

St. John's Episcopal Church
Jackson, Wyoming
Sermon for December 13, 2015 ~ Advent 3C
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My mentor during my curacy was a monumental kind of man. He was a man who discovered what were to him great principles of life and tried to live by those principles with enormous integrity. One of those principles was printed on a small piece of paper he kept for years under the glass of his desk. It was a proverb from the late prime minister Disraeli: "Life is too short to be little."

He told me that he kept it there because it reminded him of two very important things: *Life is short*, and *Littleness is one of the greatest enemies of life*. One of the reasons we remember the ministry of John the Baptist during the Advent season of waiting is because he, too, warns us of the shortness of life and the danger of littleness. John's message is far more blunt than that little proverb of Disraeli, yet Luke says his message was "good news." I'm not certain we always hear it that way. It's sort of fun to think of sending Christmas cards based on John's message. They would sound something like this:

Greetings! Thinking of you during this blessed season. "You brood of vipers! Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down thrown into the fire." Have a Merry, Merry Christmas!

Now, given that context, it doesn't sound like such good news, does it? But it is. It is good news because it tells us that one is coming whose life is life itself, one in whom we find redemption and meaning and purpose of the highest kind - one in whom there is no room for littleness of any kind, no extortion, no greed, no slander - one in whom every life will have infinite value and be a fruit bearing life. It is good news because it is a promise that, in its magnanimity, confronts and redeems the shortness of life. Life is too short to be little!

So, as we are once again confronted by the news of his coming, we are invited to hear this good news and let it transform us into magnanimous people. St. Paul wrote to the church in Philippi: "Rejoice in the Lord always, and, again, I say, 'rejoice.' Let your magnanimity be known to everyone. The Lord is near." He was saying, "Life is short. Therefore, let joy and magnanimity be the predominant themes of it." As Christians, we want to be known as a people of magnanimity. Why? In the words of Paul, "the Lord is near." We want him to find us at our very best. We want him to help us grow to be the glorious, wonderful people he intends us to be. So, "... by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God." Let me suggest some requests we can make known to God during this Advent - requests that will make of us a more magnanimous people.

We can ask Christ to help us become big in spirit.

To make us slow to condemn - Every person carries many secret burdens that we do not know about, and we need the Savior's help to be more concerned with understanding than with condemnation.

To make us rejoice in the victories of others - We need the help of Christ to overcome petty jealousy so we can rejoice in the victories of others.

To make us ready to forgive - Our unwillingness to forgive others is an obstacle that blocks the Savior's highway into our lives. We need to forgive to release ourselves from the destructive power of anger and bitterness as much as to release those whom we feel have hurt us from their own guilt. It takes a big spirit to forgive like that. It will only succeed if there is magnanimity.

We can ask Christ to give us a big outlook.

A little outlook limits the life God wants us to live. When we were children, most of us enjoyed reading *Gulliver's Travels*. I always thought Gulliver's experience in the land of Lilliput was fascinating. I delighted in the idea of this great man, tall and strong and vigorous, finding himself pinned down to the earth by all these tiny people so that he could not move. But I did not realize till much later that Dean Swift, the author of this story, was dealing with great insights into human life. In the case of Gulliver in the land of Lilliput, he was presenting an all-to-familiar paradigm: It is possible for us to let little people, little ideas, little outlooks, little visions pin us down to the ground and hold us so that life loses its glory and majesty and its beauty and its meaning.

God wants us to embrace a great vision and unwilling to settle for a short-term, quick fixes. I remember reaching the successful conclusion of a five year strategic mission plan. Many times along the way, we had to struggle to resist the temptation to take off on tangents and abandon the plan. Many times we began to doubt our beliefs and believe our doubts. But, by the grace of God, when we looked back at the terrain over which God led us, we saw that God did great things for us and through us. Things we could not have done on our own. We were accused of being "ambitious." The accusation was true: we were ambitious for God and the great ministry God wanted to unfold in that mission field. Anything less was too little and, life is too short to be little. We had leaders who had a big outlook, knew the value of time, and shared a sense of God's vision for that church's future.

God certainly has a great vision for us. Ours should be no less great than God's. When we look out upon God's world and try to see the world as God does, it enlarges our horizons and gives us a sense of the unlimited scope of God's resources and God's glory.

We can ask Christ to give us a big concern.

A concern for honesty and integrity - We want these concerns in the people we place in positions of responsibility in government, business, the Church, and in our families, the professionals who serve us in many ways. And we should, but we must begin with ourselves. Life is too short to live it without honesty and integrity.

A concern for Unselfishness - Most of the great people who have ever been admired were people who were unselfish in their devotion to others and to the causes they addressed. It was not that they took risks with the lives or institutions of others, but their willingness to be big enough to take personal risks for the higher good. In 1965, an interesting thing took place at the Wimbledon Tennis Tournament. The linesman called "fault" after one of the players served. He protested but was overruled. His opponent did not agree with the call. So, when he was to receive the next serve, he just stood there and let it pass. It was his way of saying, "I do not want to win on a technicality. I want to be fair and

unselfish.” I liked what President George H.W. Bush used to say, “No definition of a successful life will be complete without service to others.” Life is too short to live it selfishly.

A concern for the values we profess to believe in. Whistler, the painter, was asked by a man to come to his home and make a painting fit into a room. Whistler went with him, looked at the painting and the room, and told him, “You will never be able to fit this painting into this room. You are starting at the wrong end. You need to make the room fit the painting.” We have a picture of God, not on canvas, but in the form of Jesus Christ. Many people think the key to a relationship with Christ is to fit him into their lives. But you are never going to be able to fit him into your life. On the contrary, it is as H.G. Wells said, “you can never fit the love of God into your heart.” That is starting at the wrong end. You have to fit your life into the love of God. We have to be magnanimous people.

During Advent, a major part of our preparation is to grow more magnanimous so we can prepare him room so he can “cast out our sin and enter in and be born in us today.” - “Let your magnanimity be known by everyone. The Lord is Near!” Life is too short to be little!