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Saint Anne's Day

**Sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Joseph S. Pagano on
The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, July 24, 2011
Celebrating the Feast Day of Joachim and Anne Parents of the
Blessed Virgin Mary**

Several years ago, Arundhati Roy wrote a beautiful novel called, *The God of Small Things*.¹ I loved the book. Other people did too. It won the Booker prize in 1997. I also love the title: *The God of Small Things*. It comes from a passage toward the end of the book where a character reflects on a past love. She thinks: "Who was he? Who could he have been? The God of Loss. The God of Small Things. The God of Goosebumps and Sudden Smiles." I don't want to give away the ending, but I love those lines about *The God of Loss*, *The God of Small Things*, *The God of Goosebumps and Sudden Smiles*. The God that is known in the book, the God that is made manifest in the lives of the characters, is the God found in small things.

The novel takes on big themes: things like love and loss and hope, through the story of two small children, twins named Rahel and Estahappen. And their story is told against the large backdrop of Southern India in 1969. But instead of trying to talk about the larger social and political context, the author focuses on the small details in the small lives of these two rather small children. And it is precisely in her attention to the minute details of the characters' experience that the larger themes emerge and the God of Loss, the God of Goosebumps and Sudden Smiles, the God of Small Things emerges. Like I said, it is a beautiful book, and I think it is teaching us something that is profoundly true. If we are looking for God, He will often be found in small things, things like loss and goose bumps and sudden smiles, and in the lives of small children and ordinary people. Oftentimes, it is in the small things in life, in all their exquisite beauty, in all their pain, in all their surprise that we find God.

I am often struck at how the story of our faith, the story of the God who created heaven and earth, is so often told through the lives, and the actions of rather small, ordinary people. In our Old Testament lesson, we have the story of God's promise made to Abraham and his descendants, to make of them great nations, and to establish between them an everlasting covenant. It's an extraordinary story of the Almighty God entering into a covenant relationship with His people. But did you notice what it says about Abraham? He was ninety-nine years old. Not really a likely candidate to father great nations. And not only was Abraham old, he was small person in the Ancient World. The great powers in that time were located in Mesopotamia

¹ Anrundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things* (Random House, 1997)

and Egypt. Abraham was from Haran, probably somewhere in modern day Turkey, and he was a simple shepherd. Not really a big person in any sense of the word. And yet, the Almighty God, the Lord of Heaven and Earth says, “hey you, Abraham, I am going to make of you great nations and even more than that through you and through your descendants I am going to establish my covenant and through this covenant I am going to bless and save the whole world.” As Bill Cosby might say, “Yeah, Right!” And yet, through this promise, through this covenant with this small person in a remote part of the ancient world God has indeed fulfilled his promise to bless and save the world. The big things of God being worked out in the lives of small people.

Our Gospel lesson talks about the culmination of this promise in the birth of Christ. The angel Gabriel comes to the Virgin Mary and tells her that she will give birth to a Son, that he will be given the throne of David, and of his kingdom there will be no end. Again an extraordinary promise made by God Almighty. And again the recipient is a rather small person: this time a young woman, a virgin, living in the backwater Roman province of Palestine. And Mary responds, “Here I am the servant of the Lord,” and once again the extraordinary promises of God are found working their way out in the life of a rather small woman who gave birth to a small baby in whom God has saved and blessed the whole world. The big things of God being worked out in the lives of small people.

Now we read these stories today because we are celebrating the feast day of St. Anne who was the mother of the Virgin Mary. And I’m sorry to have to say this, in this wonderful parish of St Anne’s, with such a long and distinguished history, but we are named after someone who was so small that she didn’t even make it into the Bible. You know there were other options available. St. Peter the Rock. St. Paul the Apostle. St. Luke the Physician. But no, for whatever reason, we were named after St. Anne the Grandma. Okay the grandmother of our Lord. But she is not mentioned in the Bible. From later Church traditions we learn that Anne was married to Joachim, and that they were a childless, elderly couple. They grieved that they would not have any descendants and the Lord blessed them in old age with the birth of a baby girl. Again, not a high and mighty person, but rather a small ageing woman, who gave birth to a baby girl named Mary.

