

Too Light a Thing

Isaiah 49:1-7

January 20, 2008

“Every *Who*
Down in *Who*-ville
Liked Christmas a lot...
But Grinch,
Who lived just north of *Who*-ville,
Did NOT!
The Grinch *hated* Christmas! The whole Christmas season!
Now, please don’t ask why. No one quite knows the reason.
It *could* be his head wasn’t screwed on just right.
It *could* be, perhaps, that his shoes were too tight.
But I think that the most likely reason of all
May have been that his heart was two sizes too small.”¹

How many of you have read these words from Dr. Seuss’ How The Grinch Stole Christmas! to your children or grandchildren more than you care to remember over the holidays? How many of you are familiar with the story?

Those of us who enjoy the Grinch story, and the works of Dr. Seuss, know that it is a simple story written by a very wonderfully creative writer with an unbelievable ability to play with language about a mean old Grinch who attempted to keep Christmas from coming to the people of Whoville by carrying away all the presents and decorations right before Christmas. The diagnosis offered was that his heart was “two sizes too small.”²

Now, we’re going to get back to the connection between Dr. Seuss’ observation about the Grinch and today’s text in a few minutes. First, let me talk to you a little about the prophet Isaiah. He was the son of Amoz. He lived about eight centuries before Jesus was born. He began his ministry around 740 B.C. He told us in the very first verse of the book named after him, that he was active during the reigns of kings Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah. At times his messages were meant to fill the people of the southern kingdom of Israel, Judah, with hope. And then there were times when his messages were intended to warn them. Judah was the part of the kingdom in which Jerusalem was located. Isaiah is regarded as one of the greatest of all prophets.³

Today we’re going to take a really close look at this 49th chapter of the book named after him. The one doing the talking at the beginning of the chapter – the one the author or editor of the book of Isaiah has utter these first words: “Listen to me, O coastlands, pay attention, you peoples far away! The Lord called me before I was born, while I was in my mother’s womb he named me. He made my mouth like a sharp sword ... He made me a polished arrow ... And he said to me, ‘You are my servant ...’” the one doing the talking according to some bible scholars, is Israel itself.

It is the people of Israel, corporately, who is the servant of God. And, they aren’t feeling too good. They’re a little discouraged – a little put-up-on perhaps – feeling somewhat guilty perhaps also – for sure feeling ineffective, doubting their abilities to do the mission God had entrusted to them. In verse 4 we read their lament: “I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity.” And the prophet Isaiah notes that despite its failures the nation of Israel has been persistent in its trust of God. Indeed the prophet has Israel say in verse 5: “...my God has become my strength.” “In spite of all that seems wrong in our corporate life, yet God has been with us, we remain true to our God and it is God that has gotten us through it all.

Have there ever been times in your life when you've felt like Israel? I know there have been in and are in mine. Have you ever been down, discouraged, disappointed because despite all your hard work to carry out a task you agreed to do, your efforts appeared to not be appreciated, not able to bear the fruit you and the one who had assigned you the task had hoped it would? Ever been assigned a task, a mission, an assignment and been so enthused about the possibilities that you couldn't wait to tackle it and with great joy and enthusiasm thrown yourself and every ounce of your energy into getting it accomplished, only to have it crumble at your feet? Ever felt like your efforts were futile? Ever felt weak? Ever felt like a failure? Ever had your hopes or expectations trampled? Ever felt the energy flow out of you after you've invested all you had and all you were in something and had to face that it wasn't going to happen the way you had envisioned?⁴

If you have, then you can relate to what was going on in the psyche of the nation of Israel. God had called them from their birth to be God's servant. God had named and equipped them for the task and protected them for their mission. And they were disappointed and discouraged. It was a discouraged Israel who approached God.

And now, hear what the prophet Isaiah determined to be the word God offered to the failed servant of Israel: "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth." "It is too light a thing that you should only be my servant to your own struggling people. I now give you as a light to the nations that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth." Sounds a little bit like last week's message, don't you think? "Throw open the doors! The kingdom is open to everyone!"

Do you get what happened? Israel believed itself to be called to preach to her own people – to save her own people – and they failed. And God's response was, "I think I've set your sights too low. It's too little a thing for you to just scurry around among your own people with my message. Instead of lamenting your failure, I want you to multiply/increase your effort, expand your vision, and get out there and share about me to a wider audience, people everywhere. I want you to talk about me, witness of me, to people who haven't a clue of who I am and how much I love them."⁵

God doesn't hold their hands and say to them, "Hey, look, you tried. I so appreciate your effort. Why don't you just sit down here for awhile and catch your breath. Let me comfort you, my people. Let me heal you, my people." No, instead God restates the call, and expands it. "You know, my children – my followers – my loyal subjects – my disciples, I think what I've asked you to do really was too light a task – too small a vision. I want you to be concerned about the whole world – a whole lot more. Your failure in the past doesn't concern me – I don't think the failure is in your effort but in the vision I cast for you. Your heart is just two sizes too small."

