

God Scatters Beauty in the Pennies!

A sermon based on Isaiah 49:1-6

Annie Dillard...you ever heard of her? She loves small things. She writes about them in her Pulitzer Prize winning book titled *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. Annie explores the plant and animal world in and around Roanoke, Virginia, and revels in the God who sets it all in motion. Chapter 2 is entitled "Seeing." In it, she trains herself to see and observe the small things—the things we miss because they appear so insignificant, so unimportant, so small.

For many, the little things in life are like pennies on the ground, and who gets excited about a penny? Are you more prone to catching the small details (in movies, they're called the Easter eggs) or are you so focused on the big picture? For Annie, the world is a delight because it's speckled with the little things—as though they've been scattered about by a generous hand. They're like little surprises or gifts waiting to be unwrapped.

Who gets excited by a penny? Annie Dillard does. So does the prophet Isaiah. As God's spokesman he writes: **"You are My Servant . . . in whom I will display My beauty" (Isaiah 49:3).**

In chapter 9, Isaiah introduces this Servant: **"For to us a child is born, to us a Son is given; and the government shall be upon His shoulder, and His name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (v. 6).** And in chapter 11: **"There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit" (v. 1).** And, then, a couple verses later: **"A little child shall lead them."** Any question who this Servant is?

But a son who has just been born, a shoot from a stump, a branch from roots, and a little child. Who gets excited about these kinds of things? Who gets excited about a penny? Isaiah does.

How about us? Not so much. Most of the time, you and I ignore what is little, small, and insignificant. We spend most of our life looking for twenties, fifties, and hundred dollar bills. Who wants pennies? We want the big bucks, the big time, the big league. It's, "Lord, make me a glistening black stallion in daily parades!"

We dream about landing the big job with the big bonus with the big office in the big building. We want a big house, a big yard, a big car, a big boat. Powerful forces, in our world and in our hearts, drive us to be all about the B-I-G. Big. We even hear, "Go big or go home."

Now, hear me out on this. There is nothing wrong with wanting to succeed, to do a good job, or to be successful. The danger comes, though, when we become obsessed and consumed with "big" to the point we begin to despise small things, small lives, small days, small people, and small jobs. Or we become so consumed by the big picture of what we want our lives to be, that the details of what God wants (specifically, his wants, his desires, his commands to follow him and live for him in our thoughts, words, and actions), those details get shoved to the background....such important details to our God, but seemingly insignificant and unimportant to us. What does God do? His judgment is to make us small.

Small people protect their own turf, delight in the latest gossip, and belittle others to prop up their small little lives...sound like you? But not Isaiah. He stands in a long line of believers who revel in finding just a penny. All Moses had was a staff, and this conquered a kingdom, the Egyptians. The judge Gideon

defeated Midianite hoards with three hundred Israelites who lapped water like dogs. And a sling and a stone were all David needed to kill Goliath.

The greatest person in this long line of penny finders is Jesus (Mark 12:42). He found great pleasure in five loaves of barley bread and two small fish. The Savior once said, **“The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest seed you plant in the ground” (Matthew 13:31)**. Passing through Jericho on the way to Jerusalem, Jesus picked out little Zacchaeus and said to him, **“Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham” (Luke 19:9)**. And then these words for the ages: **“Let the little children come to Me and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these” (Matthew 19:14)**.

Little Stanley was the smallest child in his Sunday school class. It was one of those classes where, because the church was small, the class was composed of first- through sixth-graders. On Palm Sunday, the teacher sent empty plastic eggs home with each of her students. She told them to bring something back in the eggs next Sunday to represent Easter. She really didn't expect Stanley to bring anything, because he was just a first-grader; the rest of the children were in fifth and sixth grade. The next Sunday, children brought their eggs back. One had a pretty spring flower inside her egg. Another had a little cross in his egg. Still another had put a plastic butterfly in her egg. But, just as the Sunday school teacher suspected, there was nothing in Stanley's egg. Stanley bombed again! Everyone in the class poked fun at him. “It figures! Stanley didn't get it, again!” Stanley then got up the courage to say, “My egg is empty just like Jesus' tomb!” Here was the most insightful understanding of Easter, and they missed it!

“You are My Servant,” is how Isaiah describes Jesus here, “in whom I will display My beauty,” God says. God didn't send an NBA all-star, a polished politician, an investment banker, a cracker-jack attorney, a successful general, or a high-profile actor for you and me. No. He sent a Servant! And most people missed it!

But through this Servant, God says, **“I will display My beauty.”**

In order to display His beauty, however, it would have to get ugly—really, really ugly. It didn't start out that bad. Ok, Jesus wasn't adorned with all the royal garments as he rode triumphantly into Jerusalem at the beginning of Holy Week, on Palm Sunday. He rode a lowly, insignificant donkey on a path, not caked with beautiful rose petals and choirs singing his praise, but with dirty coats and palm branches. Not the most beautiful of entrances, but still a joyful occasion and definitely nothing close to ugly.

That would come just a few days later. In Isaiah 49:7, we learn the details, important details, ugly details...that the Servant will be **“deeply despised, abhorred by the nation.”** In Isaiah 50, we learn that the Servant will give His back to those who beat Him and His cheeks to those who pull out His beard (v. 6). In chapter 52, the Servant's appearance will be so marred that people will be appalled at Him; His form will be disfigured behind human likeness (v. 14). And in Isaiah 53:2: **“He had no form or majesty that we should look at Him, and no beauty that we should desire Him.”**

It was on Good Friday that God's beauty was on display, ironically, through an ugly and horrific crucifixion. Look again. Blood and spit are caked to His cheeks. His lips are cracked and swollen. His enemies revile Him. His friends forsake Him. And He hangs there alone, in three hours of God-forsaken darkness...hell.

What's beautiful about that? I'll tell you

Jesus did it all to find a penny. He suffered, bled, and died to find and cherish *you*.

Who gets excited about a penny? Listen to this parable: **“Suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Does she not light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.’ In the same way, I tell you, there is more rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner...”** Jesus gave more than a careful search. He suffered, bled, and died to find and cherish and rejoice in you.

Who gets excited about a penny?

Jeannette Threlfall does. She felt like one most of her life. Orphaned at an early age, two serious accidents caused her to become an invalid for life. But she lived faithfully with her pain and suffering because she knew that Jesus came for the little, the least, and the last.

Her favorite day of the year was Palm Sunday because her Savior didn’t ride a black stallion or a white war horse, but a lowly, regular, ordinary donkey.

That’s why, in 1871, Jeannette Threlfall composed a hymn for Palm Sunday, calling it “Hosanna, Loud Hosanna.” Verses 1 and 2 describe how children (children, not adults; the adults were looking for something BIG to conquer Rome) responded during Christ’s procession into Jerusalem, while verse 3 invites everyone to sing—that is, everyone who gets excited about a penny. **“ ‘Hosanna in the highest!’ That ancient song we sing; For Christ is our Redeemer, The Lord of heav’n our King. Oh, may we ever praise Him With heart and life and voice And in His royal presence eternally rejoice!”** Don’t miss it! Amen.