Rev. Jason Wells

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All Saints' Episcopal Church, Wolfeboro, NH

When the Shoes Come Off (Luke 3:7-18, Advent 3C)

Thank you again, Bill, for the invitation to come and preach this morning for the third Sunday of Advent. My name Jason Wells and I'm the executive director of the New Hampshire Council of Churches. It's a role I've been in for a little over a year, and I know I'm looking out into the congregation seeing people who I've known some of you for a number of years as I've served Episcopal churches in Concord and Manchester. I've worked with people around the diocese and in other roles, so I've seen some of you many times before.

So it's a real treat for me to be able to worship with you this morning. The New Hampshire Council of Churches is an organization that is made up of ten different denominations in the state of New Hampshire. On our membership roll on our board, we have the American Baptist Church the Episcopalians, the Catholics, the Society of Friends, who sometimes we call Quakers but also Lutherans, Methodists, Presbyterians, Unitarians, and the United Church of Christ.

I've recently done the math to figure out that in those ten denominations there are 475 individual churches in the state of New Hampshire. So that's who we organize and work among and between. And I'll say a little bit more about the council and our work, but I'll put that into context of this scripture passage. I always like to remind myself that I'm not here, as Paul says, to proclaim myself, but I am here to proclaim Jesus Christ.

So we'll look a little bit more at this passage from Luke chapter three that's been picked out for us this morning. Because we have the story of John the Baptist, and as I've been saying my

prayers this week, I can't get myself away from that sentence he gives just toward the end. He says, "Someone more greater than I is coming after me. Someone more powerful than I is coming. I am unworthy to unfasten the latchet of His shoes."

INTRODUCTION

And as I have read this, we'll look at this in the, in the sense of some other passages in the Bible, in the sense of what the New Hampshire Council of Churches is doing. But I'm reminded of a story, and this one's a true story. Later on I'll tell you a story that's not true. But here's a true story for you about the anthropologist named Margaret Mead. Margaret Mead was known for her archaeological digs of ancient, ancient human history.

She had given a lecture somewhere, and at the questions after her lecture, somebody got up to the microphone and asked, "Margaret, you're a world-renowned anthropologist. When would you say in your work have you found the earliest evidence of human civilization?" And I think that the person asking the question might have expected, well, we know about the domestication of animals, right? Some others: the invention of agriculture. One of these things that we read about in textbooks. But her answer was that on one dig, archaeologists had found a human femur, a leg bone. And that femur had obviously shown signs of at one time having been broken, but had been healed. The way bones heal themselves, you can tell where a fracture used to be.

She said, "That is the start of human civilization." And as she went on she said, "The reason for that is that this was the first evidence we have of mercy being shown." That at some point somebody in the whatever hunter gatherer group this was in thousands of years ago human history, their tribe was on the move, and if somebody had a broken femur, somebody somewhere made the choice not to leave that person behind. They built them shelter. They brought that

person food. They kept that person safe when the rest of the tribe was moving on. Proof of the birth of human civilization was in mercy. And as we turn to the scriptures, two examples of the biblical world in need of mercy.

PROBLEM IN THE TEXT

There in, in Zephaniah is this, this passage about, "Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion. Be happy O Jerusalem" (Zephaniah 3:15). This is a *Messiah* aria. My wife just sang it on Friday, as one we put into music. What we don't put into the music is if you turn a little bit earlier in chapter three, part we didn't read today, was Zephaniah talking about all of the wrongs in the world around him. And he goes, if you read chapter three, he says, "All of the politicians are corrupt. Our judges and our courts are no good. And what's even worse is our priests." Don't take it personally. You can't. I'm right there with you. I know. We're the worst.

But Zephaniah looks at a world that needs mercy, and says that God will be bringing that mercy, and then the rejoicing is what's going to break out that we read about afterward.

In Luke chapter three we were just hearing about John the Baptist who's going out and preaching and is gathering a crowd. The, the preaching has attracted this crowd that's coming. And there are tax collectors. There are soldiers. There's just a group,a crowd.

I'm always fascinated whenever there's just the crowd. There's a bunch of people just showed up, and they all wanna know, 'cause they're hearing about a different world. They know about the world that needs mercy, the world that needs changing, a world that can be changed by kindness.

And they come out and say, "So what do we do? Thanks, John. We want to know what to do next." And he says, the first thing he says, is, "Whoever has two coats must give one away to somebody who has none." We hear from the tax collectors, "You should not gather more than you

are supposed to collect in taxes." Because we know from ancient history that's how that system worked, that if you wanted to be a tax collector in Israel or in Jerusalem, you first went to the Roman government, you gave them money, you paid to become a tax collector. If you can imagine that kind of system of paying for a government job: it was corrupt from the start. So you would buy your way into the job, and then to do the job you collect more money than you were supposed to so that you can pass some on to Rome and some you keep for yourself. So don't do that. Stop it.

