



December 20, 2015 – “Christmas Footwear (Isaiah 9:2-7; Luke 2: 8-17)”

Dr. Dave Fry

Isaiah 9 Intro

The scripture I’m going to read is one of the most familiar of the Christmas passages, even though it is from the Old Testament, even though these words are never mentioned in the gospel versions of Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John, or anywhere in the New Testament, for that matter. Nevertheless, these are Christmas words for us, as much a part of the Christmas story as the words, “And there were in the same country shepherds, keeping watch over their flocks by night...”

“And his name shall be called Wonderful Counsellor, mighty God, everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” Such beautiful words they often overshadow the beginning of Isaiah’s passage, the way nobody remembers the opening act once the “real” concert takes the stage. But not this year. Reading the passage this year, one of the introductory phrases raised its hand and caught our pastor’s eye. “Choose me!”, it called out. “Call on me!” So he did, allowing that phrase to tell its version of the Christmas message. I’ll read Isaiah 9: 2-7, but that phrase lies in verse five. It’s about boots. Listen carefully.

Boots are like photo albums, but with aroma. Boots tell stories with a smell.

These boots, for example: the boots I wore on my first winter backcountry hike into the Smoky Mountains. All day we hiked through a mixture of rain and snow, so that when we made camp, our boots and socks were soaking wet. No problem, really, because a few minutes after we crawled into our sleeping bags, our feet were dry and toasty.

In the night, however, the temperature fell well below freezing so that the next morning the boots were frozen solid. Ever tried to wear a block of solid ice? We couldn’t even get them on our feet, much less hike in them. We did the only thing we could think of to do: we poured boiling water into our shoes until they thawed enough to be flexible so that we could get them on our feet. Which felt wonderful, for about 90 seconds. The remainder of the day...not so much!

On later winter hikes, I exchanged the leather boots for this model. Huge, rubber, heavy and about as anti-stylish as one can imagine. Rubber is totally waterproof, however, and these boots have one element that makes them ideal for winter hiking: a removable inner lining made of flannel. This flannel goes into the

bottom of the sleeping bag at night, where it says warm, soft, and flexible. It serves as an extra comforter for the feet during the night and in the morning: pre-heated footwear!

Sometimes I carry these in my backpack. These are not hiking boots; they're campsite boots. With a layer of down almost an inch thick, they offer wonderful insulation from the cold and ultimate comfort for tired, blistered feet. These fall into the category of luxury hiking wear.

Isaiah's boot stories, however, are not luxury stories, nor warm and fuzzy nostalgia. Isaiah's boot memories are painful. Listen to this almost throw-up-in-your-mouth description in chapter 3: "The LORD said: Because the daughters of Zion are haughty and walk with outstretched necks, glancing wantonly with their eyes, mincing along as they go, tinkling with their feet..."

"Tinkling with their feet...??" My puppy tinkles *on* his feet, but he didn't want me to tell you about that. For Isaiah, this is a "Devil wears Prada" memory, with the rich-girl, in-crowd beauty queen wearing charm bracelets on her ankles that jingle—no, "tinkle" like little bells assuring everyone wearing Walmart Keds that she is cool from bottom to top and they are not!

For Isaiah, boot memories are not pretty. They are painful, ugly, like memories of being bullied on the playground or abused as a child. Listen to one of the most painful boot-stories of my lifetime, even though I guarantee you are not going to get the point. You're going to hear about these boots and shrug and say, "What?"

(*Larry Munson's hobnail boot Ga vs. Tenn. call.*) Try—I know it will stretch your imagination—to understand how those hobnail boot words sound to a Vol fan. Or to the Tennessee linebackers who were supposed to tackle the young Bulldog freshman. (What was his name? Herschel something-or-other.)

