“Pillars: Who’s Going to Fill Their Shoes?”
(Romans 10:13-15)

“For ‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’ But how can they call on him to save them unless they believe in him? And how can they believe in him if they have never heard about him? And how can they hear about him unless someone tells them? And how will anyone go and tell them without being sent? That is why the Scriptures say, ‘How beautiful are the feet of messengers who bring good news!’” (Romans 10:13-15)

This morning as we remember those of our church family now with the Lord, we ask, “Who is going to fill their shoes?” In Galatians 2:9, Paul referred to key disciples of Jesus as “pillars of the church” in Jerusalem, meaning their reputation was so strong they could be counted on for guidance and stability. There’s a song by the late country music artist George Jones, that asks the question about those who once were “pillars” of country music, “Who’s gonna fill their shoes? Who’s gonna stand that tall? ...Who’s gonna give their heart and soul to get to me and you? ...I wonder, who’s gonna fill their shoes? (“Who’s gonna fill their shoes?” George Jones)

It’s a stretch to connect the Apostle Paul and George Jones but the question is very real: Who will replace the “pillars” of our church as they leave us to be with the Lord? Who is going to fill their shoes? In 2016 our sanctuary will be one hundred years old. Those who led that vision were “pillars” of this church and remembered with their name in the wall outside the sanctuary. Many before them are remembered by their name inscribed on the stained glass windows surrounding the sanctuary. In my years here I have witnessed the Lord call to Heaven many I would count as pillars of this church. Many of you remember those whom you would call pillars of this church. That brings us back to the original question, “Who is going to fill their shoes?” We treasure the pillars of the past but their influence is to shape a new generation of “pillars of the church” today.

In Romans 10, Paul has pulled a quote from Isaiah 52, which was Isaiah’s prophecy to a people under siege. Isaiah sees the image of a runner making his way from the battle to a war-weary people. He is coming with good news, “Peace! Good tidings! Salvation! Your God reigns!” Isaiah says the feet that bring news like that are beautiful. Paul connects that thought to those who bring good news—the news Jesus died to save us from the penalty of our sins, was raised from the dead, and all who call upon the name of the Lord will be saved—those who bring that news have the most beautiful feet we can imagine. “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!”

Those words from Isaiah are the climax of a series of questions Paul asked. He quotes another prophet in verse 13, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”(Joel 2:32) Meaning before everyone is an offer of to be saved from sin’s penalty of everlasting separation from God. Then he has a series of statements implying action or movement. People can be saved from their sins by calling on Christ but people can’t call on someone in whom they haven’t believed. They can’t believe unless they hear. They can’t hear unless someone preaches to them. Preachers can’t preach unless they’re sent. His conclusion is, “That is why the Scriptures say, ‘How beautiful are the feet of messengers who bring good news!’” People who share the gospel with others have feet that are beautiful. Yet, those beautiful feet must fill shoes that literally equip them to go where they are sent, tell what they have heard so people believe and are saved, all through Jesus Christ.

The feet of those, once “pillars of the church” of First Baptist, were beautiful because they served to insure the gospel was carried to those who needed to hear. One thing I have said about our church is we were planting churches before it was cool. Recently, former pastor Emil Williams, sent me a note of his recollections of Baptist churches in our community First Baptist has played some role in starting.
Between his list and mine there are eleven churches, missions or ministries that exist because of those committed to share the gospel. “How beautiful are the feet of messengers who bring good news!”

That doesn’t include ministries like the Care Center, Baptist Collegiate Ministry at ASU, the Jonesboro Church Health Center and so many others. It doesn’t include over one hundred and ten years of Women’s Missionary Union that sustained missionaries from this church, like Mildred Matthews, who served in Cuba from 1922 to 1955. It doesn’t count the lives reached and churches strengthened in Brazil, the Czech Republic, Guatemala and a host of cities in our own country. It doesn’t count this church’s role in establishing the camp at Mt. Zion, where through the decades, countless children have been saved. It doesn’t count the money given to support missions all around the world. It doesn’t count the volunteers who taught Sunday School or other ongoing church ministries that touched lives with the good news. As meaningful as those are to our past, many are gone, so the question is still, “Who’s going to fill their shoes?” “How beautiful are the feet of messengers who bring good news!”

