

You Got Shoes?

A sermon preached by
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Text:
Isaiah 52: 1-10
Matthew 25: 31-41

January 17, 2010
Martin Luther King, Jr. Sunday

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Isaiah 52: 1-10

1 Awake, awake, put on your strength, O Zion! Put on your beautiful garments, O Jerusalem, the holy city; for the uncircumcised and the unclean shall enter you no more. **2** Shake yourself from the dust, rise up, O captive Jerusalem; loose the bonds from your neck, O captive daughter Zion!
3 For thus says the Lord: You were sold for nothing, and you shall be redeemed without money. **4** For thus says the Lord God: Long ago, my people went down into Egypt to reside there as aliens; the Assyrian, too, has oppressed them without cause.
5 Now therefore what am I doing here, says the Lord, seeing that my people are taken away without cause? Their rulers howl, says the Lord, and continually, all day long, my name is despised.
6 Therefore my people shall know my name; therefore in that day they shall know that it is I who speak; here am I.
7 How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, "Your God reigns."
8 Listen! Your sentinels lift up their voices, together they sing for joy; for in plain sight they see the return of the Lord to Zion.
9 Break forth together into singing, you ruins of Jerusalem; for the Lord has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem.
10 The Lord has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.

Matthew 25: 31-41

[Jesus said] "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. **32** All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats,**33** and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. **34** Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; **35** for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me

something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, **36** I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' **37** Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? **38** And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? **39** And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' **40** And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.' **41** Then he will say to those at his left hand, "You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; **42** for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, **43** I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' **44** Then they also will answer, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?' **45** Then he will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' **46** And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."



Selma, Alabama, 1959.

Joanne was 6 years old when she received in the mail a white dress from her cousin who had outgrown it. Her mother proudly walked Joanne into town to buy shoes to go with the dress and she chose the shoes from the display that would have been perfect. She tried them on, but they were too small. Her mom asked the clerk if they had the same shoes but in a larger size that Joanne could try on.

The clerk said to her mom, “You have to buy the shoes that that little *n-gg--r*’s feet were already in.” Joanne’s mom bought the shoes and Joanne cried all the way home. In fact, she cried every time she had to wear those shoes.

I suspect it wasn’t the pain of the tight-fitting, too-small shoes that made Joanne cry.

Selma, Alabama, 1999.

I heard that story from Joanne Bland while I was in Selma as part of a Civil Rights History Tour with some 40 other church folk. That day we were visiting the Voter Rights Museum where Joanne, who was then 46 years old, runs an education and history program to keep the memory of the struggle alive. That day was, for me, the most eventful of the 10 day bus trip, filled with so many experiences that my senses and emotions were overwhelmed. As it turned out, that day was my day to record for the group journal so I kept detailed notes.

We had met Mrs. Amelia Boynton, a contemporary of Rosa Parks and a woman who has been called the “Mother of the Selma Voting Rights Movement” – with an impish twinkle in her eye, she called herself the “*Grandmother* of the *entire* Civil Rights Movement.” Mrs. Boynton was one who personally faced down white segregationists and found herself literally having doors slammed in her face – a woman who you can see being physically assaulted by Sheriff Jim Clark in film footage in the documentary *Eyes on the Prize*.

We visited the George Washington Carver Homes, the “projects” where much of the voting rights movement was organized. We stopped at Brown’s Chapel AME Church where Dr. King had spoken often between 1965 and 1968. We stood in the courtyard of the projects where thousands had gathered for marches and rallies and demonstrations, including 1965’s March on Montgomery. We stopped at First Baptist Church on the corner of Jefferson Davis Street and Martin Luther King

Boulevard, probably the only place in the world where those two names intersect!

We met Rachel West Nelson, one of the two girls whose relationship with Dr. King when they were children is the focus of the book and movie, *Selma, Lord, Selma*. We walked the Edmund Pettus Bridge that day, the bridge where demonstrators were tear-gassed and beaten and shot on Bloody Sunday as they protested their inability to vote; a bridge which Dr. King and others defiantly and successfully crossed on their way to Montgomery later that year to force Alabama to revise its election laws so that everyone had equal voting rights. And then we ended that emotionally and physically exhausting day with a visit to the rebuilt Rising Star Baptist Church which had been fire-bombed just three years earlier in 1996.

