

Calvary United Methodist Church
December 9, 2018

THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS
Rev. Dr. A. Robert Cook

Children's Message:

Malachi 3:1-14

If our kids would come forward, this is my favorite time. Well, come a little closer. Let me turn this on to the right thing and get this up and running here. Okay.

So, what does this and this and this and the Advent Wreath, what do they have in common? You got a cellphone calendar, a desk calendar, a watch and an Advent Wreath. What do they have in common? Think really hard. Were you about to tell me they all tell time? (No.) You weren't going to say that? I thought you were going to say that. Well, guess what? They all tell time. My wristwatch will tell you that it is 8:44, right? And this will tell you the calendar, tells you what day and actually there a time up there, right? And this will tell you that it is the 9th of December. What does that tell you about time? It means it is time to prepare for Christmas.

So, if Christmas was coming tomorrow, would you be ready? Would you be ready tomorrow? What do you think your mother would say? (We have the tree up.) Do you have the tree up? Mom, are you ready? I don't think she is ready. Are you ready for Christmas? Everything is ready? Did you make a nice present for your dad or your mom? Nope, you better get ready. How about you? They love it when you like make homemade stuff, you know. I always keep that stuff. It's really fun.

Yeah, it's the time that we need to prepare. Now the Advent Wreath won't tell you the hours or the minutes, my wristwatch will and this one will too. And it won't tell you the exact day. It will tell you that the theme of the day is Peace and last week was Hope. And next week the candle will be pink. It also tells you that today being the 9th, how many shopping days do you have till Christmas? (Uh...I forget.) You forget? Okay, well, it's about 15 so we have two weeks, right? Two weeks to make that nice gift for your mom, right? It's really fun.

Okay, so what do you do in those two weeks? Well, did you do Christmas cards for anybody in your class yet? Do you do that? You don't do that in your class? You might have to give it to a girl, right? Yeah. It's okay. Do you do Christmas cards for kids in your class? Do you do one for your grandparents? Do you make your own? Just get the kind that your mom buys? It's all good. They love it, you know. Have you decorated your room? You have? Have you decorated your room? Do you have a dog or a cat? Did you put a red bow on them yet? You did? I bet the cat doesn't like it. Well, we send Christmas cards to those we love, we decorate the house, we make presents and we light the Advent Candle.

Now, the Advent Candle tells us what season it is. If Christmas was tomorrow we wouldn't be

ready for it. So we need time to prepare. So, you don't just step from Thanksgiving to Christmas in two steps. We have to prepare, but that's what God gives us: time to prepare our heart because the most important place to prepare is your heart, to let him in and when you do that, then Christmas is really much more than about presents because after your mom picks up all the wrapping paper and your dad takes it out to the trash and you've gotten your gifts...what are you hoping for this Christmas? (Gift cards.) Gift cards? Really? No one has ever said that to me when they were this age. You are a very sophisticated boy. Gift cards. Wow! Okay!

Well, you have time to prepare. And you know what the best way to prepare is? I think, singing. Do you have a favorite Christmas Carol? What's your favorite? (Jingle Bells.) Jingle Bells, to help you prepare? Yeah. What's your favorite? (Deck the Halls.) Deck the Halls. And yours? Do you have a favorite Christmas Carol? Jingle Bells? And yours is? (Frosty the Snowman.) Frosty the Snowman. Jingle Bells. One more, what's yours, your favorite Christmas Carol? (Up on the Housetop.) Up on the Housetop. That's pretty good. It helps us to prepare so that our heart is ready for him.

Let's pray, ok? And that's another way to prepare. Thank you, Lord, for our kids and that we have a couple more weeks yet. And as we light this Advent Candle I ask that you would help us that we would be reminded that you are the light of the world and you lead the way to Christmas. Bless our kids. Amen.

Now, give you a fruit snack here. And, who is the oldest kid here today? How old are you? Ten? Nine? Nine? You are the guy. You can help me light the Advent Candles. Did you get some? Okay. Alright. Did you get one? Okay. I'll put this here. You got one? You want me to give you one for your brother? Give that to your brother. Don't eat it on the way.

Okay, you come with me. You all want to come up here? Need to do this first. Now, I want you to light this one first. And then this one. Good job. You'll make a great acolyte. Thank you.