If we ask are those shoes being filled today, the answer would be “Yes”. They are filled by those from our church, in North Africa, Uganda, Ghana, the Czech Republic, and Helena, Arkansas. Many fill shoes that lead them away from this location to serve others in our city. Others fill shoes that teach God’s word here, Sunday after Sunday, Wednesday after Wednesday and lead in multiple capacities year after year. They continue to tell the story of Christ to all because, “How beautiful are the feet of messengers who bring good news!” A pillar gives stability to a structure. Feet enable humans to move. Shoes protect feet as they move. The kingdom of God is bigger because men and women, past and present, filled shoes that brought good news to all kinds of people. How blessed we are by untold numbers of men and women who are “the pillars of the church.”

The concern for our church today is who is going to fill the shoes of the future? Why? The reason is there are more shoes to fill than feet to fill them. Whose feet will become beautiful because they are “...messengers who bring good news...” to those without questions, those without answers, those without hope, those without meaning, those without enough, those without love, those without freedom and most of all those without Jesus? Who will fill the shoes of those who insure the effectiveness of this church to impact an ever growing, ever-changing community and culture? Who will fill the shoes of those who are willing to recognize our church looks different than the city around us? Who will fill the shoes of those who will not accept while our city grows exponentially that we are not keeping pace? Who will fill the shoes of those who realize as we make the world our passion, we are fulfilling the passion of our Heavenly Father? Who will fill the shoes of those who believe we are to be Holy Spirit filled followers of a life changing Jesus not followers of a lifeless routine? Who’s going to fill their shoes? Who will be the next “pillars of the church” we call First Baptist? Of whom will it be said, “How beautiful are the feet of messengers who bring good news!”

James Donovan’s book, “The Blood of Heroes” is about the battle of the Alamo in 1836, between the Mexican Army and Texas revolutionaries, in what is now San Antonio, Texas. In the book he tells the story of a decisive moment for the rebels inside the Alamo on March 5, 1836. Commander William Travis, recognizing there was no hope of survival against the overwhelming force of the Mexican army, called all the defenders together, drew a line in the dirt with his sword, telling anyone who wished to stay and fight should cross that line, understanding it would mean their death. Anyone who wished to leave would not be considered a coward and was thanked for their service. All but one of the less than 182 defenders crossed the line and by 6:30 the next morning they were all dead.

There was a decisive moment in Jesus ministry when those who followed him had to choose to follow his command to be his witnesses, “…telling people about me everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8) or would they decide the cost was just too much.
They chose to tell and because of that, “How beautiful are the feet of messengers who bring good news!” We are indebted to those in this church’s past who chose fearlessly to fill the shoes of those before them and they were “pillars of the church”. The question now is, “Who is going to fill their shoes?” Who will be the next generation who will cross the line of obedience to be his witnesses, disregarding either the cost of petty criticism or the cost to truly follow him? Jesus’ feet took him to a hill outside Jerusalem, where they were nailed to a cross. There was nothing beautiful about those broken, bloody feet. Yet because of his nail pierced feet there was good news: “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” (Rom. 10:13) Now, for those who choose for their feet to fill the shoes of “the pillars of the church” it will be said, “How beautiful are the feet of messengers who bring good news!” Hear me say clearly, the destiny of our future depends on our answer to the question, “Who is going to fill their shoes?” Will it be you?

(A portion of this sermon was adapted from “Just Walk” by Dr. John McCallum, pastor of FBC Hot Springs, AR and used with permission.)

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Dr. Bruce Tippit, Pastor
First Baptist Church
Jonesboro, Arkansas