Yet what still stands out most vividly from that day is this grown woman, 46 year old Joanne Bland – strong, independent, determined, bright, a student leader in the 1960’s voting rights movement, an adult community leader in today’s Selma – telling us with tears welling up in her eyes that when she was 6 years old she had to buy shoes that were too small, simply because of the color of her skin. No – *not because of the color of her skin*, but because of the ignorant attitude of a racist, segregationist society which thought it was okay to do what that salesman did. And 40 years later this woman was still hurting from the personal attack and the blatant disregard of her dignity and humanity.

“How beautiful upon the mountains / are the feet of the messenger / who announces peace, / who brings us good news, / who announces salvation, / who says to Zion, / ‘Your God reigns.’” (Isaiah 52:7)

Does anyone have the right to deny the feet of any of God’s children their place wherever they want to go? Does anyone have the right to deny the shoe-covered feet of any of God’s children their place in God’s creation, their willingness to carry

out the will of God, to carry to God's mountain the message of peace and good news and salvation? Do any of us have the capacity to hold back the message of God simply because we don't like God's shoe color or because the color of another human's skin is different than ours?

"I baptize you with water," preached John the Baptist, "but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the [laces] thong of his [shoes] sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." (Luke 3:16)

Twenty years before Joanne Bland's encounter with hatred – Easter Sunday, April 9, 1939 – the morning was gray and cloudy in Washington, DC. But it didn't rain. It was reported that even the bellhops that morning prayed, "Lord, please don't let it rain!" Why should the bellhops care? A distinguished African-American lady, a lady who had conquered the capitals of Europe with her magnificent voice, Marian Anderson, was to sing that day at the Lincoln Memorial on the Mall. And there would be room for *all* people of every ethnic group.

The story is well known. Marian Anderson *was* to have sung at prestigious Constitution Hall, then the only large auditorium in Washington—until the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) found out that the performer who wanted to rent their Hall was African-American – a race forbidden to perform by a clause in the by-laws of their Hall.

The refusal to let Ms. Anderson sing at Constitution Hall brought about protest after protest. Professional musicians from around the world cancelled scheduled performances at the Hall. "I am ashamed to play at Constitution Hall," said Jasha Heifitz, one of the world's leading violinists. "One of the most monstrous and stupid things that has happened in America in years," said journalist Heywood Broun. Telegraph messages flooded the national DAR offices. Music critic Deems Taylor wrote, "This action subverts the clear meaning of the U.S. Constitution, in particular the Bill of Rights, and places your

organization in the camp of those who seek to destroy democracy, justice, and liberty."

Marian Anderson was unaware of the magnitude of the outcry. She later spoke of seeing, by chance, a news headline:

I was in San Francisco, I recall, when I passed a newsstand, and my eye caught a headline: MRS. ROOSEVELT TAKES STAND. Under this was another line, in bold print just a bit smaller: RESIGNS FROM D.A.R., etc. I was on my way to the concert hall for my performance and could not stop to buy a paper. I did not get one until after the concert, and I honestly could not conceive that things had gone so far.

In her 1959 autobiography, she recalled the Easter concert at the Lincoln Memorial:

All I knew then as I stepped forward was the overwhelming impact of that vast multitude. There seemed to be people as far as the eye could see. The crowd stretched in a great semicircle from the Lincoln Memorial around the reflecting pool on to the shaft of the Washington Monument. I had a feeling that a great wave of good will poured out from these people, almost engulfing me. And when I stood up to sing our National Anthem I felt for a moment as though I were choking. For a desperate second I thought that the words, well as I know them, would not come.

I sang. I don't know how. There must have been the help of professionalism I had accumulated over the years. Without it I could not have gone through the program. I sang—and again I know because I consulted a newspaper clipping—"America," the aria "O mio Fernando," Schubert's "Ave Maria,"

and three spirituals—"Gospel Train," "Trampin'," and "My Soul Is Anchored in the Lord."

From then on, it was a tradition with Ms. Anderson to sing all sorts of classical pieces and to end her concerts with three or four gospel songs.