Same thing with the soldiers. Do not use your position of power and of military training to take advantage of people, to bring false accusations toward them. That there are things that could be done to address the world that needed mercy so much. And I'd like to be able to say that that did it. That did the trick. John did that, and we don't need mercy anymore, right? The world is fine. We don't worry about corruption, we don't worry about people extorting each other or taking advantage of anything else, but you know that we do.

PROBLEM IN THE WORLD

We continue to live in a world that needs mercy. And as I travel through the New Hampshire Council of Churches, I get to travel to different towns as I'm invited to come and preach. We do work in different parts of the state and right now we have a number of ways that we organize. I was just speaking with Connie here about the women's prison. And a couple of years back the Council of Churches took notice of the fact that the men's prison in Concord has a full-time chaplain who can serve the needs of the men who are in prison in New Hampshire. The women's prison had nothing. If you were a woman in prison, there was no ministry, there was no chaplaincy for you. And so the New Hampshire Council of Churches drew a number of denominations together to say, "We want the women to have what the men have in prison." And

we continue to support that role. She's a part-time employee of the council. And people like churches like this one gather things together. They bring Christmas cards so these women can write to their families. They bring crafting supplies and all sorts of things that help aid the ministry that the chaplain is able to do.

We know that our state, we look around and we see around us the problem of our drug crisis in the state. And churches look at that and say, "That is a place where mercy, where kindness, where change has to happen."

I see frequently churches that are wanting to serve immigrants in their community. Sometimes that is people who are outside of our church walls. Maybe they are refugees, they are asylum seekers who have come here from somewhere else. I've met a number of churches where there are people who are in the congregations who are themselves here from another country. The Indonesian population of New Hampshire is out on the seacoast, and the Indonesians of New Hampshire have a large portion of them that are Christians. They are Lutherans, Presbyterians, United Church of Christ, Church of the Four-Square Gospel. Many them came to New Hampshire, to America to seek freedom for their faith. They were being persecuted in Indonesia because they were Christian. So they came here, and many of them are now being threatened with jail or deportation to be sent back to the place that they were fleeing from.

And so we see a world that needs mercy, a world that needs kindness, a world that needs change in it because we can see that there are things working out there, systems that are pushing people in their own congregations they are telling me that the pews have started to thin out because the Indonesians are, have fewer people because some are in jail, some are being deported.

We see in the prison ministry that I hear from Pastor Beth and from others involved with the women's prison chaplaincy, that among the women who are in prison in New Hampshire, 100% of them have a drug problem in their life. All of them. 80% of them have somewhere in their history sexual or domestic violence. And we see the systems that that could have given mercy beforehand. They could help now, they could help as women are coming out of those systems and into back, reintegrating back into their lives.

GRACE IN THE TEXT

There's all these places, but we see a world that in here, here, here, and here, all the way along, needs change and mercy and kindness. And so I turn back to one moment, to that verse in the scriptures. Because John says, "I am here, but one greater than I is coming." John urged us to mercy, and yet there is more which is coming. "I am not worthy," he says, "to untie the thong of His sandals. I am not worthy to unfasten the latchet of His shoes." So here's more my story that's not true comes in.

I told you there was a true story, there's gonna be a true story that's not true. I've heard this story many times. You might know it. I've learned that it is completely false, but sometimes I tell stories, I let you know if they're not true, but it is a story that *should* be true even if it's not. There's a lot of stories like that. It was in the days of the Industrial Revolution when people were suffering. That was another time that needed mercy, people who were working in the booming factories of the day.

We read about this in Charles Dickens and Ebenezer Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol*, and all that, of that Dickensian world that people lived in where there was child labor, there were harsh practices in the factories and all of the world that needed that change and mercy. And in France, there was a group of workers who worked in a factory, and they wanted to bring change

to what was happening. And the only way they thought they could make their voice heard to the people who employed them was they first tried to strike, and that didn't work.

They tried a number of other tactics, and eventually they took their shoes. They wore wooden shoes, and they would take those wooden shoes and jam them into the gears of the machines they were working on. And that would stop the machines, it stopped production, and all of a sudden when production stopped, the boss upstairs took notice. And the shoes that they took, those wooden shoes in French were called *sabot*. And the part of the story that is not true at all is that they put their sabot to stop the machines, and that's where we get the word sabotage, right?

