



“Isaiah’s Peace: Send in the Child”

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Isaiah 9:2-7

As part of their school curriculum, my daughters are studying author Rudyard Kipling. They are captivated by Kipling’s “Just So Stories” about animals and how they got their most distinctive traits, like how a whale got its throat, or how a leopard got its spots, or how a camel got its hump. You may be more familiar with his most famous children’s work, a collection of stories called “The Jungle Books.” Kipling didn’t only write for children, though. He was a journalist and wrote many books and short stories. Kipling was also a prolific poet. And I wonder if Kipling had the Isaiah text that Betty read earlier in mind when he wrote his poem entitled “Boots.” In this poem, Kipling’s repetitive use of words and phrases marches to a unique rhythm, revealing the unending and maddening agony of war. It goes like this:

We're foot-slog-slog-slog-sloggin' over Africa -
Foot-foot-foot-foot-sloggin' over Africa -
(Boots-boots-boots-boots-movin' up an' down again!)
There's no discharge in the war!

Seven-six-eleven-five-nine-an'-twenty mile to-day -
Four-eleven-seventeen-thirty-two the day before -
(Boots-boots-boots-boots-movin' up an' down again!)
There's no discharge in the war!

I-'ave-marched-six-weeks in 'Ell an' certify
It-is-not-fire-devils, dark, or anything,
But boots-boots-boots-boots-movin' up an' down again,
An' there's no discharge in the war!

Boots.¹ Kipling's poem is a powerful peek into the position of a soldier in war – the vivid image of the often-painful footwear as well as the often-feared view from the fallen who find themselves lying on the ground being trampled by the marching boots. The movement of the poem keeps a steady time and rhythm, a pulsating precision, as we are reminded that war and violence seem to never stop, never cease. For the prophet Isaiah, war and discord swirled around the people of God as Israel continued to suffer under the Assyrian invasion. Also, the people of Judah had given in to faithlessness and corruption, joining ranks with the horrific Assyrian empire against their brother nation, Israel. All the nations of the world were in turmoil and in darkness, and the rhythm of war marched and trampled over all of creation.

And it was into this world that Isaiah spoke directly to those who “walked in darkness,” and who lived “in a land of deep darkness.” The people of God were confused, they had suffered loss and grief. Isaiah, at the beginning of his vision, painted a picture of a national decline still in progress, with no way out and no reason for hope. The people of whom Isaiah spoke were not merely in darkness; they were stuck in darkness, mired in the pit of despair. There was a yoke upon them, a bar on their shoulders, an oppressor's rod keeping them down. And it wasn't just being under foreign military domination or devastation, it was that they had forgotten God and rebelled against God and rejected God. And the boots of trampling warriors and blood-rolled garments became symbols of war and violence, a time of curse and darkness delivered onto Israel by God because they had turned to the powers of the world for safety and they had given into their desires for war.

But this poet, Isaiah, took the boots of war that trampled over God's world and employed a very “pedestrian” metaphor in his vision for a time when those warriors' boots would one day be fuel for the fire of peace. And the fire and light of peace would soon grow, doing away with gloom...the folks who were walking in darkness would see a great light...the yoke of their burden, the bar across their shoulders and the rod of their oppressors would all be snapped by God...and this wonderful promise of peace would soon be realized as the boots of trampling warriors and their bloody garments would be burned in a bonfire of endless tranquility.

¹ I first heard this poem and many of these ideas about peace in a sermon called “Burning Boots” by Erin Conaway, the Pastor of Seventh and James in Waco, over thirteen years ago when we served together at South Main Baptist Church in Houston. His words have stuck with me ever since.

Isaiah promised that the light of peace would burn in the world. The promise is peace, and yet we watch the evening news or open the paper or click on a website and receive daily reports of bombs, guns, terror, and war. The promise is peace and yet we still live with the dream of racial equality and harmony unrealized and unfulfilled. The promise is peace and yet we drudge on and on through the bogs of depression and anxiety because we look in the mirror and what we see doesn't quite measure up. The promise is peace, but the boots of bigger and better and different keep kicking us away from contentment towards things that can never fulfill, and our feet are bloody from the constant marching. The promise is peace but it feels as if peace is constantly trampled by the anger of our warring ways.

And when we think nothing can stop the pulsating rhythm of the warring boots, something surprising happens. In the midst of the war and pain, Isaiah directs our attention to a fire, but not one of wrath. Instead, it is a purifying blaze, a light unto the world. The symbols of violence and war, hurt and pain, grief and shame will be burned away by the light of God. But how can this be? What is this tiny light that will bring peace? It is a child. Send in the child! God unleashes the power of a peaceful child into a horrific reality! Who would bring a child into this situation? Only God. Only God in God's foolish, abundant grace would do such a thing. And it is not just a birth, it is a gift. "For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given." God didn't send judgment upon God's people from a high, lofty, and wrathful position. Instead, God sent to us a child. God sent to us a child where the boots of war are loud and it seems nothing can soften their stomping. God sent to us a child so that the boots of oppression and hate could be burned away in the divine light, the light of a star. God sent to us a child so that warriors' boots could be replaced by the bare feet of a baby, the soft and tender feet of a holy gift.

Clearly, the day when all of the warriors' boots and their bloody garments will be fuel for a fire of peace has not yet come. We still hear the droning, stomping, marching of war all around us. But, tonight, we are reminded that the child has indeed come – the Prince of Peace who was and is and is to come – is here and the peace he longs to give to us is right next to the angst in our hearts and the injustice in our society. God's peace is all around us. And in a world so wrought with war and strife the peace that we claim can indeed ring true to everyone – but it must ring true in our own hearts tonight. Our lives and our hearts are the cradles for the gift of peace, and it is into our hearts that God sends in the child.

Is the Prince of Peace surrounding you this night? Can we bring the Christ-child out into a world, into the darkness, so that the boots of war and garments of

oppression can be burned in the fire of God's holy light? We light our tiny lights tonight to remind us that God's peace is among us – it's inside of us and between us. It grows as we worship together. It's strengthened by the sharing of our lives with one another. God's peace is here and as we begin to recognize and pass the light of life to one another we will indeed be standing on holy ground. People who find themselves standing on holy ground reach down and take off their shoes, their boots...those boots that trample and kick and hold down and lie – they are our boots too. But God's peace is within us and radiating out of us, so let us reach down and remove our boots and may the fire of peace begin with us, this night, one candle at a time.

Amen