Marian Anderson, one of the world's leading vocalists, was not allowed to set foot, not allowed to place the soles of her shoes on the concert stage of the largest performance hall in the capital of the world's greatest democratic republic simply because of the color of her skin. No – *not the color of her skin*, but because of the misguided, thoughtless actions of a segregationist culture acting through the DAR which promoted what it thought was the desire of our American forebears. And it is that same pattern of thinking that has reigned supreme in this country for most of our history – we, in the majority, can keep you, of the minority, in your place, a "place" which we can arbitrarily decide.

"We don't like your skin color. You can't eat here. You can't even use the bathroom here."

"We don't like the color of your shoes. If you touch those shoes, you gotta buy them."

We claim a national foundation in God's will but we act as if this country's legacy is built on elementary school playground rules. – "Whatever we say is right and you gotta accept it."

"How beautiful upon the mountains / are the feet of the messenger."

"Well, we don't want *your* feet on *this* mountain."

"One who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the laces of his shoes."

"Well, you're just gonna have to buy the shoes that little *n-gg-r's* feet were in."

Long before the fall of the Soviet Union Marian Anderson toured from Leningrad to Moscow, singing to packed audiences. She was warned, however, not to sing religious songs or spirituals in the U.S.S.R. because they would "fall on deaf ears."

"They are the songs of my people," Anderson had answered. "I shall sing them whenever and wherever I please." And she did. She sang what the Soviet announcer called, "An Aria by Schubert", which was in fact Schubert's setting of *Ave Maria*, a song banned by the communists. But at the end of nearly every concert during the Soviet tour people rushed down the aisle, pounded on the stage, and cried, "Deep River! Heaven, Heaven!" They wanted gospel songs, and Marian Anderson was more than willing. One song which they wanted more than any others and which she often sang was *All God's Children Got Shoes*:

You got shoes, I got shoes,
All God's children got shoes.
And when I get to heaven gonna try on my shoes,
I'm gonna walk all over God's heaven.

Refrain

Oh heaven, heaven,
Everybody talkin' about heaven ain't goin' there,
Heaven, heaven,
I'm gonna walk all over God's heaven.

Well you got a robe, I got a robe,
All God's children got a robe,
And when I get to heaven gonna try on my robe,
Gonna wear it all over God's heaven.

Well you got a crown, I got a crown,
All God's children got a crown,
And when I get to heaven gonna try on my crown,
Gonna wear it all over God's heaven.

Well you got a harp, I got a harp,
All God's children got a harp,
Ah when I get to heaven gonna play on my harp,
I'm gonna play all over God's heaven.

Well you got wings, I got wings
All God's children got wings
When I get to heaven gonna put on my wings
I'm gonna fly all over God's Heaven

Do we have those shoes which will carry us to the places where God would have us go – to overcome the mountains of injustice and hatred that dominate our world? Do we have shoes that make our feet beautiful upon God's mountain? Do we know the feet of Jesus, the feet which wear shoes that we can't even imagine touching let alone wearing? Can we wear the shoes of God who calls us to walk the walk of justice and peace, love and compassion, understanding and action? The shoes that take us to where Jesus invites us – to the hungry and the thirsty, to the stranger and the naked and the sick and the imprisoned?

In his book, *Love in Action*, Dr. King wrote:

We talk eloquently about our commitment to the principles of Christianity, and yet our lives are saturated with the practices of paganism. We proclaim our devotion to democracy, but we sadly practice the very opposite of the democratic creed. We talk passionately about peace, and at the same time we assiduously prepare for war. We make our fervent pleas for the high road of justice, and then we tread unflinchingly the low road of injustice. This

strange dichotomy, this agonizing gulf between the *ought* and the *is*, represents the tragic theme of [humanity's] earthly pilgrimage. But in the life of Jesus we find that the gulf is bridged.

We *have* the shoes. We have the shoes that allow us to walk across the bridges that separate us from one another. We have the shoes that Jesus left behind for us to wear – shoes of forgiveness, love, tolerance, patience, passion; shoes of change, confrontation, diversity, doubt, determination; shoes that will walk us to the places where God is very present and very persistent.

You got shoes? You got shoes; I got shoes. All God's children got shoes.

The same day that I heard Joanne Bland tell the story of her and her mother's encounter with the evil of racism – one of so many similar stories that we hear so often and don't challenge often enough – I heard another story that brought it all together for me.

