

“FOOTPRINTS”
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Several years ago I was conducting a City-wide Baptist Crusade in Washington D.C. It was my first visit to our nation's Capitol, and I was anxious to use what free time I had to see some of the wonders of that beautiful city. On one particularly busy afternoon I stopped off at the National Art Gallery (I believe that's what it's called) and being pressed for time I asked one of the guards for directions. “I'm in something of a hurry,” I said, “I wonder if you could tell me where your masterpieces are hung?”

Obviously, that was the wrong thing to say. It not only revealed my naivete, but my almost total ignorance of art. The guard looked at me with a jaundice eye, shook his head in disbelief, swung his arm about with a dramatic flourish and exclaimed in a voice dripping with sarcasm, “Everywhere! This whole building is filled with masterpieces.” I turned several shades of vermillion, mumbled an apologetic explanation of what I really meant, I had wanted to know where the Rembrandts were, and quietly stole away. I had been neatly and properly put in my place.

As I thought about the incident later, it struck me how much my presumptuous attitude was like the unbelievable blindness of some people who walk briskly through the great art gallery of life and, in the presence of the mighty “shoreless rivers” of the oceans, the lightning's flash, the thunder's roar, in the midst of mighty mountains and verdant valleys, the mist of morning and the sunsets glow, ask,

“Where is God? If he is the Creator, the Architect of Life, where are his masterpieces?” The answer is, “Everywhere!”

Creation contains nothing *but* masterpieces, and all one needs to do is look, with a discerning eye, and he will see the Creator's footprints in the sod.

I am reminded of the poem about

A little boy who
On a sunny day,
Was wandering home from Sunday School,
And dawdling on his way.

He scuffed his shoetip in the grass,
He saw a caterpillar.
He found a fluffy milkweed pod
And blew out all the ‘filler.’

A bird’s nest in the tree o’erhead
So wisely placed on high,
Was just another wonder
That caught his eager eye.

A neighbor watched his zig-zag course
And hailed him from the lawn,
Asking where he’d been that day,
Wondering where he’d gone.

‘I’ve been to Sunday School,’
(He carefully turned the sod
And found a snail beneath it)
‘I’ve learned a lot of God.’

‘What a foolish way,’ the neighbor said,
‘For a boy to spend his time.
If you’ll tell me where God is,

I'll give you a brand new dime.'

Quick as a flash his answer came,
Nor were his accents faint.
'I'll give you a dollar, mister,
To tell me where he ain't.'"

Well, the poetry is rather poor, but the theology is pretty good. If we have eyes to see, we will spot God's footprints everywhere.

Bliss Carmen describes how he found the clues that lead to God when, in his well-loved poem “Vestigia”, he tells of taking a day to search for God without much success. Then he says,

But as I trod. . .
by rocky ledge, through woods untamed,
just where one scarlet lilly flamed,
I saw his footprints in the sod.

This morning, I'd like you to pause and take a careful stare at some of the footprints God has set down in his world.

Parental Influence

One set of these may take you back to your childhood, for in all probability, your very first awareness of God, your initial inclination that life had been touched by some “invader from on high” came from your home.

This was true in my case. My parents were earnest Christians and from my earliest childhood, I was taught to pray and to look for God for guidance. To be sure, many of my ideas of him were childish. At one time I pictured him as a grand old man who sat on a regal thrown somewhere in the sky, keeping careful records of my deeds, both good and bad, in a giant book. Knowing

myself as well as I did, I had the uncomfortable feeling *my* page in that book was rather bleak, for it surely contained an agonizingly long list of debits.

Fortunately, this anthropomorphic idea of God was balanced off by a picture of him as a heavenly Father who would lovingly forgive my sin. This saved me from the devastatingly negative fear that shatters many children (and adults!) who grow up thinking of God as a harsh, unyielding judge. A kind of super-spy who delights in continually embarrassing people with the recital of sins they thought to be secret.

So I am grateful, as I hope you are, for a childhood and the religious training I received in my home. While I had some mighty hazy and fantastic notions about God which I ultimately outgrew, I am eternally grateful for parents who helped me see God’s footprints in the sod. They talked to him as if they knew him, and because God was so obviously real to them, he ultimately became real to me. Footprints! The footprints put down by parents who try hard to point their children in the proper way. The way of trust and faith.

Great Men

Later, as I grew into young manhood, my questioning mind caused me to doubt the simple faith of my father. For a while, I waded through the deep waters of doubt as I struggled to find a faith of my own. One of the things that helped me was the discovery that the simple faith of my father, while restated in more sophisticated terms, was actually sustained by some of the giants of history.

I went to the library and exposed myself to good books written by and about great men. As I moved about the college campus and found scholars of faith there, as I became familiar with the leading churchmen of our country, as I studied the actions and words of men like Schweitzer, I became convinced that such qualities of greatness and goodness could not come from the slime and the ooze.

