

Covenant Word

Just Begin...One by One by One

Isaiah 49:5-6; Matthew 3:13-17; I Cor. 3:10-16

*A Message by
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Pastor
Sunday
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It has become a familiar story. A father and son are walking along the beach after a storm has caused an unusual, but natural, occurrence. The shore is littered with thousands of sea stars. As the father and son attempt their walk, the son stops every other step to throw a sea star back into the ocean. The father, exasperated over the delays, finally says,

“What are you doing? There

are hundreds of those creatures!

To throw a few

back will not make any difference at all!” To which the son, tossing as he talked, said, “But Dad, it does make a difference for this one and for this one and for this one.”

Our attempts at ministry often feel this futile: band-aids on huge, gaping wounds; a cup of cold water to the desperately dehydrated; trite words to those in the depths of despair and grief; a cookie to the already malnourished and starving; a quick burning match in a void of dire darkness. We realize there is only one person being helped, while the need and hurt of the world surrounds us, much as the masses did around Jesus, demanding and needing so much more.

The prophet Isaiah knew this discouragement as well. Called by God, entrusted with a divine message, and appointed a servant who was to glorify God, he found only hardship and struggle. He had expended all of his energy on the people of Israel, but it was to no avail.

So Isaiah presents his case to God. He protests. He outlines his frustrations. He makes his case with convincing fervor. A lesser god would have received his resignation without a second thought. But this God of ours not only reinforces the original calling; this great, big, personal God increases the scope of the prophet’s call to extend beyond Israel to the whole earth.

“It is too little,” says God. “This first call to service is too small. Your plans are too small because your sense of self is diminutive. You think small! You act

small! You dream small! You achieve small goals! I want you to think big! I want you to be big! I want you to fulfill the potential that has been put within you! I want you to be all that I have created you to be: my sons and daughters, mirrors of the Divine Presence within you; bearers of Christ’s love to all nations so that My salvation reaches to the ends of the earth! It is not enough to be my servants. I have bigger plans for you!” (Elizabeth Anne Stewart, “Sunday Bible Talk, Sunday, Jan. 20, 2008)

Has it occurred to you that God has bigger plans for you? Do we realize that God has bigger plans for us as a faith community?

The dreams and visions of the Company of the Committed were and are noble. They were so prayerfully considered and so carefully executed that we continue to build on them even to this day. But, what if these words to Isaiah are truly God’s message to us at this pivotal time in the church’s history? “You think too small! You dream too small! I want you to think and dream in larger ways.”

Our task is to literally save the world one person at a time.

Do not misunderstand me. This is no quick-fix faith we are talking

about. This is not a “get rich theology” that expects God to deliver the highest paid positions with the greatest possibilities for advancement and benefits. It is not a calling to be a country-club church with screens that come down from the ceiling for worship or a Starbuck’s drive-through attached to the building or a recreational center that rivals the local gym at UAB or St. Vincent’s. No, instead, we are being challenged to a path of greatness that is a spiritual matter. It is outlined in the Beatitudes, where we are blessed for having not, for being persecuted, for being consumed with grief, and for being meek and merciful and peaceful. God’s interest is not with making us wealthy and powerful. God’s desire is that we be so Spirit-filled that we are not only empowered to be servants of the living God, but that we are empowering others to take a leap of faith to believe. Our task is not merely to improve facilities in order to move ahead. Our task is to literally save the world one person at a time. (Stewart...also list below)

How do we do that, we might ask.

We save the world when we refuse to give in to envy and greed.

We save the world when we deliberately choose to let go of petty disagreements, we intentionally refuse anger, and we remove our desire for revenge. We save the world when we make peace with our enemies and give a blessing to those who have harmed us in any way.

We save the world when we move beyond our comfort zones and reach out to the poor and oppressed, and actively work for justice.

We save the world when we purposefully bring joy

**Dear Friends,
Thank you for wanting to read and study these thoughts more carefully. Please know that I do not take full credit for anything that may be contained within, because I may have read or heard something at some point during my pilgrimage and do not remember its source and thus, cannot give the rightful author his/her credit. I pray that you will find inspiration and encouragement.
Sarah Shelton**



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Covenant*

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Worship with us each Sunday
morning at 9 a.m. and
for Bible study at 10:30 a.m.

into another person's life or we restore someone's dignity or we help another rise above despair.

We save the world when we work to overturn unjust laws.

We save the world when we can look upon each person, including ourselves, and recognize that our bodies are, as Paul's letter to the

Corinthians'

confirms, a holy

temple in which

God's Spirit resides.

We save the world when we tend to our Earth by protecting her air and water and all the creatures who share this space with us.

We save the world when we allow the Spirit to work so powerfully through us that we become the dreamers and visionaries that God calls us to be.

We save the world when we commit to love our neighbor one by one by one.

I believe this is how Mother Teresa was able to devote her life to serving the poorest of the poor. She believed that no one should die without knowing that they are loved. So she, and the Missionaries of Charity, began their ministry of mercy in 1952 in Calcutta, India. She tells a story of walking past an open drain and catching a glimpse of something moving in it. She investigated and found a dying man whom she took back to a home where he could die in love and peace. The man told her, "I live like an animal in the streets, but now I will die like an angel."

