

A New Roof
A Christmas Homily for Sardis Baptist Church
Bob Stillerman
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Isaiah 52:7-10

Years ago, Edwin McNeill Poteat, a famous Baptist minister from Raleigh, wrote a sermon about friendship. He remembered the four friends in Mark's gospel, who so dedicated to their paralyzed friend, lowered him on a gurney through the roof of a house, in the hopes that Jesus would offer healing. Jesus noticed this gesture and told them, "Go, your faith has healed your friend."

What was interesting to me about Poteat's sermon, is that he didn't focus on the event of the healing. Instead, he imagined what the next day might have looked like. Poteat writes:

The next day after Jesus had healed the crowds in the low-ceiled house, a man came briskly down the street looking for a door. His step was elastic and his whole appearance suggested the vigor and eagerness of youth. He paused before the door and looked within. On a scaffold, precariously poised, a lone workman was plastering the ceiling. The floor and doorway were cluttered with debris. The young man greeted the plasterer: --

"Good morning neighbor, what are you doing?" There was a slight delay as the workman looked toward the door before answering pleasantly: "O ho; have you not heard about the excitement from yesterday? There was a young man, a healer from Galilee. The place was jammed with people who came to be cured, and He used this house for His ministry....But the big excitement was when four fellows brought a poor palsied wretch, and being unable to crowd into the room, tore open this roof here, and lowered the sick man down in front of the healer. He seemed pleased by it, cured the paralytic, and commended his friends."

"Yes," observed the young man with an inflection and indicated amusement.

"Who may you be, if I may ask," went on the workman, "and how happens it that you have not heard of this strange story?" There was a pause before the answer came.

"I'm the palsied wretch," he said smiling.

"Indeed, and how do you feel?"

"Why I feel great! By the way, whose house is this? I'd thought I'd come round and offer to repair the damage my friends caused."

The workman laughed quietly, carefully descended from the scaffolding, straightened up stiffly, and proudly answered:

"I'm the owner, and you owe me nothing. As a matter of fact, I've been thinking for quite some time that my roof was in pretty bad shape and needed attention. I have a new one now, and

*we're all lots better off, it seems. But I'll confess, I never thought it would come about in any such way as this."*¹

Now I know what you are thinking: Bob, this is a great story, but what does it have to do with Isaiah 52? Well quite a bit, actually.

The prophet Isaiah envisions the day when YHWH will reside once more on the holy mountain of Jerusalem. Sentinels will stand on the city wall and collectively they will sing out, "God is coming, y'all. We see Him. He's right there! He's getting so close!!!"

Throughout the season of Advent, we've acted as sentinels, too. We've lit candles, and sung carols, and proclaimed stories of peace, hope, joy, and love. God is so close we can taste it!

But now that Christmas has arrived, what it is that we're celebrating, and what is it that we're supposed to do next?

We're celebrating the birth of a child who will inspire friends to take great leaps of faith on behalf of those they love, and one whose witness will inspire others to pursue God's love over worldly love. We're celebrating the coming of a God who will quite literally blow the roof off of the structures that keep us subdued to the limitations of this world.

And in the knowledge of such goodness, what is it that we should do? We should sing! Sing praises, because God has comforted His people, and has redeemed Jerusalem.

And tomorrow, when the singing is done, and the Christmas lights begin to go back into attic boxes, give thought to that roof of yours. Perhaps it needs a repair? Or perhaps it needs a giant hole, in order to let a little faith seep in? Either way, we'll all be lots better off.

May it be so. And may it be soon. Amen.

¹ Edwin McNeill Poteat, "Vandalism of Faith," from Andrew W. Blackwood's *The Protestant Pulpit: An Anthology of Master Sermons from the Reformation to Our Own Day*. (Baker Book House: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1947), p 256-263.