

“Trust the Messenger”

Isaiah 52:7-10

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Christmastime 1998, my mom has been wearing her Furman sweatshirt nonstop for about 2 weeks around the house. Every afternoon around 1pm, we strain our eyes to look over the hill and see the mail truck approaching. The anticipation is palpable as we wait for that Furman acceptance envelope. How beautiful, on the mountains, are the feet of the messenger.

Think of a time you have waited expectantly for news. What was it like? Have you craned your neck to stare down the road, waiting for a car to appear and willing it to arrive sooner? Sat staring at a timer, never believing seconds would creep by so slowly and yet, feel suspended in time all together? Hit the refresh button on your computer waiting for a screen to pop up or a message to arrive? Can you still smell the waiting room or feel the rough upholstery of a chair where you sat waiting for news? Can you see the posters or the wallpaper in the office?

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger. The royal city is looking with hope out to the edges of what can be seen, waiting in suspense. Our Scripture for today opens, not on the event, but the tidings of it, the rumor of it, news delivered by advance messengers. The messenger who brings, who announces, who says. The beauty is not really in the feet, but in the arrival of the

tidings, the joy of the news that we have been waiting for- good news, salvation, God reigns. For Israel, and the audience of Isaiah, good news, salvation was release from captivity and return from exile. For Mary, Joseph, Elizabeth, Zechariah, the shepherds, the magi, good news is the birth of the Messiah, Emmanuel, God with us. For us, good news is Christ is born anew to us, Christ is born to redeem and restore us and all of creation.

But as we take down the tree, vacuum up all the needles, pack away the ornaments and the luminous markers of a season that came and went too quickly, it might start to seem like that good news is just a rumor. Christ has come! But the world is still seems determined to follow paths of hurt and darkness. Christ has come, but now we are left with a dreary season of January, only that National Championship football game and the Golden Globes to look forward to. The regular pressures of life exert their power over us once again. Christ has come, but life is still filled with sorrow, illness, greed, and pain. Christ has come but we are still searching.

The prophet Isaiah reminds us that we can trust the messengers. Listen! Your sentinels lift up their voices, together they sing for joy. Sentinels, on the city walls, a city that has been destroyed and lies in ruins. Destroyed and taken into captivity, but it is no mistake that the sentinels are posted on the walls of

Jerusalem, a signal of hope, watchmen of hope.¹ “Together they sing for joy; for in plain sight they see the return of the Lord to Zion.” The voice of the messenger is joined by the watchmen on the walls. Seeing is added to hearing, and then singing. “Break forth together into singing you ruins of Jerusalem.” Sitting in the ruins, break forth into singing. This is not a cheap promise of hope. It is the real promise of the Messiah, the real outpouring of love and grace to reconcile, make whole, and redeem, knowing full well the reality of darkness and death. The Lord has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem. This news is so good that hearing, becomes seeing, becomes rejoicing. The response is rejoicing, in the ruins and in the rebuilding.

Trust that this news is worth repeating. As a teacher in Virginia, I supported the work of our school’s PBIS committee. Positive behavior intervention strategies is a framework for building positive relationships with students, setting and teaching expectations and coaching to support behavior. This framework is now nationally recognized as one of the ways to prevent suspensions and support healthy outcomes for students. To me it was also living out hospitality and grace. Greet children with genuine welcome by teaching expectations and coaching to make positive choices. One of the layers of the framework is that children who

¹ Sandra Hack Polaski says, “The idea of sentinels posted on the walls of Jerusalem is present foolishness but, more significantly, also signals future hope.”