I came to the conclusion that behind those qualities was the God of goodness my daddy had

introduced to me as a child. For, to me, even greater than the problem of evil was the “problem” of good. Take God out of the scheme of things, and one is hard put to explain the *goodness* we see in great lives.

A friend of mine who has had some success of witnessing to agnostics was approached one day by a rather flippant young fellow who asked for three sensible reasons for believing in God. My friend replied,

“Three! I can give you fifty-three strong reasons for believing in God! They are fifty-three people I know. People who have a beauty and greatness in their character which could not possible have come from gas and mud.”

You see, for the benefit of his agnostic inquirer, my friend was emphasizing the problem of good.

Henry Stanley who, as you remember, spent months searching for David Livingston in the jungles of Africa, put it this way, “I know there is a God, because I know Livingston.” The problem of good, again!

I would add that I know there is a God, because I know some of you! As I have rubbed shoulders with you, as I have seen some of the hurts life has flung at you and the way you have handled them with grace, as I have seen you move about your daily tasks, as I have observed the evidence of his grace and love in *you*, I have caught, *through* you, a glimpse of God.

Footprints! The footprints impressed upon life by the stately steps of saintly people. Great people, though oft times unsung people, like some of you.

Nature

There are other footprints which, if followed far enough, will lead to God. One set of these in found in the world in which we live.

David, who authored many of the psalms cried,

“The heavens declare the glory of the Lord and the earth shows forth his

handy work!”

David was saying the great expanse of the universe demonstrates God’s craftsmanship, and David was right! Just as the waters of the sea reflect the light of the moon, and mirror its glory, so, too, the world about us reflects God’s power and reveals his glory. Indeed, the sheer vastness of the universe is one set of footprints.

Eighteen-hundred years ago Ptolemy listed one-thousand and twenty-two stars. Later, Galileo looking through his telescope, thought he saw five-thousand stars. About the beginning of this century our knowledge of the universe in which we live had grown until it was estimated there were about three-hundred-billion stars. Then the scientists doubled that, tripled that, talked about galaxies and multiple universes, until now, no one would presume to guess the number of the stars in the heavens. We simply talked about the galaxies of galaxies and universes within universes, ad infinitum.

The sheer vastness of it all! And, when we turn our eyes toward heaven, which on a clear night is a blaze of diamonds stuck in the black ore of space, we cannot help but wonder about the Initial Cause. The Source of such majesty. And when we add to this set of footprints, another set put down by the precision with which this universe moves, we are driven to ask even more penetrating questions about the Source from which it comes.

A couple of years ago the world’s most complicated clock was put on exhibit at the town hall of Copenhagen, Denmark. It had been forty years in the process of construction. The man who designed it died ten years before it was completed. Costing more than a million dollars to build, the clock has ten faces, fifteen thousand parts, and is accurate to two-fifths of a second in three hundred years!

It computes the days of the week, the month, the year, and records the movements of the stars. It is expected to calculate the position of the planets to the next twenty-five centuries. So complicated and involved is this mechanism that some parts of the clock are designed not to move

until twenty-five thousand years from now!

It is an incredible piece of machinery. But, with all of its magnificent mechanisms, it isn't accurate! It loses two-fifths of a second every three hundred years! How do the scientists know that? They tested it by another clock, the universe itself. This mighty astronomical “watch” with its billions of moving parts, proceeds from millennium to millennium without deviation. Its movements are so precise they can be predicted accurately for thousands upon thousands of years to come.

Is it any wonder, then, that a hard-headed, hard-nosed, hard-driving businessman once told his pastor his most moving spiritual experience had not been in church, but in a planetarium. He said that when he visited a planetarium and saw the spectacle of the universe unrolled before his eyes, he came closer to God than he had ever been, and said to himself,

“The word ‘chance’ doesn’t fit this picture. There must be a mind behind it.”

A few months ago Guideposts Magazine carried the story of little girl who didn’t want to go to bed when her mother asked her to, claiming, “She had some thinking to do.” Her mother who was pretty smart and understanding, told her to finish her thinking and then skip on to bed. A little bit later the mother went to the child’s room to tuck her in and said,

“What were you thinking about, darling?”

The little girl confided,

“I was thinking about gravity, mother. I decided gravity is God in the center of the world keeping people right-side up when the world is upside down.”

I don’t think I’ve ever heard a better description of gravity, or for that matter, a better explanation for the orderly nature of creation.

“God at the center of things, keeping people right-side up when the world is upside down.”

Footprints! Set down in the sod by the vastness and incredible precision of creation.

Consider if you will, the unity of the universe which, like the seamless robe of Christ, is a perfect oneness. Ask it the same question, under any circumstance, at any time, at any place, and the universe will give you the same answer. It's a symphony of oneness, and whether it be the sights you see or the sounds you hear, there is never a clash or discord.

To many, this harmony of sight and sound is a most significant set of footprints in the sod.

William Herbert Carruth put it this way --

“A haze on the far horizon,
The infinite tender sky,
The ripe, rich tint of the cornfields,
And the wild geese sailing high:
And all over upland and lowland
The charm of the Goldenrod,
Some people call it Autumn
The rest of us call it God.”

