

Reconsidering that Footprints Poem

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16 For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. 17 For he received honor and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, “This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” 18 We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain.

2 Peter 1:16-18

In the 1970s, a poem started appearing in newspapers and sermons across the U.S. Over three years in the early 80s, the poem appeared in an Ann Landers column, Jerry Falwell’s biography, and in a speech by Ronald Reagan. This poem has since become the most repeated and reproduced poem of the last century. You all know it, I am sure. The poem is most commonly called “Footprints.”

Here are the bones of it. It begins with a dream where someone is talking to Jesus. The pilgrim, the man, or the woman—it changes depending on the poem—is reflecting upon their life. And what they see in the past are footprints on a beach, a path, or a dusty road—signs of life’s journey. For most of the journey, there are two sets of footprints, Jesus and the person, walking side by side. But every once in a while, there is only one set of prints. Troublingly, these single sets of footprints correspond with life’s most challenging times. Confused, the pilgrim makes an assumption: Jesus must have abandoned me. Sad or indignant, the person asks Jesus, “Why’d you leave?” Jesus then replies with the tenderness you expect from Christ, “When you see one set of footprints, it is then when I carried you.”

The first time I heard this, it made an impression on me. I am not the only one. Part of the popularity of this poem is its ability to make sense of the silence or absence of God in our lives. It is a thoughtful rendering of a deeply unoriginal idea: you think God has abandoned you, but God is with you.

The simplicity of the idea may be why at least four people have claimed ownership of this poem. They all have a similar story: struck by a sudden burst of inspiration, they jotted down this poem, a little different, but with the same basic punchline, “It is then when I carried you.” The authors are now fighting each other—dueling copyrights. All of them are sure that they are the originator of this idea. One has taken a lie detector test to assure people he wrote the poem. Another has considered hiring the forensic literary analyst who studied the letters of the Unabomber. Cease and desist letters are regularly sent to those who print the poem. It’s everywhere. It’s been everywhere for a while. And the problem with the poem being everywhere is that its force is increasingly blunted on each successive reading. It is easy to dismiss

the poem when the surprise is no longer surprising. And yet, the poem deserves our attention. At the heart of the poem is a reflection, someone looking backward and trying to make sense of the world.

In his second epistle, Peter is likewise looking backward. Years earlier, Peter tromped up a mountain with Jesus, James, and John. At the top of the mountain, Jesus was crowned in glory and started glowing. Suddenly, Moses and Elijah show up. In Peter's first attempt to make meaning of the moment, he tries to keep everyone on the mountain. "Let's build some tents," he says. Jesus dismisses the idea, and everyone except Moses and Elijah eventually come down the mountain.

Months later, Peter followed the arrested Christ into Jerusalem. Peter sat around a fire as Jesus was interrogated a few yards away. In that moment of fear and distress, Peter can't find his faith. He can't conjure the memory of Christ's glory on that mountain. Christ is then executed. In his hopelessness, did Peter think about that day on the mountaintop? That Saturday between death and resurrection must have been a time of furious grief and troubling reflection. Then Christ shows up again. And Peter is inspired to more reflection. Then Christ leaves again—ascends to heaven. More reflection. Then Pentecost. More reflection. Then a vision of animals and gentiles. More reflection. Later in his ministry, he writes a pastoral letter where he again reflects on that moment on the mountain, and it makes sense again. Christ was with him that day. The glory was real.

The power of the footprints poem lies in the power of reflection. The poem assures us that in looking backward, Christ might make meaning of moments of silence and hardship. The poem reminds us that the past is not random and brutal, and we do not walk this journey alone and without help. Both Peter and the footsteps poem make sense of the holes, the silence, and the absence in our world. A deeper reflection on Christ's presence is a necessary and compelling posture of faith. And yet, the footsteps poem and Peter's vision of glory are incomplete. They need another story about footprints.