Devoting her life to those who were dying, she, paradoxically, witnessed that as a result of the sisters' love and care, over half of the people recovered. She says in her book, Words to Love By:

I never look at the masses as my responsibility. I look at the individual. I can only love one person at a time. I can only feed one person at a time. Just one, one, one. So you begin...I begin.

I picked up one person—maybe if I didn't pick up that one person I wouldn't have picked up 42,000. The whole work is only a drop in the ocean. But if I didn't put the drop in, the ocean would be one drop less.

<And then she says to us all:>

Same thing with you, same thing with your family, same thing in the church where you go, just begin...one <by> one <by> one.

Today we begin one by one as we baptize Katy Grace Bateman and Alethea Thompson.

Katy Grace, last year in School for Christian Living, we studied Bible characters who, because they listened to God, they encountered a challenge, but because of their faith, they always responded with obedience. One of those persons was Queen Esther.

Esther was a Jew who had become Queen through a competition similar to a beauty pageant. Esther kept it a secret that she was a Jew.

There was a man in the King's court by the name of Haman. Haman hated the Jews. In fact, so strong was his hate, he asked the King to kill all the Jews. Trusting his advisor, the King agreed. When Esther heard about this plan, she was worried about all of her family and friends who were Jews. She was worried about herself too!

The King was in his private chambers and had said that he did not want to be disturbed. So definite were his orders that he said that if anyone disturbed him, he would have them put to death.

Well, Esther summoned up her courage and went in to the King.

Fortunately, he allowed her in. She asked the King to come enjoy a special dinner she was preparing for him and Haman. The King agreed

to come and when he did, Esther asked for the King's help to save her people.

Because Esther was willing to risk her life, her position as Queen, and her relationship with the King, all of the Jews were saved. It was such a brave act that the Jews celebrate it still on a day they call Purim. Esther was only one person, but her courage saved the lives of thousands.

I tell you this story on the day of your baptism Katy Grace, because it is our hope and prayer that your faith will grow to be as strong as Esther's; that you will become a believer who acts on her faith convictions rather than be a believer who is crippled by fear. We also pray that you will have the integrity to know when to speak to authorities who have power and when to be silent so that justice has a chance to prevail.

So in obedience to the commands of our Lord and Savior, and upon your public profession of faith in Him, I do baptize you, Katy Grace Bateman, in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost, Amen.

In the gospel of Mark (5:25-34), there is a story told about Jesus. He is surrounded by a crowd and his disciples. In fact, during the story, one of the disciples questions Jesus about how could He possibly feel anyone touch Him because the crowd was so thick. They were all jostling one another trying to get close to Jesus.

Alethea Thompson, it seems to me that you have been trying to get close to Jesus for a long time. You made a decision to be a believer early in life, but then life began to happen...jostling you this way and that, so that rather than getting closer to Jesus, you were actually pushed away.

Somehow, you found your way to this sanctuary. You heard words of welcome, music that brought peace to your soul, and you began to struggle with how to start over one more time. You told me that you wanted to be baptized in order to set some things straight by having a fresh point of beginning. It seemed to me that you were finally ready to touch the hem of Jesus' garment.

That's what happened, after all, in the Bible story I mentioned earlier. There was a woman there the day that Jesus walked through town and was surrounded by the crowds. She had been sick for many years. She had tried everything. In fact, the scriptures say that she had spent all of her money on doctors trying to get well. Nothing had worked. She needed a miracle in her life, so she came to Jesus. The crowd was thick. Jesus was on a mission of mercy to heal someone else. If the others in the crowd recognized her, they would be angry because her presence would make them unclean according to Jewish law. It was one of those moments where she knew if she did not act right then, then she would lose her chance forever. So she reached out and

all she could do was to touch the hem of Jesus' garment.

You know what, Alethea? When she touched Jesus, she was healed immediately. All of her pain, all of her sorrows, all of her feelings of being a lesser person...all of it was gone. Then Jesus turned and before everyone that was present, He praised her for her faith.

Alethea, you stand in these baptismal waters as a symbol of the fact that you, too, have touched the hem of Jesus' garment. We stand with you as the crowd that will keep nudging you to Jesus. And the miracle that we witness in your faith that keeps reaching to touch His garment, will not only change you. It will change us and others one by one by one.

So in obedience to the commands of our Lord and Savior and upon your public profession of faith in Him, I baptize you Alethea Thompson in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost. Amen.

We ask Your blessing, oh Lord, upon Katy Grace Bateman and Alethea Thompson. Protect them as they grow in their love and commitment to You, Your church, and Your people. May we, as fellow travelers on this journey of faith, be sources of strength, encouragement, joy and hope. Convict us now of our commitments to Your kingdom. Give us generous hearts that remain open to the Spirit's call to be Your people in this place. Amen.

Perhaps there is one who desires to follow the example of these two and confess your faith and be a candidate for baptism. Perhaps there is one who desires to be a member of this congregation as we dream bigger dreams. Or perhaps there is one who desires to give their life to a full time Christian vocation that will bring ministry one by one by one. Whatever your decision, we welcome it. John will be here at the front to greet you as we stand and sing hymn #240, "Spirit, Now Live in Me."