

Of Good Things and Small Packages
2nd Sunday of Advent—December 4, 2016
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[Texts: Isaiah 11:1-10/Matthew 3:1-12]

“Good things come in small packages.” The saying conjures up images of small, but exquisite gifts, jewelry or some other precious offering. “Good things come in small packages” is the counter-saying to “bigger is better.” To speak of good things and small packages is to remind us that it is from sprouts new plants grow. It also serves to remind us that new sprouts, new directions can come from within us when our priorities begin to line up with God’s priorities. Scripture is one long record of God doing unexpected things through unlikely means; Advent and Christmas certainly celebrate that and remind us to think of good things and small packages.

Isaiah was speaking to a people whose expectations had been truncated, cut-off, by their compromising the covenant they had with God. In the process of focusing their trust on foreign alliances they had lost touch with their root, their source, and now Isaiah speaks to them of hope, of good things in a small package. “A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of its roots.” He is describing the Messiah-king who will restore the covenant and bring life back into balance for Israel, and for the whole world.

The Messiah-king will be empowered by God’s *ruah*, the Spirit who had brooded over the face of the watery chaos at creation and who turned lifeless flesh into living beings. The coming king will manifest all of the qualities that God’s Spirit brings, so his life and actions will reflect God’s covenant priorities. It’s interesting to note that both the Greek *Septuagint* and the Latin *Vulgate* translations of the text add “piety” in place of one “fear of the Lord” and the subsequent list becomes the traditional gifts of the Holy Spirit in mystical theology. Just to remind us, the gifts are: wisdom, understanding, knowledge, counsel, fortitude/courage, piety and fear of the Lord (reverence/awe). So the Messiah-king won’t judge on his own or act apart from God and the covenant; all will be in line with God’s will and God’s priorities because he will listen deeply to the Spirit. Remember, too, that the root of the word ‘obedience’ in the original language is ‘to listen.’ To be obedient is to listen and to be obedient to God is to listen with the ear of the heart.

The end-result of this king’s reign will be nothing short of paradise regained, at least that’s what Isaiah describes. The world, now at odds with itself because it is out of harmony with God, will become a place of harmony and concord; the “peaceable kingdom” so often depicted in early 19th century American art. “The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kind, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.” What is more, the paradise-regained is not for Israel alone. The salvation Isaiah announces will extend to the whole world because the world’s discord and conflict exist as a result of disobeying God’s will and, indeed, not knowing God.

It should be easy to see why the early church took such delight in Isaiah's prophecy. His words seemed to both foreshadow and confirm their experience of Jesus, his life and actions. And then there was this John the Baptizer who comes along, pointing to Jesus and fulfilling yet something else Isaiah had said: "A voice cries out: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.'" [Is. 40:3] To the early Church good things were, indeed, coming in a small package making a bigger and better difference than anyone ever expected.

John the Baptist, also called the Forerunner, continues what Isaiah started. He reminds the people of their need to leave their own agendas and priorities and to return to God's covenant agenda and priorities. John calls the people to "bear fruit worthy of repentance." Repentance, *metanoia*, means a change of direction—not just being sorry for what we've done—and it implies also a change in priorities and in life. If we've repented of sin—that is the self-focus and self-centeredness that takes us away from God's life and will to loving service—it will show in changed behavior. In other words, to use yet another old saying, the proof will be in the pudding, because even to God, perhaps especially to God, actions speak louder than words. We know whether or not we've repented by the way we live—not just by what we say.

Isaiah and John the Baptist point us to a good gift in a small package—the human heart. Early on humans learned that when the heart stops, life stops, so it was seen as not only the center of physical existence, but was symbolic of our emotional and spiritual center, too. To come to the heart of a matter is to be at the most important point—and so it is with our spiritual lives. Our hearts will act out of inner fullness and that comes to us only when we can move away from self-centeredness and self-focus, from being servants of our own reactive egos and turn toward God's service. Later, three chapters on in Matthew chapter six, Jesus in his incredible treatise on simplicity he says, "where your treasure is there your heart will be also." What matters to you; what really counts to you will be where your heart is, it will show. To serve God, the Other, leads us naturally to the service of others and we are drawn from self-centeredness to Other-centeredness.

