hears the Footsteps of the Messiah and anticipates Jesus arrival when he leaves this disordered world of suffering and death and enters God's ordered world where "righteousness is at home".