

extraORDINARY Shoes

Acts 12:6-11; Mark 6:6b-13

Living God, let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of all our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

There is something so troubling and vulnerable about this lesson from Mark 6, when Jesus commissions the disciples and sends them out to the mission field. “[Jesus] ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics.” A staff, shoes, and a shirt? Wow, I take more with me to walk the dog! When you’re being sent out on a critical mission, something central to the ministry you’ve shared and built your life around, that seems like the **last** time you would want to set out unprepared!

We as people take great strides to ensure that we’re prepared for all life has to offer. I’m sure many of you share in a collective mini ritual of preparedness before leaving your homes. I call my ritual “The Triple Pat”. You know, that quick touch up of the three pockets to ensure that they contain your phone, keys, and wallet? Some days the preparedness ritual is a little more complicated—like when your bag, lunch, and coffee mug get thrown into the checklist—but for me... the triple pat is the minimum. I can forget everything else, but I’m not going anywhere without my phone, keys, and wallet.

I’m sure you have your own checklist, whether it’s pockets or a purse or a table by the door where everything is safely stored, we all have our checklist of stuff that’s “necessary” before being sent out. But these lessons today, and our extraORDINARY Lenten theme that calls us to witness to God’s extraORDINARY love by being mindful of *ordinary* objects, has caused me to rethink this checklist. Our image of the week is *shoes*. Now, I never leave the house without my phone, keys, and wallet, but I can sit around the house with those things still in my pocket... But shoes? For me, that’s really the sign that I’m leaving, that I have somewhere to go, and, depending on what shoes I’m wearing, they’re a sign of what I’m up to. I give a bit of thought to what shoes I’ll wear; whether they compliment what I’m wearing, whether they’re professional enough, whether they’re comfortable enough, and I especially check to make sure I’m wearing matching shoes after the one Sunday a few months ago that—much to the amusement of the choir—I wore a black and a brown shoe to Church. But for some reason, shoes didn’t make my list of things to think about before leaving. Did they make yours? It’s easy to take shoes for granted, and they might just be so ordinary we overlook them.

As Pastor Jill Duffield, the author of our Lenten devotional, reminded us just the other week, these ordinary objects tell a story. Can you think about the story that’s being told by your shoes. I have with me a favorite shoe. This shoe has held up well for five years. I bought it when I was working as a Hospital Chaplain at UPenn Hospital in 2015. I was on my feet constantly, and running from one trauma to the next. I got these shoes because they were professional on top, but the soles and insides were built like a tennis shoe, so they’re really comfortable! Five years I’ve had these shoes... They’re wearing out. They’re super scuffed, the laces are destroyed, the pads are wearing thin, and when it rains

the water seeps in through cracks in the soles... But I can't bring myself to part with these shoes. These shoes tell stories...

I consoled families whose loved one had just died in a West Philly Trauma Bay in these shoes. I preached the gospel in these shoes more times than I can count. I went to class in these shoes so that I could be a better pastor. I wore these shoes on the day I was ordained as a Minister of Word and Sacrament in Christ's church. I proposed in these shoes. I officiated weddings in these shoes. I wore these shoes on *my* wedding day. I've lived a lot of life in these shoes, so when we're asked to be mindful of our shoes, in good ways and tough ways mine begin to tell a story. I would imagine yours do too...

Because, when I really think back on the stories these shoes tell, they're not stories of cool things I've done... They're stories of times God has been faithful. They're stories of times when I was sent out, knowing I was totally unprepared, but God was with me. God present with mercy in the face of death, God's Spirit speaking through my weak attempt at words, vows made in ministry and in love that could not be sustained without God's steadfast presence. What stories of God's faithfulness are your shoes telling? What story of God's faithfulness are your shoes waiting to tell in the adventures to come, as we trust the paths that lie ahead to God's abundant mercy?

Our shoes point us back to the sure promise that *God empowers us for extraORDINARY ministry*. The packing list for the Apostles seems sparse, but they had everything they needed. Equipped only with staff, shoes, and shirt, The twelve went out and did the ministry of Jesus—proclaiming the call to repent, engaging in works of liberation, and bringing about restoration. It turns out they had enough. They had more than just a staff, shoes, and a shirt. They had everything they needed to do Christ's work of Kingdom building here on earth. They had trust... They had faith. Trust and faith are not things we can manufacture on our own, they are a gift from God. The Apostles had these gifts of God and these gifts produced the fruits of repentance, hope, love, and grace in the lives of those they met. Perhaps, like the disciples, our shoes can become for us a sign of hope. Perhaps shoes can be a reminder that *you* are enough in God's eyes. Perhaps they can be a reminder that we already have everything we need to do Christ's work here on earth, as long as we are open to receiving the gift of faith and living it out in bold trust. We have a God who is faithful, and every time we lace, latch, or slip on our shoes, we can remember that God has given us everything we need to bear love, hope, and mercy to the world in all we do. Our shoes are a sure sign that God is with us, and God empowers each of us for extraORDINARY ministry.

But... you've probably noticed the disappointing irony of our Lenten image this week. At least in my house, shoes are a sign that we're going *out*. That's something many of us cannot do in the midst of a global pandemic. For most of you hearing this, your shoes may be laying neglected in the midst of this season of social distancing. Rather than adding to the anxiety and fear we may already be feeling as COVID-19 spreads, perhaps we can take this week to be creative with our Lenten image. Adapting to our time, perhaps we should ask, "So what ministry can we do in our socks?"

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Ministry in our socks brings our lesson today from Acts chapter 12 into a whole new light. Peter is imprisoned, with Herod's wrath and the threat of death looming over him. (Being stuck, with the threat of death around? Sound familiar?) Peter is set to die, but Herod holds off not wanting to kill Peter in the midst of "the festival of the unleavened bread"... Passover. The celebration of God who is faithful, of God who delivers God's people. And in the night, Peter is delivered. An angel of the Lord appears to Peter saying, "Fasten your belt and put on your [shoes]." God is faithful, and Peter is saved. But just like us, this scene found Peter in his socks. Though we may be in the the early hours of a long, dark night, the time of hope and liberation is coming, breaking forth as surely the dawn. Trust in the Lord, who has empowered you for the time at hand.

This is the ministry we can do in socks: We return often to the story of faith, a story of God's faithfulness and deliverance to those mired in bondage and fear. Ministry in socks can be the work of angels to one another, imploring one another to not lose hope and offering strength and respite when our neighbors are weak. Fear and death may be around us in profound ways, but our God is faithful, our God is with us, and the ministry of socks is one that proclaims this promise boldly. The ministry of socks is one that demands more of our creativity, but we are people of God our creator, who we know is infinitely creative in redeeming us and transforming the world in hope.

So, as you notice the shoes in your life this week, be mindful of the yearning. Take to heart the desire your feel to put on your shoes, be sent out, and discover new opportunities to share God's love and mercy in the world. Be mindful of this feeling and pray for the ways God can use this heart for action in the days to come. Pray for the creativity to adapt this ministry to a season of socks. Become angelic partners to one another: this week find someone whom you can call, tell them to "fasten their belt and put on [their shoes]", actually do it, and there in your belt and shoes pray for God's people, commend your fear and worry to God, and trust in the hope that will dawn. In spacious solidarity, reach out to one another, listen to your own self when you feel you may be getting overwhelmed, and return to the promise that God is with you. God is empowering each of us for extraORDINARY ministry in this time... even in our socks.

Amen.