Montague Pastoral Charge

January 18, 2026

Second Sunday after Epiphany

Sermon

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I saw a cartoon recently that was poking fun at modern physics. It shows a senior scientist talking to his assistant outside their observatory. He tells her, "I'll be working on the largest and smallest objects in the universe – superclusters and neutrinos. I'd like you to handle everything in between." Because that's what modern science tends to explore, and we just assume that this is where you find out what reality really is – the really big and the really small. They're looking for what they call a "theory of everything" that would unite the theories of the big and the small.

Now that has nothing at all to do with our readings today, except that the scriptures invite us to consider what you could call the "scale of salvation" – the big and the small. There's a theme of bigness in our three readings today. Each of them talks about salvation with a very wide scope – something that reaches out to a great number of people. God's work is on display for the whole world to see and hear. In Isaiah, we have one of what they call the "servant songs," these poems about this mysterious "servant of the Lord" who will suffer for the people and save them. In chapter 49, God says to the servant, "I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth." Meanwhile, Psalm 40 is a very personal song of salvation, except that the psalmist is not content to keep the good news to him-or-herself, but proclaims it for a large audience: "I have told the glad news of deliverance in the great congregation; see, I have not restrained my lips." And in our Gospel reading, John the Baptist points to Jesus and names him with that amazingly big title: "Here is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world." The sin of the world – the whole world! You can't get any bigger than that. Read on and you see the calling of the first disciples according to John, except that in this telling of the story Jesus doesn't even need to call them, it's as if he is so big that he has his own gravity. It's as if the whole world is simply pulled into his orbit: "Come and see." In these three readings, salvation – whatever exactly that means – is huge.

I don't know about you, but the relationship between the big things and the small things has been tense, lately. The big things have seemed bigger than usual these days, and they seem to be invading the world of the small, everyday stuff. The "sin of the world" seems easy to spot, and I'm sure it has been weighing on many minds this past week, like a heavy, oppressive fog. Protesters in Iran being killed by the thousands, a bullying foreign policy coming out of the White House, undermining generations of trust between allies – not to mention all the ongoing wars, drugs, tariffs, climate change…there's a lot of big stuff to worry about. More than ever, it feels that we need that mysterious "Servant of the Lord" who will be a "light to the nations." Someone with global credibility, whom "kings shall see and stand up, princes, and they shall prostrate themselves." Because we seem to be at the mercy of forces that are far bigger than ourselves, orders of magnitude bigger, and it's hard to imagine what we, as a small group of people in a small place, can do about it.

The question I've found myself asking is, "What, as Christians, are we supposed to do about the big stuff going on in the world? Can we do anything about that? At what level are we

supposed to live out our faith? Where is the stage on which we act? Is it at the small level, the level of our homes and communities, tending our gardens and doing the best we can for our neighbours? Or is it at the global level, fighting and advocating for justice at the national and international level? And if it's the latter, how do we even go about doing that, as people of a small church in a small province in a sparsely populated country? What is the relationship between the small and the big? How much should we be invested in the global issues of our time, and how much should we focus on the smaller things that we can actually do something about? The story we tell ourselves and that we teach our children, is that you can make the world a better place wherever you are, by helping a stranger, by giving to a local shelter, by sorting your garbage properly. In a day-to-day, local way, we can show a better way to live. But sometimes you can't help asking, "What difference does it make? Do we actually change the world that way? Does anyone notice? Or does the world operate on two different levels – what happens down here in Montague stays here, and what happens up there in the White House stays there?

If we're ever tempted to despair that we never make a real difference, at least we are in good company. Even in our reading from Isaiah, the "Servant of the Lord" himself is worn out and ready to give up. "I have laboured in vain; I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity." When you consider that, as Christians, we usually read these "servant songs" as referring to Jesus, that's quite striking. Even the anointed messiah seems ready to give up on his mission. This is the old familiar pattern with the prophets: they try to bring the people back to God, but the people don't want to listen; they don't pay any attention. I daresay we feel the same way, when the best that we do, at the personal, local level, goes unnoticed by the higher levels. It's natural to despair that we can ever make a difference. The global world disrupts the local world, and it seems that the local world can't make any difference to the global.