Just cannot go there? Okay, try this: on a sunny day, you walk from the beach to the open air bar where no-shoes, no-shirt is the expected apparel. You're waiting for your frozen margarita to arrive, when you realize this particular bar is claimed as exclusive property of the local motorcycle gang. They circle you, wearing their steel-toed boots and leather jackets. "Do you dance?" they ask, but it's a rhetorical question. "Come on, let's see you dance," they order as they begin to stomp their heavy feet dangerously near your naked, tender, slightly sunburned toes." On the wall behind the bar you suddenly notice are hung pairs of socks and sandals and flip-flops, each of them coated in dried blood. In horror, you recognize some of them as your children's footwear.

It's only a nightmare, you tell yourself, only this time it doesn't end because it's way more than a dream. It is a political reality and the boots are worn by occupying troops. Now read Isaiah 9:5 again. "For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire..."

Has anyone ever stomped on you with a hobnail boot? A bully at school, a boss at work, an abusive family member, anyone who has power to hurt you and knows it, even enjoys it? Ever encountered put-you-down boots of intimidation, humiliation, exploitation? “Now comes rescue,” shouts Isaiah! That abusive power is stripped away like smelly boots and thrown into the fire! Look down at your feet and smile. Pay-back time!

That’s Isaiah’s picture. That’s Isaiah’s promise. No, that’s Isaiah’s announcement. It has happened! With the joy and confidence that a face-to-face encounter with the Almighty God can evoke, Isaiah assures you that those fear-inducing boots are already toast, like ashes in tomorrow morning’s dead campfire. “The zeal of the Lord of Hosts shall do this.” (v. 7)

Isaiah describes God’s “shock and awe” weapon that will reverse everything. A baby. An infant, clad in knit booties. “Hey, enemy special forces troops, take a look and quake in your boots!”

A little hard to swallow? Gonna take just a tiny bit of faith to buy into Isaiah’s comforting assurances? Let’s invite Isaiah’s Christmas dance partner to join him. You’ve heard of him; his name is Luke; he’s a physician, general practice up in Galilee.

Like Isaiah’s vision, Luke’s story changes the way we look at feet. Without directly describing shoes, Luke talks about a baby’s booties that can do two things hobnailed, steel-toes warriors’ boots could never do: these little babies can alter time

Luke 2: “In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went...” Luke’s first words tell us what time it is: “in those days.” In the old time, time was shaped by the powers that be. “In those days...” time was denoted by whoever is in charge. The times were shaped by those in positions of power. “In those days...” Even the words sound tired, like someone two hours into working a double shift already looking at the clock.

The Christmas story, however, tells time differently. Christmas moves away from “In those days” to “this day”. “Do not be afraid,” say the angels. “*On this day* is born to you...” A new time has entered into the world. And the new time is now. “The kingdom of heaven is among you” announced Jesus. “This day” time is not some dreamed of far-off hope for a future in heaven; it is a direct challenge to the stress-inducing “three more shopping days until...” time. It reshapes time now.

With this baby’s birth, time is filled, not with fear but with freedom and with joy. “Do not be afraid...” “In those days” time, life is governed by fear. The powers, in both Jesus day and in our day, leverage fear to get their way – whether it be fear of the emperor, fear of terrorists, fear of the stranger, or the fear of death.

The boots worn by trampling soldiers can stomp some toes. “Be afraid, be very afraid,” they pronounce.

You have so much to fear this season, don’t you—that your marriage will turn cold, your children are turning bold, your mother is turning old. If you lose your focus on your personal fears, the news will remind you of Isis terrorists, or the economy, or that Trump will actually get elected, or that Trump will be ignored and the country will stay on the same track. “Be afraid, be very afraid,” insists the “in those days” powers with their trampling boots.

The first words spoken to Mary by the angel are “Fear not.” The first words spoken to the shepherds are, “Do not be afraid.” Time is no longer driven by fear but by “good news of great joy for all the people.” (v. 10) This child, feet swaddled in booties, turns fear into joy.

Into the darkest night, accompanied by a baby in booties, comes the message: “Fear not. For behold, I bring you good news of great joy. *On this day...*”

Who would think that what was needed to transform and save the earth might not be a plan or army, proud in purpose, proved in worth? Who would think, despite derision, that a child is God’s decision, Christ the babe is Lord of all; Christ, the babe is Lord of all. Amen.