Writer Shusako Endo never really fit in. His Roman Catholic neighbors met his ethnicity with skepticism and racist assumptions. Additionally, his religious convictions were never honored among his Japanese neighbors who were predominantly Buddhist. Remarking on the awkwardness of his faith, Endo once wrote that "the clothes and my body were not made for each other."

Additionally, Endo could never fully embrace the terrible history of Christian colonialism in his country and the triumphalism of the Western Church. Like our footprints pilgrim, he walked alone. In his telling, Endo needed a more terrestrial Christianity, something quieter and less concerned with making sense of everything, something that rested solely on Christ and not on the dogma that permeated the tradition.

In 1966, Endo published *Chinmoku*, a book that explored his version of Japanese Christianity. Later translated in 1969 as *Silence*, Endo's tale is about a headstrong Portuguese Jesuit priest who comes to service in Japan during the 16th century amid

Christian persecution by the Shogunate. At the time, Christianity had been banned, and priests served hidden communities of Christians. Amid his service to those suffering, the protagonist, Sebastião Rodrigues, hopes to hear from God, but all he hears is silence. Rodrigues keeps looking backward and asking for a word, but he hears nothing. Eventually, Rodrigues is captured by the government and tortured, along with some other members of his Japanese Christian community.

The priest is told that he can save these other members of his flock by denying Jesus and stepping on a carved iron picture of Christ called a *fumi-e*. The decision rends Rodrigues in two, deny Christ and save these people or refuse and everyone will die. He longs for Christ's wisdom. He longs to be carried through the trial on the back of Christ. As Rodrigues stares at the picture of Christ, it begins speaking to him. In a moment of rare literary power, Jesus finally breaks the silence. Christ says to him, "Trample, trample!" Christ says step on me. Step on me for your own life and the life of these others. Step on me because this is precisely why I came to earth. I came that you might find life. I came, Christ says, so my sacrifice might be your gain, your life, your opportunity.

Endo's *Silence* is a book about reflection. It is about the struggle that comes from seeing the pain and the hurt in the world and not seeing God amid that trouble. In this way, Endo's book is like footprints. But Endo provides a slightly different theology we need to hear. "My child," says Christ, "I didn't just carry you. You walked across me. The footprints are not just in the sand; they are on me."

Beloved of God, you may never know the true danger you have faced. You may be oblivious to the most profound acts of mercy that Christ routinely submits himself to on your behalf. But Christ's sacrifice is not predicated on you realizing it. Christ came to be trampled—stepped on and raised to a cross—so that we might be saved. We need to know that we were carried, yes, yes. Loved. Secured. Yes. And we also need to know that Christ didn't just carry us but sacrificed himself for us. We need to know that when we survey the footprints in the sand, it should have been obvious that these were Christ's feet in the sand because they still bear the marks of the violence of this world. And sometimes, there is one set of footsteps because we carry Christ into the world.

We carry Christ into the places of pain and sorrow, suffering from silence. We carry Christ, not as a triumphal antidote to the pain, but as a fellow sojourner who knows the pain. We carry Christ as one who still bears the marks of his crucifixion on his hands and feet. We carry Christ so that when people reflect and look back, they won't see a single set of footprints, but two butt-prints in the sand. I am going to write a poem that no one will buy, called "Butt-prints." There, you see those, those two butt-prints; that's where that person sat with me and wept. They were like Christ to me. That is where that person didn't feel the need to move me forward but sat with me in my pain, where her silence made room for my growth and my understanding.

The gift of the footprints poem, Peter's letter, and Endo's *Silence* is that they are invitations to reflect upon the mountains in our memories and the beaches of our recollections. They call us to reconsider where God has been amid our struggles. With help and in time, we might hear God's silence as a sign of God's faithfulness. And when we look back upon our struggles, we might also know that God has not just been carrying us or away upon a mountaintop shining in glory, but Christ is also standing beneath us—our firm foundation.