

DAY OF SMALL THINGS

A sermon by Rev. James R. Blades

First Presbyterian Church of San Luis Obispo, CA

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Text: *"Who despises the day of small things?" Zechariah 4:10*

"Who despises the day of small things?"

A pertinent question, don't you think?

For is it not our human tendency to look for significance in the grand things, the glorious things, the showy things, and to look down on life's commonalities, its drudgeries, its obscure little duties and responsibilities?

Is it not our natural tendency to look admiringly at the important, the prestigious, and to look down on the plain and ordinary?

"Who despises the day of small things?"

Obviously, this question calls for more than an answer. It calls for reflection.

On the day when Zechariah the prophet spoke these words, his Hebrew people were discouraged. They had returned from Babylonian exile to a devastated Jerusalem. They had worked hard and long against much opposition to rebuild the walls and temple of the city. They had heard stories about the glory days of Jerusalem and the grandeur of Solomon's temple; and they looked at their own feeble rebuilding efforts in comparison, and said to themselves, "What good is it? All our labor, all our pain? Such trivial results. Such shabby and insignificant buildings."

They were not unlike us. They tended as we do to look for significance in the big things and to look down on the small; to admire the glamorous and to scorn the ordinary.

"Who despises the day of small things?" Who indeed? For across history, it has been the small things and the "small" people through whom God has delighted to do God's grandest works.

So said Moses to the children of Israel: "The Lord did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were bigger than the other peoples; for you were the smallest of all the peoples."

So said Paul to the Corinthian church: "God did not choose you because you were wise, or influential or of noble birth. But God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong . . . the lowly things and the despised things – the things that are not, to set at nothing the things that are, so that no one may boast before him."

So foretold Micah about the birthplace of the Christ: "But you Bethlehem, Ephrathah, though you are little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of you shall come forth for me One who is to be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, even from eternity."

When we reflect upon the day of Christ's birth, we realize it too appeared to be a day of small things.

Now we understand the momentous significance of the events surrounding Christ's birth. But put yourself back in the place of the people that lived through those events, and you will see, from their perspective, that they hardly seemed momentous at all.

Here for instance is this obscure teenage girl, a common peasant. She has no dreams of grandeur. Nor is she a person of any distinction. She works with her hands day after day, along with the rest of her people, just to scrape together a bare living. Yet God quite deliberately chooses her to be the most significant influence upon the greatest personage of all time.

As the day approaches for Mary to give birth, Caesar in far off Rome decrees a census. Everyone must go to his hometown to be counted. That's not very good timing for Mary who, with Joseph, must walk—yes walk—seventy miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Never mind the quaint pictures you see of Mary riding a donkey. Only the rich owned donkeys. The poor walked and that's a long hike for a woman in her ninth month.

Finally, the couple arrives in Bethlehem. They must be exhausted. And just as they arrive, Mary goes into labor. More bad timing. They anxiously look for lodging in a town of less than a thousand. They go to the local Inn. This is not Holiday Inn, mind you. Inns in those days were shabby places – open-air pens with some straw and a fire pit, the haunt of bandits. A lot of people have come to Bethlehem for the same reason as Mary and Joseph, and all quarters are taken. Mary is doubling over in the throes of labor, the baby is pushing down the pike, and there is nowhere for Mary to go. I doubt that she's thinking to herself: "How glamorous!" At last, some sympathetic soul directs her and Joseph to an animal stall: not a cutesy little barn, but a dank stinking cave. And there the King of Kings and Lord of Lords is born.

Now let's clear the poufy Christmas pageantry from our minds for just a moment. Have you ever come to the end of a long day's travel and you're tired and cranky and you arrive at your destination only to find every hotel sign in town flashing "no vacancy"? How did you feel? A bit frustrated? And you weren't even in labor!

So what's the point? Here is one of the key dramas of all human history, the birth of the most important personage who has ever stepped foot on this earth. Look at the people God chooses as the star players. And look at the common, even chaotic, even frustrating circumstances out of which this event unfolds.

Do you think that Mary and Joseph had any idea of the vast historic significance of these circumstances in which they were participants?

And even if Joseph and Mary had some inkling, no one else in the world but some shepherds were paying the slightest attention.

How often it is so, that the grandest things that happen in this world, are left unmarked by the typical trappings of grandeur.

Did you happen to see last week's Time Magazine? The piece entitled: "PEOPLE WHO MATTERED 2008."

