

The Second Sunday of Advent  
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Matthew 3: 1-12

### Small Things

A mainstay of Advent is John the Baptist's cry that we prepare God's way. There's so much to prepare for this time of year---present-giving, parties, dinners, family visits... I'm not sure that we have the time to prepare God's way, as well---we're busy preparing the way for Ken and Barbie, Mom and Dad, the boss and the secretary. Preparation is a topic that consumes us.

It's the case here at the Church, as well. We spend more time preparing, for services, for events, for seasons in our Christian Education year. Ninety percent of my anxiety is bound to the topic of preparation---on Friday, I called Kitty at 4:55, asking if we'd remembered to ask Nicole to be here by 9:00 this morning, to cover the cribbery for my adult Ed class. She laughed and said that we had. I'm not nervous about actually leading the services, teaching the classes, or successfully eating the Oktoberfest feast---I'm comfortable managing those things. But we can only lead, feast, or manage if all the pieces are put in place ahead of time.... It's about the preparation. And in the preparation, we depend on each other. There is too much to do for all of our events if we don't do it together. We depend on each other.

I was acutely aware of this last month, when Martha and Jack Cashman were out of commission for a few weeks with health issues. There is so much that they do to prepare our way each week---we have bulletins, we have coffee, we have a good deal of our receptions because of their work. We are blessed to have them. And as I reflected on their blessing to us, I realized that it is so bound up with the small things. It's the small things that make our lives gracious.

When we put together Sunday morning services, there are the big chunks---do I have a sermon, do we have music---things that are essential to the service, that we are unlikely to forget and that are few enough in number, so we can manage to get them done. But then there are all of the small things---do we have bulletins and are they folded? Do we have coffee and is it hot? Do we have flowers on the altar, a reader for the lessons, ushers to guide us, and acolytes to light and lead our way? These are the things that fill our and enrich our mornings---the things that make this place a community, and not just a speaking society. That's Martha and Jack's ministry, and the ministry of so many others here---it's the ministry of small things, of making community, of making life gracious. That, it seems to me, is the ministry of preparing God's way.

Raymond Carver wrote a short story about a baker once, about a baker and small, good things---I suppose that it's odd to say that it's about the baker---he's on stage very little in the story, but I still think it's about the baker. The main action in the story revolves around a young family. They're preparing to celebrate their eight-year old son's birthday, but he's hit by a car the day of the party and seems to have a concussion, so they take him

to the hospital. The narrative from there is his long, torturous descent to death---there's no apparent reason that he shouldn't recover, the doctors repeatedly tell the family, but the boy loses consciousness, becomes less and less responsive, and, after a few days, he dies. Only then do they discover an undetectable problem—a hidden Occlusion they call it—and the family is left to their despair.

But what of the Baker? At the beginning of the story, we find the mother at the bakery ordering a cake for the birthday party, before the tragedy strikes. The Baker promises to have it ready Monday morning, the day of the party, but when Monday comes, no one arrives to pick up the cake and pay. The Baker doesn't know why. He just knows that he'd worked long and hard, that he struggled to keep his business open---that he worked though the night, every night, to have breads and cakes ready in the morning, and then they didn't pick it up; and he didn't get paid. The Baker was angry. I don't just mean at the family, though he was angry at them. The baker was angry at life, at the world. He was tired of all of his work. He was wondering where his life was going, if anywhere. He was lost—at one point in the story, he says that he doesn't know how to act anymore.

The Baker was angry at the world, but he was also angry at this family that orders a cake and doesn't pick it up or pay—that wastes his time and his energy—he doesn't have enough. So he starts calling---first getting the father, who doesn't know about the cake, and so he's stone-walled. Then he just starts calling randomly, leaving messages, speaking cryptically when the phone is answered by the husband or the wife. He doesn't know how they could forget the cake. He asks them, never telling them who he is, he asks them if they've forgotten their son. He asks them if they've forgotten Scotty, the name that's on the cake. And so the macabre scene advances, a family caught in tragedy, watching their son die, receiving harassing calls asking if they've forgotten him—calls made by an unidentified Baker who's at the end of his rope as well.

The night after the son dies, the Baker calls again, but doesn't say anything---they hear the radio in the bakery in the background, though, and then it clicks for the wife—she heard that radio when she ordered the cake. She knew that it was that bastard, the baker, to use her words. It was midnight, and she made her husband drive her down to the bakery. She confronts the baker with his cruelty, she explains that she didn't pick up the cake because her son was dying. Her anger raged, and then it subsided into a sick feeling of nausea, as the realization that they no longer had their son hit her in the stomach, hard....

And the baker was abased. He didn't know, he said. His behavior was inexcusable, he admitted. "I'm not an evil man," he explained, "I just don't know how to act anymore." He begged their forgiveness, and in their weariness, they took off their coats and they sat. The baker poured them coffee, he brought them some cinnamon rolls, warm out of the oven, and they began to eat. They were starving. "It's good to eat something," the Baker said. Eat all you want. There's all the rolls in the world in here." The wife ate at least three, and they sat and listened as the Baker talked about his life—his loneliness, his doubts and limitations, what it was to live childless. Every day the same, ovens filling up, ovens empty, working through the night. At least he was a Baker, he said, not a florist—it

was better to be feeding people, he said, and he brought out a heavy, rich bread that tasted of molasses and course grains. And the three of them sat and talked through the night, over coffee and bread. “Eating is a small, good thing at a time like this,” the baker had said.

Too much of our lives are captured in this story. For too many of us, we are broken by events that have come upon us—by losses, by unexpected turns in our careers, our relationships, our own sense of self. We are weary and hungry—and in the midst of that weariness, I don’t know that the big things make much of an impact---the sermons or the classes. It’s the small things—the small good things that make community—the gift of flowers, of coffee, or an ear to listen, or a smile of acknowledgement.

We are rich in small, good things here, but we need to take care to not lose track of them. In the midst of all of our preparations, for Christmas, for work, for life---in the midst of our preparations, we need to be sure that we prepare to be gracious—that we attend to the small things, so that we can find each other, and with each other find life and love in them.

Amen.