## Isaiah 52:7-10: Israel’s Gospel - God Has Begun to Reign

How lovely on the mountains

are the feet of a herald,

Someone proclaiming that all is well,

bringing good news,

proclaiming deliverance,

Saying to Zion

“Your God is reigning!”

It is a striking beginning to a prophecy. We may have nice parts of our body, but our feet are not really one of them. And mine (at least) get less pleasant the older I get—they crumble at the edges and in the summer, when I just wear sandals, they get ingrained with dirt and hard to keep clean. Indeed, feet can be rather disgusting, especially in a traditional society with no paved sidewalks or well-shod feet or bans on animal excrement.

It is in such a context that Second Isaiah talks about someone with lovely feet, and the loveliness of the feet is shared by anyone who preaches this text. God has given this prophet a message about returning to Jerusalem, about reigning in the life of Israel again. I am tempted to say that bringing it about that someone who comes with a message about God has got lovely feet is as big a miracle as God ever does.

Along comes a prophet who says God reigns, declares that this is good news. That is where the word “gospel” comes from. Some people might think it is rather weird to talk about Israel’s gospel. Is the Old Testament not the law? Surely it is the New Testament that is the gospel? But when Jesus came along bringing good news about the reign of God (e.g., Mark 1:14), that language came from the Old Testament, from this passage in Isaiah. I am tempted to suggest that the best lines in the New Testament result from sampling the Old Testament you see, and Isaiah 52 is one of the more frequently sampled passages in the New Testament.

A prophet comes along and declares good news, gospel, that God reigns. It may seem a weird statement. News is about things that have happened. Here the prophet is not talking about television news where it is gossip about things that might happen or that people in Hollywood might have done. In theory, news is about things that have happened, and that matter. God reigns. In what sense is that news? Surely God always reigns? How can that be news? What the prophet reflects is that the Bible looks at this matter in a different way from us. There is a sense in which, of course, God reigns all the time. Nothing happens outside of God’s control, without God allowing it to happen. Further, in Israel’s story some of the bad things that happened to them happened by God’s will, as a result of God’s reigning. God as king was bringing disaster on them.

But neither of these are God reigning in a really good sense, in the sense the Old Testament uses the expression. This prophet speaks to people during the exile, either in Babylon or in Jerusalem. Whether they look at their situation in Babylon or in Jerusalem, they cannot see God reigning. That is not because they are not spiritual enough to see it. God actually is not reigning in the real sense, in a positive sense. Half the community has been taken off into Babylon and been compelled to live there, fifty years have now passed and most people there have never seen Jerusalem. They are an ethnic minority in a foreign country in a place where they never wanted to be. And there in Jerusalem are people living in the devastated remains of that city with the walls demolished, the temple destroyed, and no priests that can offer the sacrifices. Whether you are a Judean in Babylon or a Judean in Jerusalem, it is hard to say or to see that God is reigning.

But if someone comes along and says that God reigns that might be news—in the sense in which I used the word. It might refer to something that has happened. The verb in Hebrew is a perfect verb. There are fuzzy edges about the meanings of perfect verbs in Hebrew, but in principle what that verb ought to mean is that something has happened, that God has become King, that God has started to reign. In light of my comments about God seeming not to reign, that makes considerable sense. It is indeed a piece of news, and perfect verbs are what a speaker ought to be using when bringing news. Such past verbs indicate that something has happened.

God has begun to reign. People look around and what they see in Babylon or in Jerusalem, is God not reigning. We likewise look around and see God not reigning. We look around this great metropolitan area of Los Angeles, we see what we have done to the human environment, what a slum Los Angeles is. We read in newspapers or get too close to fires engulfing the forests. We know about the vast disparity between rich and poor. We know about the sex industry or about the kind of values that spoil the movie industry or the music industry. Does God reign in Los Angeles? I hope not, because I hope that is not what God’s reign looks like. We ourselves are confronted by the same experience as people had in Second Isaiah’s day and as people were again having in Jesus’ day, when he came along and repeated those words about God reigning.

The background of Israel’s gospel is that God is not reigning. Indeed, throughout Israel’s story God has not really been reigning much of the time. What God has often been doing has been carrying. This constitutes another way of summing up Israel’s gospel. The Hebrew verb that is most often translated into English as “forgive” is the ordinary Hebrew word for “carry.” Hebrew does have a word that means forgive, as we have, but when you get “forgive” in the English Bible, that is not the Hebrew word that is usually translated there. It is this ordinary word meaning “carry.” When God forgives Israel, God is literally carrying Israel. When God forgives sin God is carrying sin. It is a powerful image. What God has been doing through most of Israel’s story, when God has not really been reigning, is carrying Israel in its weakness—its moral and religious and social weakness, in its sin. When someone does something wrong to us, either we punish, we lash back, or we “carry” it. People who read the Old Testament often get concerned about the extent to which God does lash back and lose his temper in the Old Testament. And God does do that, but it is a long story, a thousand years or more, so even if God loses his temper once every fifty years, for the other forty-nine God is carrying that sin. This is Israel’s gospel, that God carries sin.

But it will not be enough in the end for that to be all that God does, for God only to be carrying sin to be keep the story going. It need also to be the case that God reigns.

