

# ***Lutheran Mission Matters***



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## Sermon

# Too Small a Thing

Sermon by Joel Biermann

Isaiah 49:1–7  
Epiphany Lutheran Church, St. Louis  
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The good news is that there is still time. It may be the third week of the new year, but it's not too late, not yet, you can still get started on that resolution for the new year—or maybe you can even get around actually to making one. For weeks the gyms and health clubs have been blitzing us with their great deals thoughtfully timed and designed to make it easy for those motivated by the arrival of a new year to get after those 2020 resolutions. Yes, we are now into the “last chance” extension period—but there is still a sliver of time. You can still do it. Or, maybe not.

Personally, I'm not much of a new year's resolution person. I can't remember ever having made one. You can chalk it up as one of the negative-tilting aspects of my phlegmatic personality if you like, but I have a hard time grasping the attraction of making resolutions. Even to come up with a resolution requires some degree of reflection and then effort and eventually, if it is kept, change—all of which implies that there is something wrong with the way things are. No, the making of resolutions has never held much attraction for me. But, that's not true for everyone, of course—that's evident by the influx of new people awkwardly competing for the exercise equipment at the gym. Apparently, the advertising and great deals were not in vain. I can only say, “Good job, keep it up . . . just don't stay standing on that leg lift contraption while you rest between sets—others are waiting.”

Actually, this whole new year's resolution thing does raise an important question—one that often plagues me, and one that I'm not eager to confront . . . simply



*Rev. Dr. Joel Biermann is a professor of Systematic Theology at Concordia Seminary and teaches doctrinal theology with a special interest in ethics. He and his wife, Jeannalee, enjoy a variety of activities living in St. Louis—especially spending time with their nine grandchildren. [biermannj@csl.edu](mailto:biermannj@csl.edu)*

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because it has the potential to upend so many of the settled conclusions that comfortably guide my life. The important question is simply this: when does being content become being complacent? Contentment, of course, is a wonderful gift and a virtue that is repeatedly encouraged in the pages of Scripture. “Godliness with contentment is great gain,” what more needs to be said? Learning to be content with what God gives is a critical aspect of Christian maturity. Discontentment is the breeding ground for a long list of very nasty problems—including a few of the seven deadly sins. Greed, envy, and lust are all rooted in a failure to learn to be content. So, it’s understandable that we elevate the virtue of contentment.

But, when does contentment extend too far and give birth to its own nasty sins like apathy, and self-centeredness and even the deadly sins of sloth and pride? When does being content stop and being complacent start? That’s not an easy question, is it? And if we are honest, we are forced to admit that it’s all too convenient to shake off a challenge to do something new, chart a different course, or strive for something more all in the name of being content with what you already have. How many extraordinary things were never accomplished simply because the one who was appointed to do them, being content with what he had, never got started? How many bad habits were never challenged, virtues never attained, and lives not changed for the good because someone who had learned to be content had also learned to be complacent?

You can see, then, how the annual emphasis on new year’s resolutions has a way of highlighting this old question for me. Well, and so does today’s Old Testament Reading. It’s right there in verse six. Isaiah gives us a powerful prophecy of the work that the Messiah, that Jesus would one day accomplish. From the womb, God calls His Servant, His chosen Messiah, to do the special work that has been prepared: the Servant is going to bring back to God and honor exiled Jacob and seek out and restore the lost people of Israel. God’s chosen people would be saved and glorified—all through the work of the Servant. Pretty heady stuff—there’s plenty in the Messiah’s job description to celebrate and savor.

But, apparently, it’s not enough. No, not by a long shot. “It is too small a thing,” says God, “too light, too insignificant, too flimsy a thing for my chosen servant to save only Jacob and Israel. No, His work is bigger than that. His salvation is going to stretch out to every single nation and reach to the very ends of the earth.” Wow. That’s ambitious. And so, the challenge becomes acute. If God is not content with anything less for His Chosen Servant than worldwide salvation, does God have similar grand aspirations for His Church? If He sets an extraordinary goal for His Messiah, then what does He ambitiously expect from all those who follow that Messiah? It seems that there is no room here for contentment with modest achievements, realistic goals, or manageable job descriptions. “It’s too small a thing!” would seem to be the rallying cry that God would have on our lips.