I wonder who would've been included in a "People That Mattered" in the year Jesus was born. Maybe Herod the Great. Maybe Caesar Augustus. Maybe Quirinius, governor of Judea. Certainly not Mary or Joseph or their child of destiny.

The story is told of a mail carrier who made his stop in the Hodgenville, Kentucky in 1809. In those days, mail carriers carried more than the mail into the frontier. They carried news of national and world events. So the locals asked this carrier what was happening out in the world. "Well, Napoleon is on the march in Europe," he said, "and trouble is brewing again between the States and England, and there's talk of a

National Bank,” and on he went telling of the fascinating people and events of the day. Then he asked the locals, “So what’s been happening back here?”

“Shucks mister, nothin’ ever happens back here,” one of them replied. “*Nancy Hanks and Tom Lincoln had a baby boy last night*, but shucks, Mister, nothin’ important ever happens back here.”

Curious, isn’t it, how many of the world’s critical events are wrought out of circumstances so common that they would pass notice, and through people so ordinary that you would never make the “People Who Mattered” page.

Let the Christmas story remind us, and history remind us, and the life of Jesus remind us that God uses common things to accomplish uncommon ends, and ordinary people for extraordinary purposes.

“My soul glorifies the Lord,” exulted Mary, “and my spirit rejoices in God my savior, for he has humbled the high and mighty and lifted up the humble.”

“Who despises the day of small things?”

So what has this got to do with you? with me?

Just this: If what we are observing here is true, perhaps it is time for us to reset the scale by which we measure value and importance in our lives.

How do you measure the worth of a thing? How do I? Do we measure it on the glamour-scale, the popularity-scale, the social-significance-scale, the notoriety-scale? Do we look at people whose works are celebrated and whose achievements are lifted up to public praise, and then compare our own rather obscure and ordinary life to theirs?

You work hard. But who notices?

You carry through your daily responsibilities, but where’s the celebration?

You may be a kind and dependable and responsible parent or grandparent or teacher or spouse or friend, but so what?

Here’s what: Who knows what affect your small acts of kindness, your ordinary dependability, your sometimes dogged fulfillment of responsibilities, who knows what affect these are having on the lives of people, on the world around you?

“God’s mightiest forces are secret forces,” wrote R.A. Finlayson. “God’s greatest works are operations in which the hand of the worker is hid.”

I tell you most of us *don’t* realize the significance of our lives. I’m quite sure Nancy Hanks or Tom Lincoln didn’t. That Mary and Joseph didn’t. Nor, most likely, do you.

Most people through whom God is doing significant things, even great things, don’t know it is happening at the time.

It is said that one of the Martin Luther’s teachers, at the beginning of each class day, would bow to his pupils. Someone asked him why he bowed to them rather than they to him as was customary.

“Who knows,” he replied, “whether one of these students may go out to change the world?”

You don’t know. Sometimes you never see how your ordinary daily kindnesses, your quiet acts of caring, your integrity and honesty at work, your shouldering of your common everyday duties, how these may be affecting the people and events down the road.

“Who despises the day of small things?”

Sometimes the small things are the really important things. But here’s the other side of it. Sometimes the things that appear big and important aren’t very important at all.

Charles Francis Adams, the nineteenth century politician and diplomat, kept a diary. One day, he entered: “Went fishing with my son today – a day of work wasted.” His son, Brook Adams, also kept a diary, which is still in existence. On that same day Brook Adams made this entry: “Went fishing with my father – the most wonderful day of my life!”

“Who despises the day of small things?”

Sometimes we get the price tags mixed up in our lives. We attach big price tags to things of little value. And we pin low price tags on things of surpassing value. Sometimes we’re fooled by the bigness of things. We’re charmed by prominence and popularity and prestige. *There*, we think, is where real significance is to be found. We weigh our lives by those standards and we come up wanting every time.

As we take our leave of this Christmas season past, may we take with us the lesson that the grandest event of all time was wrought through the most ordinary people, and out of the most homely of circumstances.

Prayer

Almighty God, you have reminded us that our thoughts are not your thoughts, nor our ways your ways. For you have chosen the humble things to shame the prestigious, and the weak things to challenge the powerful.

Help us to see ourselves and each other and the circumstances of our lives in this light. Help us not to look down on the ordinary and common circumstances of our lives. Help us, rather, to recognize the opportunities these circumstances conceal.

Remind us that, truly, many of your grandest gifts come wrapped in the plainest packages.