

Footprints

One of the most famous inspirational stories is that one called "Footprints."

Many of you know this story.

A fellow dreams that he is reviewing his life with God.

His life is represented by a series of footprints along a sandy beach.

For much of the walk, there are two sets of footprints, which the man sees as God walking beside him during his life.

But then the fellow notices that during those times when things were toughest, times he felt most alone, there is only a single set of footprints.

"Why did you leave me alone during those really hard times?" he asks God.

"My child," God replies, "during those times, I didn't leave you alone.

I carried you."

This is the first Sunday after the feast of the Ascension of our Lord.

That day when he is taken into heaven, as Luke tells it in today's first reading.

And thinking about the Ascension got me thinking about footprints.

At first about that famous inspirational story, but then about another set of footprints.

Footprints on a wood cutting made back in the 1500's, depicting Jesus ascending into heaven.

Because, on that wood cutting, if you look closely, you'll see something quite remarkable.

You'll see that while Jesus' feet are off the ground, because he's ascending, right where he was standing just moments before, on the hillside, his footprints remain – sunk firmly into the ground.

Footprints left behind by an ascending Jesus.

The Ascension of our Lord is an event that raises plenty of questions.

Like, was Jesus the first astronaut?

And, did he pass the moon and leave the solar system behind on his way to heaven?

The earliest Christians are asking similar questions, even as they stand there as witnesses.

And God, through his messengers, says to them:

“Why do you stare into space for the one whose footprints remain on earth?”

Isn't that the same question God asks us everyday?

Where do we look for God?

Out there in space, inhabiting some distant heaven?

Or might we look somewhere closer to home?

In these days of pandemic and economic shut down, days of fear and distress, these questions are particularly pertinent, don't you think?

Just the other day, I heard a retired Lutheran minister being interviewed on the radio.

The pandemic has caused him to lose his faith.

"Where is God in the midst of all of this pain and suffering?", he asks.

Which kind of startled me.

I had to wonder what his God looks like, acts like, feels like, if pain and suffering make him doubt God's reality?

Was his faith merely in the creeds and dogmas and prayers?

Or was his faith in the person of Christ, in the humanity of God?

Meaning, was his faith in the God who sits with us in our suffering, who, when we are hanging from our own cross, comes and hangs with us?

Isn't this, after all, the God whom Jesus reveals?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was also a Lutheran pastor.

He was captured by the Nazis and put in a death camp, and he knew a great deal about faith in the face of suffering and pain.

He knew something about footprints too.

"The body of Christ," he says, "takes up space on the earth.

In other words, the Body of Christ makes footprints."

On the other hand, dogmas, creeds and doctrines don't need any space..

They're disembodied ideas.

But the incarnate Christ needs not only ears or hearts that accept ideas.

The incarnate Christ needs living people who will follow him." Id. modified.

Living people – who will follow him.

This has many implications, but here's just two.

First, to follow Jesus means to do what Jesus does.

Second, it means to go where Jesus goes.

Which begs the question: what does Jesus do and where does Jesus go?

The answer comes from his very first sermon.

That day when he put down his hammer and saw and stood up in Nazareth.

There in the synagogue, where, surrounded by family and friends, he takes the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, and reads:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me...

He has sent me to preach good news to the poor.

To proclaim release to the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind.

To liberate the oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

All of which is very well received; until Jesus tells them that he really means what he's just read!

That he, this nobody from Nazareth, is the embodiment of God's promise to do these marvelous things!

At which point the whole congregation tries to throw him off the cliff.

Jesus' agenda is a concrete agenda.

It's an agenda intimately concerned not with life after death, but with life before death.

The mission of Jesus is to heal our broken world, by healing broken people.

So that we might be restored to who we are meant to be.

Creatures yes, but creatures made in the image and likeness of God!

A God who laughs whole galaxies into existence.

Who knows exactly the number of hairs on your head.

It's in that restoration, from brokenness to wholeness, that we discover, and enter into, eternal life.

And here's the strange thing.

"Eternal life" isn't a disembodied soul "up there" with harps strumming and little wings flapping.

No.

"Eternal life" is to know Jesus, and to know the Father, not after we die, but today, Sunday, May 24, 2020.

Even as we sit, smack dab in the middle of a pandemic.

Smack dab in the middle of our mortality.

Don't take my word for it.

Jesus himself tells us what "eternal life" is:

"And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent."

Restoring human brokenness in this workaday world of ours is God's primary mission:

"I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do."

What is the work of God?

It is to heal our broken world, by healing broken people.

So that we might become who we truly are: creatures made in the image and likeness of God.

I know that there are lots of folks who think that the life of a Christian is all about focusing on pie in the sky in the sweet bye and bye, or memorizing the creeds, or being sharp with the dogmas.

But these things, which certainly have their place, don't leave footprints.

In calling us to life before death, Jesus invites us to become fellow travelers in the Kingdom of God.

He invites us to develop the eyes to see in the least among us — the face of Jesus.

He invites us to give time, talent and treasure to building up the strange Kingdom of this strange God.

A Kingdom whose weapons are humility and service.

Whose song is forgiveness.

Whose walking stick is hope, especially in the face of hopelessness.

On this Sunday after the Ascension, we can stand looking up into heaven or we can believe Jesus when he assures us that:

"You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

The Ascension of our Lord is not a call to look up into space.

"It is the day to trust that Christ's promise remains down here, in and around and with us.

We are not alone.

You and I who dance and climb.

Who run and get knocked down.

We who lie on the grass and watch the evening sun expire." B. Lundblad (paraphrased).

We are not alone.

The Holy Spirit is even now invading our lives, upending our expectations, preparing us for glories beyond imagining!

Transforming confused and bewildered us — into a people who are — even now, becoming one, as Jesus and the Father are one.

May our footprints tell that story.

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