Are you ready? I chose to preach on this text – I chose the sermon title for this sermon back in early-December, when it looked like we were heading into the new year able to proceed with the things the Micah Committee had envisioned for us – optimistic that the congregation was on board with the vision of expanding an emphasis on small groups and doing a better job of communicating who we are to the larger community. There was the news that the nearly 100 households needed to increase their pledge to supporting the operating budget of the church had come through. There were the individuals who contacted the office to let us know that they wanted to increase their pledge after hearing the vision more clearly spelled out. I had not a clue at that time what I was going to say this morning – how this text might speak to our situation. I chose the title simply because the thought of God saying to "I've given you too light a thing to do" caught my imagination. I liked the phrase. Aren't you glad to hear sermon titles are so carefully thought out?

And then, the other side of the news began to unfold – some households determined that they needed to reduce the amount of their pledge – some felt they were not able to make a pledge for 2008 at all – and I and other members of the staff and members of the Micah Committee and other church leaders had to deal with feelings of disappointment, discouragement, disillusionment. We found ourselves having to face some pretty tough decisions – cuts had to be made – not just new things, but apportionments and even some ongoing programs. (You’re going to receive a letter with your end of the year financial statements this next week detailing the situation and inviting you to an information session after each of the worship services on Sunday, February 3.)

It’s not the numbers or causes or cuts with which I want to deal today, though. That’s not what captured my soul about today’s text. Oh, they contributed much to my being able to hear the text speak to me, but they were only the vehicle that allowed God’s word to come alive. It’s a message of hope and challenge, not of comfort or resignation.

“Well, Bill Croy – well, Christians – well, Maple Grovites - let’s take a look at your situation. I don’t think now is a time for you to dwell on your failure – your disappointment – yourself. I think I’ve given you too light a thing – too small a vision. I’ll tell you what, expand your vision of your ministry – who you are for and the lengths you will go to share the good news. That’s my answer to your situation.”

Hmmm. If we were to take these words in the book of the prophet Isaiah’s and apply them to our situation today, what do you suppose that might mean for us? Here are some of the thoughts that crossed my mind: that while we’re recommitting ourselves to solving our current dilemma, we should begin to think beyond our building and our community of faith, to the ministry needs beyond our walls – that rather than give in to our despair, we need to look at things beyond ourselves. That is, that it’s not enough for us to be concerned about educating our children on Sunday morning only, but that we need to figure out what we need to do for the children in the community and around the world – that it is not enough for us to care for the elderly and shut-ins of our congregation, but we need to check out the issues the seniors beyond our walls are facing – that it is not enough for us to be concerned about how our corner of High and Henderson are impacted by development in the area, but we need to be concerned about how the decisions we make impact the area – that it is not enough for us to be concerned about how rising health care costs impact our operating budget, but need also to be part of helping find solutions to the problem beyond ourselves – that it is not enough for us to start a recycling ministry team to look at how we discard our paper, but that it may mean we find ways to connect to the larger recycling efforts. Get the picture?

Hear these words included in another preacher’s sermon: “I believe that disciples of Jesus have been plagued for eysars with doing things that are too light for us. We have enormous muscles, both physical and spiritual, and we haven’t used them. We could move mountains and yet we are afraid to try, because we have been stymied for so long by focusing on how to move mole hills.

“And that goes for church work and it goes for us personally. God has unlimited resources for us and calls us to reach out to the world with those enormous resources.

“People say ‘charity should begin at home,’ and that is surely correct. our problem is that so often it ends there. The person or the church with the world view, with the cosmic view, is so filled with compassion for others, that the people close at hand end up being beneficiaries of that same compassion. It doesn’t automatically work the other way around.

“All I know is that God is sure to bless with new energy and new options and new vigor and new joy the persons or the church that chooses to dare great things for people beyond themselves, to be, as Isaiah said, ‘ a light to the nations’ out of commitment to and gratitude for God’s great love for us which we have seen and known in Jesus Christ.

“Focusing only on ourselves and on easily reachable goals is simply too light a thing. It leads to unhealthy, disease, and plugs up the flow of God’s spirit and power, so that even the ‘easy goals’ are found to be unattainable.

“What this might mean for you and me and (Maple Grove) might make great dinner conversation, church committee discussion and prayer time contemplation this week. May we be open to what God would speak to us.”⁶

“I’ve given you too light a thing to accomplish.” Hmmm.....

Let us pray.

1. Dr. Seuss, How the Grinch Stole Christmas (New York: Random House, 1957).
2. John T. Ball, “Theology Two Sizes Too Small,” Sermons for Sundays in Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany (Lima, Ohio: CSS Publishing Company, Inc., 2004), 0-7780-2322-5a.
3. Paul E. Robinson, “Too Light a Thing,” Hope Beneath the Surface (Lima, Ohio: CSS Publishing, 1995), 0-7880-0436-0.
4. “A Renewed Call,” esermons.com, 0-89536-822-6.
5. “Too Light a Thing.”
6. Ibid.