But notice what God does with the despair. 'And now the LORD says, who formed me in the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him, and that Israel might be gathered to him, for I am honored in the sight of the LORD, and my God has become my strength – he says, "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."' The original project is to bring one people back to God – the people of Israel – but when that doesn't seem to be working and the servant feels discouraged, God changes the plan. You might expect God to lower the expectations and pick a more attainable goal, but God does just the opposite. "You know what? The project wasn't too big, it was too small. Now I will give you not just to guide the people of Israel, but as a light to all the nations." As if to say, if your dreams aren't coming true, you're not dreaming big enough. You see it in the New Testament too: at a time of empire and oppression, we might expect God's mercy to shrink, but instead it widens: a lamb of God to take away the sin of the whole world, at the local and the global level.

God is addressing the anointed servant that we call Christ, but in him, God is also addressing us who are part of his body, and who share in his ministry of light to the world. For us, too, maybe we are not daring to dream big enough. In Jesus, the small and the big come together; the local and the global touch each other. See how he brings together peasants and kings, back-country villages and world capitals. In the language of physics, he is our theory of everything; he and the things we do in and with him are never as small as they seem. He deals with the sin of petty fraudsters at the same time he takes away the sin of the whole world.

The message for us who share in his ministry seems to be, "Dream big, work small" Set our eyes on the kingdom of God, orient ourselves on the very highest thing, and then set to work on the lowest thing. The world will notice; maybe not straight away, and maybe it will take a bit of effort. But if Jesus was telling the truth that we share his light, then what we do will be noticed. A city on a hill can't be hid. When the light of Christ is shining, people will pay attention.

Just yesterday I was hearing about a new tradition in Atlanta, Georgia that started last year. In a couple of weeks, Habitat for Humanity will be gathering a team of workers outside the State Capitol Building to do a house build (including a couple of our folks from Hillcrest). Just like they normally do, but this time it's put on display for legislators at the highest level to see. It's a way of putting the spotlight on the issue of affordable housing, and at the same time, putting together part of a real family's new house. It's also a way of highlighting the work that Habitat for Humanity is doing in that state and all around the world every day – a reminder that there is unglamorous, day-to-day work of compassion happening constantly, making a genuine difference, one family at a time. It's a perfect illustration of what Christian mission is for: to bring together neighbourhood and government, the weak and the mighty – to bridge that gap.

When faced with a world of tremendous need and increasing anxiety, and our own inability to do very much about it other than tiny acts of love, there are a few ways to cope. One option is to convince yourself that the small things we can do are bigger than we think, that they really are changing the world more than we know. That small things are really big things, in other words. Another option is to say, "Yes, I know it's a small thing, I know it's just a drop in the ocean, but I'm going to keep doing the right thing even if it doesn't make any difference." That small things are just small things, and that's OK. But really, the truth is probably somewhere in the middle. The things that seem small are probably not as tiny as we think, nor are they as big as we'd like to imagine. More likely the small thing is actually a *medium* thing. Like the physicist, we tend to think in terms of huge and tiny, infinities and infinitesimals, that we are either making an earth-shaking difference or no difference whatsoever. As if the light we shine must be either a flickering tea-light or a giant supernova. But most of the world lies somewhere in the middle. There is, in fact, a lot of stuff between superclusters and neutrinos, between the dauntingly huge and the insignificantly small, and it's in that middle space, which Jesus has opened up for us, that Christian mission happens.

No, our monthly community luncheons are not creating world peace. I love them, but that would be a delusion. But nor are they doing nothing; they're not just a few bites of food for people that don't really need it. They're not that big, but they're not that small, either. They're medium-sized. They're giving solitary people something to look forward to, they're strengthening relationships and gently building community. They're not much in the grand network of the universe, but they're not that small, either; they're even quite significant at the local level.

The working Christian – the "servant of the Lord" who shares the Light of the World – is the person who will dream big and work small, who will lift their eyes to heaven and pray "Thy kingdom come," who will ache for "justice to roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream," who will believe that, one day there will be such peace that even "the wolf will lie down with the lamb" – all of that – and who will then turn their eyes down to earth and pound a nail in the house frame, or ring the buzzer to get into the nursing home, or pull off an

extra jar from the shelf for the Food Bank. As George Eliot wrote, “the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.”