Here, my friend, is a world of beauty, a world of unity, a world of order, simplicity and intelligibility. A world in which “from the throat of the Goldenrod to the far-lung rim of the horizon” gives evidence that God is! And, that he is worthy of your loving worship.

“I need not shout my faith,” says Charles Town,
“Thrice eloquent are the quiet trees,
And the green, glistening sod.
Hushed are the stars,
Whose power is spent,
The hills are mute,
But oh, how they speak of God!”

Footprints! “For the heavens declare the glory of the Lord and the earth doth show forth his

handy work.”

The Bible

And then, may I point out the footprint God has left in the form of this grand old Book we call the Bible. Through nature God had revealed himself in space, and through the Bible God has revealed himself in language.

One of my favorite preachers is Clarence Cranford, pastor of the great Calvary Baptist Church in Washington D.C. A few years ago, I heard “Cranny” preach at a national convention. In his sermon he laid before us the great sweep of the Bible as it unveils the glory and majesty of God. He took us back to the beginning when men thought there were many gods and that these gods were whimsical. So religion consisted pretty much of trying to appease the gods.

Then “Cranny” led us into the Old Testament and showed us how, out of its wandering and suffering, a nation rose to say that there is One God, and he is not whimsical, he is dependable.

“Shall not the judge of the nations do right?” asked Abraham.

And his words were more than a question, they were an affirmation of faith!

But dependable in what way?

Amos said,

“I know, we can depend on his justice. His justice is as stern as the law of the desert in which I keep my sheep. God is like a plumbline. Whatever is not true to that plumbline will eventually topple over.”

Hosea said,

“Yes, that’s true. But God is more than justice. Even after she had proved untrue to my love, and was about to be sold as a slave, I love Gomar so much I bought her back. God is greater than I. If I could love Gomar after she was unfaithful to me, then God can and does love Israel, even though Israel has sinned.”

Jonah said,

“Yes, but he loves more than Israel. He told me to go to Nineveh to preach, but I didn’t want to go. The Ninevites were our enemies. So I went to Joppa and bought a ticket for Tarshish, which is as far in the other direction as I could go. But I learned you can’t run away from God. God turned me around, and I went to Nineveh and preached ,and a revival broke out. One day, as I examined a gourd destroyed by worms, God’s truth flashed in on me. If I could be concerned about a gourd, God could be concerned about something infinitely more precious: the souls of the Ninevites”

Jeremiah drew another picture of God. He said,

“God is like a potter, patiently re-making a marred vessel.”

Isaiah went a little farther and drew an even better picture. He said,

“God is suffering servant, who took upon himself the sins of the world.”

But still the people could not understand. A God of vengeance, they could understand that. A God of seven thunders, *that* appealed to them. But a God who was willing to be afflicted for *their* transgressions and bruised for *their* inequities? *That* was beyond them. And then, one day that picture of a suffering servant took on flesh, and people didn’t have to ask anymore what God was like. They saw him revealed in a life, on a cross! Footprints! Set indelibly on the pages of this Book, providing you with an ever growing, widening, deepening understanding of who God is.

Christ

Oh, my friend, hear me! There are many footprints in the sod. Footprints, which if followed far enough, will lead your heart to God. There are the footprints set down by godly parents. By great men. By simple folk of faith whom you meet day by day. By a creation of order, simplicity and intelligibility. By insights, thoughts and revelations stamped indelibly upon this book. But even more wonderful than these, are the firmest, clearest, most unmistakable footprints of all.

And, I speak of those set down by God’s beloved son, Jesus Christ.

Ever since that day when God came sweeping down the stairway of the stars to confront the world, not just in space or in language, but in human flesh, ever since the incarnation when people have asked the question, “Who is God and what is he like?” we have pointed to Jesus and said, “He is like *this!*” Whatever God is, he is not less than Jesus. He is not less loving, less patient, less strong, less kind. In the majestic language of Paul,

“In him (that is, in Christ) dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily, who is the image of the invisible God.”

What does this mean? What is the significance of this statement? Well, to give even a partial answer would require more time than we have today. So, we must wait ‘til next week, when God willing, I’ll bring part three of this sermon. Today I have talked to you about footprints. Next Sunday I want to talk to you about nailprints.

But, to conclude our thoughts for this morning, let me say this --

God is not a great mechanic who, having brought the universe into being and having set the wheels to going round, has now abandoned it. God is present, right here, right now! He is closer than breathing. Nearer than hands and feet. And he longs to have fellowship with you.

To help you know him, love him, and serve him, God has placed footprints in the sod. Footprints which, if followed far enough, will lead into his holy presence. Following those footprints is up to you. “In many ways he will be good and kind, but God will not force the human mind.” The following, the discovering, and the inevitable worshiping, are up to you.

“All the earth is crammed with heaven,
and every common bush is aflame with God,
but only he that sees, takes off his shoes.”