In the midst of the hurry, the busyness and the business of the Christmas season we need to slow down for a moment and consider the heart—this good gift in a small package. I was moved by something theologian and story-teller John Shea wrote:

When we arrive at the heart, we will know the truth of loving both God and neighbor. Until we arrive there, we are deluded. We live in what Reb Menahem Nendle of Korzk known as the Kotzker, called a world of phantoms—false perceptions we treat as real. The story is told of the Kotzker:
"One day he and Reb Hirsh of Tomashov came to a bridge where several women began throwing stones at them.
'Have no fear,' said the Kotzker. 'They are not real women, or are their stones real. They are mere phantoms.'
Reb Hirsh was silent for a moment, then asked, 'Might we not be phantoms too?'

‘No,’ came the Kotzker’s answer, ‘as long as we have at some time had the genuine urge to repent.’” (Abraham Joshua Heschel, *A Passion for Truth* New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1973)

The “genuine urge to repent” is an expression of our desire to be real, to be conscious of our ultimate grounding and live out of that grounding.

Why did the people come to John and submit to his harsh words and tactics? Why do we continue to journey to his desert? We sense the promise in repentance, the promise to move beyond half-heartedness and delusion, the promise to be real, the promise that will lead us to our heart. [*On Earth As It Is In Heaven* Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2004, p. 36]

The gift in a small package that we seek is the heart and the way we seek it is the way of the heart. It is only through this good gift in a small package that we can come to wholeness, to holiness, to oneness with God and, indeed, with ourselves.

Bigger and better will not lead us to our hearts or will it regain the peaceable kingdom. Back in 2006 a researcher at the University of Leicester produced the world’s first happiness map. I found the following observation by Bill McKibben quite telling “. . . in the United States, where the Eisenhower-era ideal of bigger cars, faster foods and automatic everything has been nearly as devastating to our nation’s psyche as rampant consumption has been to the earth. Once measured to have the happiest citizens in the developed world, the United States is now number 23 . . . Alcoholism, suicide, and depression rates have soared, with fewer than one in three Americans claiming to be ‘very happy.’ Even more frightening is the trickle-down effect of this malaise on our kids. Studies suggest that today’s average American child reports suffering higher levels of anxiety than the average child under psychiatric care in the 1950s. ‘All that material progress—and all the billions of barrels of oils and millions of acres of trees that it took to create it—seems not to have moved the satisfaction meter an inch,’” says McKibben. “It’s as if we’ve done an experiment in whether consumption produces happiness and determined that it doesn’t.” According to the UN study on happiness published this year we’ve risen to 13th, but what does the recent political season tell us? So, where do we find happiness? Where do we find satisfaction? Perhaps we should look, again, to the good gift in a small package?

Let’s look to our hearts and there we’ll find that good gift in a small package—relationship: relationship with God and with one another. Relationships—as labor intensive as they are—these are the real gifts that keep on giving and far more effectively than any greeting card, regardless of cost. To enter into relationship authentically we have to heed the call to repent, to change our priorities and our behaviors, so that we reflect more of the gifts of the Spirit, more of the loving relationship into which God has called us. Out of that relationship will come what Paul calls “the fruit of the Spirit”—“love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” [Galatians 5:22-23]. If we’re not bearing those fruits in our lives, in our

behaviors and attitudes, it's because we've not opened ourselves to God's good gift of relationship. We've not stopped and said, "Not my way, but Your way." What bears fruit is a heart-to-heart relationship; God's heart to our hearts. It is this that really matters.

What matters, then, is the quality of our care for one another. What matters is our becoming spiritually centered and living toward God and toward others. So, as Isaiah and John the Forerunner did, I do on this Sunday and take my prophetic stance in this pulpit and tell you—that bigger, better, cultural, internet, whatever standard of what is supposed to make us happy -- it doesn't really matter. Remember what matters, dear ones. Look to the gift in the small package, the heart. Welcome the One who comes to bring peace and right priorities.

Welcome the good gift in a small package and remember, when it comes to all the stuff, all the expectations that the media and society place on us to make a "perfect" or "traditional" or "wonderful" (pick your adjective) Christmas—it doesn't really matter. Only one thing really matters: where is your heart? Where is the gift in the small package that makes all the difference to you and to those whom you love? Where is your heart? Look for good gifts in small packages this Christmas because all the rest, well, doesn't really matter. One thing matters, where is your heart?