need support may be connected with a coach, someone who is not their teacher, who they check in with during the day to talk about how their choices are going and set goals for the day or the week. I was a 5th grade teacher and was a coach to a Kindergartener. This wee friend sometimes used some inappropriate words and used force to solve conflicts. So, we focused on strategies to calm down and work through our anger in safe ways. Each morning, we would meet while my class was getting settled and talk about the day, setting goals. We would check in as we saw each other through the day, or he would sometimes come to my class for a break. Each afternoon, as my class was packing up, our friend would come from Kindergarten to report on his day. I will never forget one day, when we saw him basically strut into the classroom. He came straight over to me, extended his hand with his goal sheet for the day, and grinned so wide that the smile seemed to radiate from his heart out. He had a conflict with a friend and he chose to deal with his anger in a healthy, safe way instead of hitting and cussing. He was so proud of himself for making good choices. The 5th graders started to notice too. They came over and asked him about his day and he reported all the details, with flourish, and proudly shared. His news was so good, he had to share it. And my class shared with each other, parading him around and celebrating him. Not every day after that was as shining, but from that moment, he knew what was possible and it changed the reality of who he was. We know that goodness, great love, and deep

transformation have come into our world through Christ and even though we still search for the fullness of God's kingdom, we know what is possible.

Paul K. Hooker of Austin Theological Seminary describes it this way.

“There is a direct line from the manger to the cross to the tomb to the mountaintop in Galilee to the final consummation of the hope of salvation. The hope of Advent, birthed at Christmas, grows through the ordinariness of things, until at year's end it blooms as Christ the King and returns to hope again. As Christians yearn for Christ to come again, we do not simply stare into the far-off distant future, we remember the future as we recall the person of Jesus Christ, who represents the coming of the kingdom.”

The hope of salvation, born in Christ, grows in the ordinariness of things. It grows when we take down the tinsel and take up the work of sitting with one another in ruins of life and pointing to what is possible through the love of Christ. The peace the messengers announced grows in the ordinariness of things as we lift our voices and sing for joy when we testify to how we have seen God at work in our every day lives and our every day relationships. Tell one another where you have seen God in plain sight. The work of Christmas now begins, where we remind one another, “Your God reigns” and has come to redeem you and bring you life.

The Presbyterian Church, USA, has a unique program as a part of the Presbyterian Mission Agency. The Young Adult Volunteer program is for young

adults aged 19-30, to serve for a year with mission partners nationally or internationally. Volunteers serve alongside local agencies to address root causes of poverty and to support the work of reconciliation. I was a Young Adult Volunteer in Belfast, Northern Ireland from 2006-2007. One of my placements was a local Presbyterian Church which sat on the divide of Catholic and Protestant communities which had been at war with one another during the Troubles, the conflict in Northern Ireland. The church had been destroyed by an arson attack. From the ruins, they committed to rebuild and to being a beacon of cross community reconciliation and peacemaking. One way they did this was with a group called "Friends and Neighbors." This group of the more senior members of the community, met and still meets, every Thursday at church for a cuppa and chat, games, and then a hot lunch. In the upstairs room of the church, you will find a spirited game of boccia, which is seated bowling. When I was there, it was refereed by Gordon. There was healthy banter as Celine commented that Gordon's call was off and he best get his eyes checked and empathetic conversation as members inquired about each other's families. What is so incredible about all of this is that Gordon was a police officer during the Troubles and many of the boccia players are Catholic neighbors. They were enemies, standing across lines of deep division. Now, they sit as friends and neighbors, in the ordinariness of things, proclaiming

our God reigns and striving for peace and reconciliation in everyday life. How beautiful are the feet of the messenger who announces peace.

Look for the messengers announcing peace, sharing this news so worthy of repeating, in the birth of Christ, life has been redeemed from fang and claw. Look for those who proclaim God's reign in ordinary action- seeking the lost, binding up the broken hearted, feeding the hungry, bringing peace. For the Lord has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem. Trust that God came in the ordinary and comes still in the ordinariness of things. Trust that this good news is so real and trustworthy it is worth sharing.

Trust the messengers of Mary, Joseph, Elizabeth, the angels, the shepherds, the magi. They knew real social pressure, the real threat of Herod's wrath, the reality of death. Trust the messengers of the witness of Scripture, though the city lies in ruins God's action is decisive and redemptive. Trust the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to you, "Your God reigns."

Trust yourself as a messenger of the hope alive in Christ today. God gives us the message to share. Christ has come, hope is real, and we do not have to be afraid. Open your heart again to the good news in Christ, so that hearing becomes seeing, becomes singing. Trust the messenger, Your God reigns.