That they had their shoes and shoved them in and it sabotaged the works, and then suddenly things started to change. **When the shoes came off, things started to change**. And that makes me think all the way back in the Bible, there was a, a story that we often learn as children in Sunday school about Moses before the burning bush, right? That Moses and the, all the people of Israel, the Hebrew people are enslaved in Egypt. They're building pyramids for Pharaoh for King Pharaoh. And Moses takes a little journey aside.

He goes up to the mountaintop and sees the burning bush, and the burning bush is about to send him to go back to Moses, you remember the Ten Commandments, and say, "Let my people go." But how did it start? He saw the bush, he went closer, and the first thing, he heard a voice. And the voice from the bush said what? "Moses, take off your shoes, for you are on holy ground." Once the shoes came off, everything started to change. When the shoes came off, then he got the commission from God to go back to Pharaoh and say, "Let my people go," and to bring people out of slavery and into the land of freedom, the land of promise. That's when it all started to change. And we start to see that again from John the Baptist, who's saying, "I am not worthy to

take off those shoes, but the time is coming." The time is coming. That is the message of Advent, that we are preparing for that coming, for the return of Jesus Christ, for that coming where we know every theologian will tell you that we look to the manger to tell us what's about to happen on the cross. Many preachers will say that at Christmastime you preach Easter, and then on Easter you preach the Christmas message, 'cause they're the same message after all, that the wood of the manger shows us a little glimpse of the wood of the cross. That what Jesus will do is to take the wood of the cross, and by his death and resurrection, he will put to a stop the machinery of human sin, and instead bring forgiveness and mercy and grace. And if we have received mercy, we must give it to others. We were just reciting a moment ago, because Christ has loved us, we love others. "Love one another as I have loved you." We'll pray in a little while in the Lord's Prayer that we, if we wish forgiveness, we must give it to others.

GRACE IN THE WORLD

So we know we have that opportunity. Because we have received mercy, we will give that kindness and mercy to others. That's the message of the cross. That's the message of the manger. It's the message of the shoes coming off. And so we have the opportunity through the Council of Churches to get together. I can't imagine that if it was one French factory worker who decided to put her shoes in the machine, that anything would have happened. When a whole bunch of people did it, when people got together, things started to change.

And so we've seen places where churches are getting together. And I traveled to Manchester, where people had said, "I heard somewhere about sanctuary churches, where if an immigrant is going to be deported, they can stay in a church while you work out their court case, that they can have their day of justice in the courts while we work out that they have a right to the

citizenship, and they can stay there." And a lot of churches said, "Well, we'd love to do that, but our church is too small.

We don't have enough volunteers to feed this person, to take care of a family. We don't have the money to do it." But if you find that there's a Methodist who wants to do it, and the Lutherans wanna do it, and the Episcopalians wanna do it, and the Catholics wanna do it, all of a sudden you have a whole bunch of people, and you have hundreds of volunteers and more money than you need to do it.

Now, so we have in the prison ministry, when people gather things together from across the state the state budget said, "Oh, we couldn't put a chaplain in the women's prison. It wouldn't be possible financially." But the churches got together and made it happen. It's always impossible until it happens, right?

In our drug crisis in the state right now, there are in local communities like Wolfeboro a few months ago, there was a gathering of Protestant churches and evangelical churches who just got together to say, "What if we all talked about the fact that my church has an AA group, and you've got a recovery program, and you've got a narcotics program, and you have a program for teenagers in addiction?" And we had sort of found out what everybody else was doing, and we shared that information. And then we found out what's not there, and we built what's not there, and what nobody's built before.

All of a sudden, we start to see that the shoes have come off, the people are together, and everything can start to change. Because it's here that we start to realize that it is, in fact, deeply true what Margaret Mead had told us at the beginning, that it was mercy that was the only thing that was the condition for human civilization.

It was only kindness. And now we can know that as humanists and people who love others, but as Christians, we know that through the message of the manger and the cross, we have received mercy and forgiveness. That's at the very core center beliefs of our faith, and if we have received love, we must show it to others. If we have received mercy, we must show it to others. And this is the faith that we need so much, that the world still needs two thousand years after John the Baptist has come and gone. It is the work that means our faith is together.

Our faith is the only thing. The faith is the mercy. The faith will be the kindness. The faith will be the transformation. And it is, in fact, promised to us. Margaret Mead knew it, that this mercy, this faith, was the only thing that would save human civilization. And as Christians, we know this faith is the thing that can save the world, and it can save our souls. Amen. Amen.