

Bruised Reeds & Dimly Burning Wicks

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Epiphany I, Baptism of Our Lord (Year A [Isaiah 42:1-9])

St. Andrew's, Westridge

This morning my sermon is called “Bruised Reeds and Dimly Burning Wicks,” and in it I want to talk with you about God’s usual technique for making big things happen. Because we are looking for some big things to happen — at this campus, in our church, but also I imagine in your lives. The scriptures have a word of encouragement for us about making big things happen, and an important word about how we are to do it.

But first I want to remind us of something about our God and the mission he has given us. Look at verse 5 in the reading from Isaiah: “Thus says God, the LORD, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it.”¹

This is an all-encompassing scope. This is a big God we’re dealing with. Heavens. Earth. All that lives on it. Breath and spirit to the people. This is the God who calls us (you and me) to serve him, even as he called the servant spoken of in this passage. This is a pretty awesome responsibility. After all, how many people on this earth are beyond pleased and proud to just serve those with much smaller fiefdoms?

Haven’t you ever noticed that we human beings can get intoxicated by proximity the smallest amounts of power? Like the parking attendants at sporting events or bodyguards to pop stars? I remember my second job. I was an associate at The Museum Company, which was a mall gift store selling expensive stuff no one needed. I worked there over the summer, and then came back and worked the holiday season when I returned home from college. Because this was not a good job and turnover was pretty high, when I came back to work there were all these new and unexperienced staff members, and I would often find myself the second most senior employee at the store. I didn’t have any real power, except the knowledge of where things were and how things worked. But in a world where no one knew anything, that was something. Y’all, I wielded that power like, and the little elastic ring of keys that came with it, like I was the pharaoh of Egypt. I was pretty hot stuff at the Museum Company, y’all.

How is it that we can get excited about that sort of power? And yet, at the same time we, who work directly for the Lord — “who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it” — we work for that Lord and we’re like, “Ehh.” We work for a God who has infinitely more power and authority than any human being ever, and yet we’re much more impressed with someone becoming the associate to the vice president in charge of saying yes to CEO.

You realize, right, that the God of the universe is calling you to work directly for him? And the purpose of his mission — God’s mission statement, if you will — is the salvation of the world. Verse 4 says that he will not stop until “he has established justice in the whole earth; and the coastlands wait for his teaching.” Doesn’t that verse sound like it was written by a good Texan or Midwesterner? Y’all on the coasts, in New York and LA, you’re going to listen to us...someday.

But it’s not just about getting the cultural elite to pay attention to God. It’s about everyone; justice, peace and salvation for the world...that is what our service to the LORD is supposed to help accomplish. That’s the job we get to work on. I think lots of y’all know this; that’s why we’re sitting here in slightly uncomfortable chairs.

So the first thing I want to remind you is that’s a big awesome deal. And we get to help.

When not describing God in verse 5, this passage from Isaiah is describing someone called “the servant,” is this is one of the Old Testament prophecies that’s only fully fulfilled by Jesus. We can see this connection in our two readings. In our gospel reading about Jesus’ baptism, the voice from heaven says about Jesus, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”² This unmistakably picks up the language of the first verse of our reading from Isaiah. The Isaiah passage reads: “Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights.”³ It’s not identical, for God is revealing something more in Jesus. Think of it like this: this Isaiah verse, it’s like a regular Wal-Mart. The verse in the Gospel, well it’s like a Super Wal-Mart. A Wal-Mart and a Super Wal-Mart are obviously the same in some way, it’s just that the Super Wal-Mart is, well, more super. Here in the scripture, everything that is true of the servant in Isaiah is true of Jesus, it’s just that Jesus is even more super than that.

But this week I want to stress something from the regular Wal-Mart passage. Something it says quite beautifully and clearly. In verse 3, it says of the servant, “A bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench.”⁴ What possible difference can it make if a reed — already bruised and damaged — is broken. How can it matter if a wick, one that is just about out anyway, not

contributing any light of value, is snuffed out? Reeds and wicks are tiny, insignificant things.

In places like the Jordan river, or the Nile Delta, or the edges of the Sea of Galilee, reeds weren't rare, or particularly beautiful, or of great commercial value. They just were.

In the lands north of Judea, Jesus met a Samaritan woman at a well. There were lots of Samaritan women; she wasn't rare, or particularly beautiful, or wealthy. She just was. And her heart was bruised; no one gets through five marriages without a little bruising, and now she was living with a man to whom she was not married.

Jesus didn't break her; he spoke to her the words of life.

Wicks weren't particularly special in the ancient world either. Dimly burning wicks were even less so. Whereas we light the wicks of candles as a luxury or to make a room smell good, the wicks of oil lamps provided light. A dim wick was like a flickering light bulb; it was failing at the purpose for which it had been made.