So, maybe we need to take this to heart, embrace the challenge, and take up the shout. “It’s too small a thing!” It’s too small a thing that a church built to seat four hundred people can lure scarcely eighty on any given Sunday. It’s too small a thing that the faithful who gather in God’s church hear and know God’s truth while the neighborhood just outside the doors still languishes in confusion and death. It’s too small a thing that my own immediate family is carefully nurtured and formed in the faith when other families lurch about aimlessly and breed futility. It’s too small a thing that our little synod carefully teaches God’s truth while so many Christian groups in America are overrun with accommodation and compromise to a godless culture. It’s too small a thing that in one small corner of the church the mission is clear and the doctrine is solid. It’s too small a thing that neighbors can exercise their dogs and their children on our campus without ever encountering God’s gospel. It’s too small a thing that we can meet the physical needs of neighbors but fail to bring them the wonderful good news of forgiveness and grace in Christ’s gospel. It’s too small a thing that only a handful of the world’s people actually know God’s grace and faithfully follow Christ. It’s too small a thing that your spiritual life is sanctified while the rest of your life is normed by your peers on social media. It’s too small a thing that you are content with a narrow, denominational, parochial, and spiritual salvation when Christ came to save the whole creation.

It’s too small a thing! It’s too small a thing! Even a status quo phlegmatic like myself can admit the thrill and inspiration of that cheer. It tugs at me like gravity. It’s too small a thing! . . . but, *is* it? Is it true? Is it really too small a thing when God’s people are doing what God has given them to do even if that thing appears unimportant, inconsequential, and is all but unnoticed? Is it really too small? Is it too small a thing when the ninety-year-old whose life has contracted down to the space of an industrial bed daily prays for the pastor who in duty to his vocation does the even smaller thing of bringing her the Lord’s Supper once a month? *Is* it too small a thing? Actually, today’s Gospel Reading allows us to move out of theoretical speculation and well beyond merely rhetorical questions. The reading from John brings us into concrete reality and actually gives us a definitive answer to these questions—it even answers that nagging question about when being rightly content becomes being wrongly complacent.

In the story from John’s Gospel we hear about Jesus’ very first disciples. Andrew and another nameless follower of John were the first two to follow Jesus. After that initial meeting and a day spent with Jesus, Andrew’s next move was to find his brother Simon and bring him along to meet Jesus. And the rest, of course, is history. Simon became Peter, the Rock and the spokesman and the leader, and Andrew . . . well, Andrew faded into the background—not even included as one of the inner circle of the twelve disciples. Was it too small a thing when Andrew brought Peter to Jesus? Was it too small a thing when later, in the last week of Jesus’ ministry, Andrew brought

some earnest Greeks to meet Jesus? Did Andrew lack ambition? Was he aiming too low? Did Andrew become complacent while Peter kept striving for more? No, there's nothing in the Bible or church history to suggest such a notion. Quite the opposite, in fact.

Andrew simply did what he had been given to do, and God used that faithful work for His purpose. And that's the key. To do well what God has given you to do is exactly what it means to be content; and whether or not the thing you do is too small a thing . . . well, that's entirely up to God to decide. I don't know what Andrew thought about his place in God's plan or whether he ever felt any dissatisfaction with his small role of bringing another person who would end up with a lead role. I don't know if Andrew ever felt like his part was too small a thing—but I know for sure that it wasn't. What Andrew did was not too small a thing, because what Andrew did was the thing God had given him to do. That's never too small a thing.

It's fine to ask the question, in fact it's probably a good idea to ask pointedly about whether what you're doing is *all* that God has given you to do. There is always a temptation to settle and to aim low. It's good to aim high. It's very good to seek ways that allow you to use the gifts and resources that you have been given. It might even be all right to pray for greater opportunity to serve or use your gifts. But, until *God* gives you a bigger thing to do, you can be content to do the thing you've already been given to do. Let God be the one to decide it's time for a new resolution. Let God be the one to resolve that what you're doing is too small a thing and that He wants from you more than what you're doing. That's *God's* call.

Listen for that call—and be careful: don't let complacency keep you from hearing when God has resolved that what you're doing is too small a thing and it's time for a new thing or another thing that needs to be done. God makes the resolutions; you make every effort to fulfill them. Keep listening . . . and keep doing what you've already been given to do. That thing God has given you to do is never too small a thing; because God uses that thing for His purpose—to deliver His grace in a certain place. That's how it is with God's plan. When grace comes, it cannot ever be too small a thing. For the one who is touched by God's grace, the thing that brings that grace cannot possibly be too small a thing. Whatever extraordinary things are yet to unfold in the continuing work of God's chosen Messiah—and there are some incredible things still to come—I'm grateful that it was not too small a thing for His grace to come even to me. And be certain of this, neither was it too small a thing when God's perfect grace came even to you. Amen.