Message:

Would you join me in a word of prayer? Gracious Lord, help us to understand this word today, these old stories that come to us year by year, that are part of the fabric of our faith. I pray that you would guide us and may the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O, Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen.

A mission group was visiting in Uganda and they had had quite a lot of experiences sitting around talking about this and there was a young Ugandan woman who was visiting with them. Her name was Christine, she was a teacher. And they said: Well, tell us of your experiences. And she said: Well, I didn't have a very exciting life. I just grew up in a rural village." And they prodded her a little bit. She was shy, but she said: Well, when she was five and her sister was seven and her brother was four, their parents both died of AIDS. The three children lived for nearly two years on their own. They were orphaned, they were scrounging food wherever

they could get it. They had no one to care for them. They were dressed in rags. They often huddled in this mud hut that their dad had built, but of course the roof had leaked and when it was rainy they were soaking wet all the time. It's a wonder they survived at all. And they asked her: Why wasn't there anyone to care for you? And she said that most of the adults in her little village had died from AIDS too.

After almost two years a local pastor who had been working with one of the relief organizations, World Vision, had found them. He was actually making a census of children who were orphaned and vulnerable because of this. It is a huge problem and so he enrolled them into a little program that World Vision had far off in Australia. A newly graduated young woman, a teacher, Julie, she had seen a World Vision ad on TV and she decided that she would take a little bit of her salary, which was under 20 bucks a month, and she would just sponsor a child. A small step of faith, no big deal, and she was matched with Christine in Uganda. World Vision was able to build them a new little home, make sure that there was enough food and clothes, that there was a school in their little village and the teacher kind of looked after all these kids, paid their school fees. Her brother got very sick, but he got medical care because of this and these girls became, along with their brother, part of local church and were baptized. Julianne, in far off Australia, continued to pray, did her monthly support for this young girl, and actually supported her for a number of years right through high school. It was a small thing. One day she was approached by World Vision if she would support her little bit longer, she agreed. And she decided to go there and then she brought Christine back with her to Australia where she got her enrolled in the university there.

And Christine is talking to this mission group whose mothers are just gaping open. And she said: If it was not for God's love and this teacher, I would be dead. And if I had survived my childhood, likely I would have been forced into prostitution only to die of AIDS before I was 20.

So a young teacher in far off Australia did a very small thing. It made a big difference and God does that with small things. He's always making a difference.

Well, think of the times in your life when someone did something very small for you and you realize that it make a big difference for you down the road. Well, today in our Gospel, we meet Zachariah and Elizabeth, married a long time. To not have children in that day was huge thing. They didn't quite understand the science behind that. They thought it was all the woman's fault. I would say that that probably is not true. But their longing for a child was also mirrored by the longing of Israel for the God who had been silent for so long and they wondered what had become of the prophets of the old days who would give the Word of God, who would promise that God would come to them and be there for them, intimately involved in their experience. Probably there hadn't been a prophet like that for maybe 400 years since the days of Malachi. And so it became easier and easier to believe that God did not care.

Now Zachariah is a priest and every name in the Bible means something. His name means

“God remembers” and Elizabeth’s name means “God is my oath” or “God keeps his promises.” And they had disappointment in those names, really, but they were faithful. And that’s what matters. They were faithful in the small everyday things. Zachariah and Elizabeth both were descendants of Aaron. Aaron was from the priestly line, Moses brother and he belonged to one of the 24 ranks of priests whose task was to officiate at the temple. It would be one week out of their whole lives because there was maybe 20,000 priests. And so the most privileged duty was to go into the holy place, not the holy of holies but the holy place every day and there they would put twelve loaves of bread on the table, one for the twelve tribes of Israel. They would trim the lamps, you’d see that from the menorah. We just got through Hanukkah and he would also light incense which would be symbolic of the prayers of Israel and then he would bow before that and pray before God. And no one would probably perform this duty more than one week in their whole entire life. In fact, they may not even do this but just once, so it’s a great honor for Zachariah in his old age, which would probably be like 45, to carry out this task. And though he is honored by his duty, he feels like his life is diminished because the longing that he had that maybe a son would follow in his footsteps just would never happen.