The first time the verb “reign” was used of God followed on the Israelites’ rescue at the Red Sea. When the Israelites had still been in Egypt, God had determined that enough was enough of oppression by the Egyptians. God had determined to reign over Pharaoh. The Red Sea was the final demonstration that God was doing so. And Miriam and company shouted with joy, “God reigns.” Now in the exile when Israel has long been under another overlord God is saying once again, “I am going to reign now.” Actually the Persians are advancing on Babylon and the political situation looks chaotic but what this prophet says is that God is working through that political situation in order to reign again. Thus God is going to make it possible for the people in Babylon to return to Judea, and also God intends personally to return to Jerusalem. The relationship between God and city is going to be made right again. The relationship between God and the people is going to be put right again. In earlier lines in this chapter the prophet has spoken of the way the city is to be transformed. It is going to become a place that’s bejeweled rather than devastated. Its people are going to become those who acknowledge the upright, instead of those who turn their backs on Yahweh. That is what happens when God reigns.

The prophet invites us to imagine God coming back to Los Angeles. Imagine this urban slum being turned into a beautiful city. Imagine a situation in which the forests do not catch fire. Imagine a situation in which the movie industry and the music industry are not spoiled by their attitude to sex and drugs and fame and money. Imagine a city in which there is not the gulf between rich and poor that there is.

The declaration that God reigns invites us to believe that God can and will do that. You have to be a prophet to know whether God might do it this week or this year or this decade. We cannot put a date on when God will do it, as we cannot put a date on when Jesus will come again. Indeed, in a way we are talking about same thing when we talk about God reigning and about Jesus coming. Without knowing when, we can that this will happen and we know that it will bring about a kind of transformation.

When this prophecy talked about Yahweh reigning, it was inviting people in that particular context to respond to the fact that God was declaring kingship at that moment. But its presence in scripture invites us, too, to live in the context of its declaration, to live in the context of that fact that from time to time God has come to reign. God came into the situation where the Israelites were in bondage in Egypt and decided to reign, to bring them out and take them to their land. God came into the situation of the Israelites in exile and decided to assert kingship again and make it possible for them to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the city. God came into the situation of the Jewish people another five hundred years later in sending Jesus to declare once again that God reigns. Israel’s gospel is that God does that and will do it again. Israel’s God is that kind of God.

What do we therefore have to do? Here is the really bad news. We cannot do anything. This is radically counter-cultural. It is not American at all. In connection with our discussion of “What Is the Gospel,” as a faculty we read a book called *The Storm Front: The Good News of God.* The blurb says that North American Christianity has become a consumerist menu of personal spiritual care products intended to assure eternal life at minimal cost to the customer. Now I have visited a few churches in Southern California and I have heard that gospel preached. That is why we have been discussing what is the gospel, not because we have become unsure of the answer to that question—the answer can be put in many ways—but because we know that in our culture what people think is the answer is not the answer.

*Storm Front*, its blurb says, “suggests a powerful and compromising alternative.” But I am then worried that it goes on to say, “The Christian life is a call to active participation in the communal global purposes of God.” That could sound as if it has fallen into that trap of thinking that the gospel is something we do. The really bad news that is also the really good news is that Christian faith, the gospel, is not something that we do, it is something that God has done.

Neither when Jesus came nor when he went did he say, “Now you go and establish the kingdom. Now you go and further the kingdom, now you go build up the kingdom, now you go and extend the kingdom.” The Kingdom of God is never the object of any verbs like that. We cannot do anything of that kind. It is not our vocation. It is a foolish idea when one thinks about it. We should bring in the reign of God? That would put things upside-down. We do not bring in the reign of God. God brings in his reign.

But the fact that God is committed to doing that means that it is possible for us to make a response. What do you have to do? Take your clothes off, it says in Isaiah 52. “Put on your beautiful garments, Jerusalem, holy city. Shake yourself from the dust, rise up, captive Jerusalem.” Start living in the light of the fact that God is committed to reigning. That is what the Sermon on the Mount is about. The Sermon on the Mount gets diverted if we turn it into our way of furthering the kingdom. That is not what it is. It is because God is committed to reigning that we can live by the Sermon on the Mount—not in order to make God’s reign happen, but because God is committed to making that reign happen.

Because God is committed to reigning you can go out and live, live your life. I have been reading a piece by Anthony Bloom about living in the light of the fact that you are going to die. It is very important, he says, to live in the light of the fact that you are going to die, because that makes a radical difference to how you live now. Start living your life, he says, because that is what you start doing when you realize you are going to die.

Many of my friends are not living their lives. Instead, they are getting ready to living their life sometime. The way I would adapt Bloom’s words is by encouraging them to start living their life in light of the fact that God is committed to reigning. We are invited to start living the kind of life that Second Isaiah pictures, by climbing out of the dust and putting our glory clothes on, to start living the kind of life that Jesus pictures—because God is going to reign. That is the life that is possible when God reigns. We do not have to wait until something happens, because God is already committed to doing reigning and you can start taking part in that now. That is Israel’s gospel.

Awake, awake,

put on your strength, Zion,

Put on your beautiful garments,

Jerusalem, holy city,

Shake yourself from the dust,

rise up, captive Jerusalem,

Loose the bonds from your neck,

captive daughter Zion.

How lovely on the mountains

are the feet of a herald,

Someone proclaiming that all is well,

bringing good news,

proclaiming deliverance,

Saying to Zion

“Your God is reigning!”