And you know what, I think that’s great! I think it’s great because it is so typical of the way that God in His incomprehensible wisdom has decided to bless and save the world. Not through the high and mighty, the kings and pharaohs and emperors of the world. But rather through grandmothers, and shepherds, and young women, and little babies. Ordinary, small people through whom God has done extraordinary things. And I think that is telling us something important. If we are looking for God, He will often be found in the small things, things like goose bumps and sudden smiles, and in the lives of small children and ordinary people.

I have been at St. Anne’s for less than a year, but I can tell you that I have already seen God at work in many ways. Maybe not in high and mighty things, at least in the way the world judges, but rather in the faithful lives of ordinary people in all their pain, in all their joy, in all their beauty. In fact, I have seen so many things that I can’t name them all. I’ll just mention a few. I have seen Ms. Deede and others taking a group of kids from camp for a swim on a hot summer afternoon. A small thing maybe, but when it flows from the heart of someone who loves Jesus and his children a group of kids splashing around in a pool looks like streams of living water. I have seen our parish hall filled with baskets of food provided by our parishioners so that our neighbors can have an Easter Supper. Those baskets may be small things, but they transformed our parish hall into a Kingdom Hall. I have heard music in this parish that lifts my

heart to God. And have you noticed that sometimes, right after the music stops, the voice of a small child will say “Yeah!” I’m not making it up, it has happened on more than one occasion, and in those small voices, I hear the saints gathered around the throne. And in the words of our rector, preaching at a packed funeral in this church, bearing witness to God’s forgiveness and mercy and the hope we have in Christ. All small things, I suppose, but all things in which I see the kingdom of God at work. I could name more, and they would all be fitting in a parish named after St. Anne, the Grandmother of our Lord. A small person who isn’t even mentioned in the Bible. But just look what God has done through her!

Tom Long tells a story about the church he worships at during the summer when he is on the Eastern Shore.² It is Antioch Methodist Church, and Long says, “A hundred years ago Antioch was full of life and was the center of social and religious activity, but all that’s gone now. In fact, they have gotten down to such a point that they only have two forms of mission left. The first is their building. They leave it open for prayer all of the time.” And the second is a Peach Festival. Long says, “Once a year in August, people come from hundreds of miles away to this little country church for the festival. The old women of the church bake peach cobbles and peach pies and peach bread. And in the little cinder block hut that is the fellowship hall they serve crab-cake sandwiches and fresh peach ice-cream. They put tables out in the cemetery, underneath some cottonwood trees where people can eat.

“Last summer,” Long says, “I was working there serving crab cake sandwiches, and after one o’clock, I decided to take a short break, and I went out in the side yard, and I could not believe what I saw. There under the cotton wood trees, there were whites and blacks and Hispanics and Asians. There were young and old. There were farmers and merchants. There were rich and poor and the living and the dead. If you squinted and looked, it was the Kingdom of God.

“And the next day in church, our minister was in the announcements saying what a wonderful festival we had, and then she said, ‘Did anybody see . . . under the trees. . . ?’ And then she stopped because she couldn’t describe it. But I knew what she had seen. I had seen it too.”

The Kingdom of God on the Eastern Shore under the cotton wood trees. If you squinted and looked, you could see it. The God of Loss. The God of Small Things. The God of Goosebumps and Sudden Smiles. The promises and salvation of God working themselves out in the seemingly small lives of ordinary people. In our ancestors Abraham and Mary and Anne. In the faithful people who have been worshipping in this parish church for generations. People who come to hear the word of God proclaimed, to be fed from the Lord’s Table, and who go out into the world leading lives of faith and service. Small things maybe, but if you squint and look you just might see the Kingdom of God.

Amen.

² Story told by Tom Long at the “Festival of Homiletics” (2006).