It was a small thing in a small and insignificant life and yet as he enters this holy place in the temple, he lights the candles, trims them, prepares the incense, arranges the bread, kneels in prayer for the nation, which is when an angel appeared. Whether you believe in angels or not, or whether they look like the kind of stuff from the Renaissance, the Raphael like angels or like the Griffins and other kinds of things from the Middle East and antiquity, I don’t know, but the angel says that God has heard your prayer and you will have a son and he will be the answer to the prayers of your people and he will reawaken the nation, call them back to the covenant, make ready for the coming of the Lord. This infant yet to be conceived will fill the prophecy of Malachi which John read very eloquently before. So it is not surprising that Malachi is skeptical. If I was a little more southern I’d say, “Well, shut my mouth!” because that’s exactly what happened, that the angel said: so you don’t believe. Okay.” And he shut his mouth.

But the question is this, really, for so long he was so faithful in this life. And he does the small things very faithfully. But is he just about his own pokey business, or is God concerned with life here and now, given the smallness of all of our lives or the insanity of life here?

So, this is not just a simple feel good Bible story. The world of Zachariah and Elizabeth is a dangerous world. It is a difficult one, it is a violent one. They live in an occupied country. Herod the Great was the king. He was only great at outrageous acts of violence and pandering to the Romans. Augustus was the Caesar. Roman troops occupied their homeland. No one would ever see Caesar, but if you misbehaved, the wrath of Caesar would come. Try passing through one of their checkpoint unassaulted without them picking your pockets. But there is also a guerilla terrorist group that was present, like Barabbas later on in the story of Jesus. These people were around. This would rival modern day Iraq, Afghanistan, parts of Sierra, where it would be very easy to believe that God has abandoned this world.

And though Zachariah is a person of faith, somehow his spirit was unable to receive the great

work that God was doing behind the scenes in his small acts of faithfulness. He had no concept of the wild extravagance of God, even in his once in a lifetime service in the sanctuary which he thought was just a ritual, just doing his own pokey little business. He never expected God's reality to crash in on him.

Well, you know, I've been a pastor a long time and a lot of times I am about my own pokey little business and so are you in church. It's what we do. We pray before meetings and you know, do we wonder, is God really concerned with the issues that trustees deal with or leaky roof or is God concerned about our bottom line budget and all those other things? Is the Spirit going to show up and be with us on a Sunday morning? But we continue to do our parts despite all of our doubts because the wild extravagance of God just may burst in on us. But the question before us then is: how would we understand that if we have never sought God, if we've never been that kind of faithful person like Zachariah, because sometimes we think that, well, the church is like a mom and pop operation, just there for our convenience. We don't think how a girl named Christine in far off Uganda who was orphaned because of AIDS, a small lack of a teacher in Australia for a few bucks a month and probably for less than \$3000 over ten years brought life to her and made a big difference. That the small acts we do really do make a difference because the God of all creation is in this with us.

God does amazing things among people who are simply open and openness is the only requirement. That's it. Now, if the church is just a pokey little business of our own, if it's just a religious expression of human experience, the human heart longing for the transcendent, if that is all it is, we'll we join everyone else in doing that, but it doesn't really make any difference. What if we are the people whom God has gathered here and through whom God expresses his grace, his healing, his love to the world. What if the small act that you might do in a given day that wouldn't cost you very much, just to go out of your way a little bit or to give a little more or to do a little more, what if God will express the grace and healing and life of Christ through that to someone else and change their lives? And if that is so, well it is time for all of us to just set our sights a little bit higher. The young teacher in Australia did a very small thing. God used it for three orphaned children, one of whom is now a teacher and three of whom are disciples of Jesus. God uses the small things that we do to do great things and even though we are small and sometimes tempted to think what we do is unimportant and doesn't really matter, all of us have so much to give and all of us are important to God. God uses the small things and the small people. Well, just think of the love that you have to give, think of the things that your tithe can do, think of the smiles and hugs that you have to share. Someone has said to me you are not a friendly church. I want you to prove them wrong. The smiles and hugs you share will prove that. You can say kind things. Your two hand can change a life, do something really unique and interesting and none of these things depend on your size, only the size of your heart. Amen.

Lord, help us today, whether we are small or not doesn't matter because you are so big. Bless each one. Use us in the small things of life to do great things. Amen.