One day Jesus walked by a sycamore tree, and in the sycamore tree sat a wee little man named Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus was a born child of Abraham, an Israelite — but now he had conspired with the Roman oppressors as a tax collector. The light of God in his heart was burning dimly, barely flickering. As an Israelite, he was failing at the purpose for which he had been made a part of God's people. But Jesus didn't quench his heart with a word of condemnation. Jesus called him down, invited himself over to dinner, and brought repentance and salvation to Zacchaeus' house.

Jesus' earthly ministry was all about loving the individual bruised reeds and faintly burning wicks that were placed in front of him. The chronically ill women, the dying children; the lame, the blind, and the beggars. Those with leprosy, the tax collectors, the sinners, and the prostitutes. Even Pharisees whose hearts had grown cold.

The gospel narratives, by which I mean the part of the gospels where Jesus isn't talking, largely consist of him walking around Galilee and Judea and loving individual people, bruised reeds and dimly burning wicks.

And this ministry happened on the banks of the Jordan, or the Sea of Galilee; in someone's living room, at the dinner table; in the portico of the Temple, or at the street corner. Save maybe the Temple itself, this building is more impressive (and bigger) than any Jesus ever ministered in.

His mission was grand and glorious. What he accomplished was grand and glorious. But there was nothing grand or glorious about the setting or the manner in which he carried it out. And there was certainly nothing grand or glorious about the

people whom he touched. Just bruised reed after bruised reed; dimly burning wick after dimly burning wick. Enough of that and Jesus changed the world.

His macro level ministry *is* carried out at a micro level. The level where hearts are broken and tears are shed. And I say *is carried out* not *was*, present tense, not past, because that's still true today. We don't have to do anything grand to accomplish what is great, but we must be consistent about loving what is little. If we give ourselves fully to what seems small, especially what seems small and bruised or small and failing, then we'll accomplish something big.

It's commonplace to say that a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step, or that the key to writing a book is to start by writing the first page. But this is more than big things start with small things. I mean it is is that. That's true. But it's more than that. In the kingdom of God, big things start with loving small things that are broken.

Now there are obviously sorts of brokenness in the world; our Hands & Feet ministry does a good job offering of ways to love them. But you know, not all of bruised reeds and faintly burning wick Jesus touched were poor or in prison or homeless. Lots of them would have been like the people in this room.

The fastest and best way for this campus and this church to grow is for us to love each other with the care and compassion due bruised reeds and faintly burning wicks. For us to care for one another, not as partners in some Sunday morning labor camp, but as fellow servants of the most high God...who are worried about our kids, anxious after the health of our parents, and feeling the weight of sin emptying our hearts. God will do big things with that; including making this group bigger. Imagine what God will do with us if we are confident, and he is confident, that this is a place where bruised reeds will find healing, and faintly burning wicks will be kindled to bright flame. Let us commit ourselves to that sort of love.

I want to close with a final story. Because St. Andrew's already has been this sort of place to many of us. I know of some such stories about people in this room. But I'm going to share a story about someone you probably don't know, and — so long as I do this right, you probably won't know who it is when I'm done either.

Over a year ago I got a text from someone who doesn't live in McKinney about a friend of theirs who had unexpectedly just lost her mom, along with this friend's phone number and a thinly veiled suggestion to call her. Now look, I know I do this professionally, but really... "Hello, um, I'm Fr. Andrew... I hear your mom died!"

Anyway, I sucked it up and made the phone call. I let her talk for a while, invited her to come to worship. She came. Sat in the back; snuck out the back at the end. We talked again the following week, and maybe a time or two after that. She came to

church a few more times; then spent some time out of the country. But she kept coming, and I kept praying, having little email conversations, and checking in here and there. She now regularly attends, and recently she volunteered to host our youth group.

Now I tell this story because honestly, the only part of it that requires my being a priest is the part about calling her as a complete stranger. I don't suggest you start trolling the obituaries for the names of family members of the deceased as a way to identify future church members.

But you will know people in your circles who, facing loss or addiction or hurt or abuse or doubt or whatever, need you to pick up the phone, or bring them Starbucks in the morning, or schedule a play date. Some of those people are sitting in this room, some of them aren't.

But if we're faithful at that, God will do great things at St. Andrew's. Loving bruised reeds and faintly burning wicks is, after all the ministry of Jesus Christ. And so it's our ministry too.

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1. [Isaiah 42:5 ↩](#)
 2. [Matthew 3:17 ↩](#)
 3. [Isaiah 42:1 ↩](#)
 4. [Isaiah 41:3 ↩](#)