My friend Richard Cox was leading us on this Civil Rights History Tour in 1999. Dick is a retired United Methodist pastor who had been, as a younger man, extremely active in the 1960's racial civil rights movement and remains actively involved in fighting racism today. In the 1960s, he was an Associate Pastor at a large Methodist Church in Harlem, where he wore the shoes of being the only white person at the church. During his many trips to Selma and Montgomery and Birmingham he had met Dr. King and his associates many times.

On our trip in 1999, Dick told of a Sunday back in the 1960's when he was to lead the extemporaneous prayers at his church in Harlem. As he prayed, God brought these words out of his mouth: "I pray for a time when the color of a man's or woman's skin is no more important than the size of his or her shoes."

Are we any closer to that time today? In some ways we are. Maybe today you can try on a pair of shoes without worrying about the salesperson forcing you to buy them because your different-colored skin touched them. But if your skin is dark brown, are you able to walk into a suburban mall's shoe store without the security guard snapping to an alert mode? No. Maybe today we are not judged by the color of our feet as they touch the shoes of the majority, but are those in the racial minority allowed the privileges of those in the racial majority? No.

The gulf that Dr. King talked about, the gulf that he devoted his life to eliminating, the gulf that got so deep that it cost him his life – God gave us the bridge over that gulf. Dr. King knew it. Jesus was the bridge. And we have the shoes to walk the bridge that crosses the gulf. That's the truth of the matter.

“Goodness is stronger than evil,” prayed Desmond Tutu, “Love is stronger than hate / Light is stronger than darkness / Life is stronger than death / Victory is ours through One who loves us.” Walk the bridge from evil to goodness, from hate to love, from darkness to light, from death to life. Put on the shoes that Jesus left us and walk that bridge to victory.

All God's children got shoes. You got shoes, I got shoes, all God's children got shoes. We got the shoes of the One who was greater than John. We got the shoes of the One who we know as the Messiah. We got the shoes of the One who brought reality into this world and called us to wear the shoes with pride and faith.

We *got* shoes. In the opening of the movie, *Forrest Gump*, Forrest is sitting on a bus stop bench in Savannah, Georgia, when an African-American nurse sits next to him. We can't avoid the irony and message of the encounter here – just a few years before this scene segregation laws would have never let it happen.

He points at her white shoes.

“Those must be comfortable shoes,” he says, “I'll bet you could walk all day in shoes like that and not feel a thing. I wish I had shoes like that.”

“My feet hurt,” answers the nurse slightly annoyed.

“Momma always says there's an awful lot you could tell about a person by their shoes. Where they're going. Where they've been.” The woman stares at Forrest as he looks down at his own shoes. “I've worn lots of shoes. I bet if I think about it real hard I could remember my first pair of shoes.” Forrest closes his eyes tightly. “Momma said they'd take my anywhere.”

The shoes we need aren't necessarily comfortable shoes, but they are shoes that we can wear on our journey toward inclusion and equality and justice to which God calls us. We need shoes that can take our beautiful feet to God's mountain. We need shoes that will walk us to the waters of the Jordan River.

My friend, Pastor Adan, has a quotation at the end of his Email messages. It's from a hip hop group from Denver called The Flobots (anybody know them?) “Stand Up! We shall not be moved. Unless it's for children with no socks and shoes ...” I think that's so on-point. We need to stand up – we need to commit to not being moved from our fight for justice in Jesus' name – and we need to move when it comes to children without socks and shoes.

How many photos have you seen this week of children and moms and dads and grandparents who no longer have shoes after Haiti's earthquake? I've been there – I've walked those streets that you see on television, I've stood in front of that Presidential Palace that is now collapsed, I've worked with people whose building is now collapsed and who now are living in devastation and chaos – and I don't even yet know if the people that I met while I was there are alive or not – I may never

know. I have seen people without shoes, without food, without what you and I take for granted.

Here is one more opportunity for us to put on our shoes. Right now we need to send money – the we need to send specific, requested items – then we need shoes on the ground in Port au Prince. Let's do it. Let's put on those shoes today.

We need shoes. We *got* shoes. We got the shoes of God. We just gotta tie 'em tighter and face the world, wearing those shoes that fit us so perfectly. I got shoes, you got shoes, all God's children got shoes.

Amen.