

REJOICING ON THE DAY OF SMALL THINGS

Zechariah 4

Then the angel who talked with me returned and wakened me, as a man is wakened from his sleep. He asked me, "What do you see?"

I answered, "I see a solid gold lampstand with a bowl at the top and seven lights on it, with seven channels to the lights. Also there are two olive trees by it, one on the right of the bowl and the other on its left."

I asked the angel who talked with me, "What are these, my lord?"

He answered, "Do you not know what these are?"

"No, my lord," I replied.

So he said to me, "This is the word of the LORD to Zerubbabel: 'Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,' says the LORD Almighty.

"What are you, O mighty mountain? Before Zerubbabel you will become level ground. Then he will bring out the capstone to shouts of 'God bless it! God bless it!' "

Then the word of the LORD came to me: "The hands of Zerubbabel have laid the foundation of this temple; his hands will also complete it. Then you will know that the LORD Almighty has sent me to you.

"Who despises the day of small things? Men will rejoice when they see the plumb line in the hand of Zerubbabel.

"(These seven are the eyes of the LORD, which range throughout the earth.)"

Then I asked the angel, "What are these two olive trees on the right and the left of the lampstand?"

Again I asked him, "What are these two olive branches beside the two gold pipes that pour out golden oil?"

He replied, "Do you not know what these are?"

"No, my lord," I said.

So he said, "These are the two who are anointed to serve the Lord of all the earth."

I think the 1940s and 50s are more popular today than they were fifty years ago. Have you noticed how our culture admires and imitates the style of this era? I eat subs in Dibella's sub shop, which closely mimics this style, even down to the big-band music. I get catalogs regularly from Prairie Home Companion, Restoration Hardware, Eddie Bauer, all of which try to sell me clocks, watches, lamps, clothes, radios straight out of that era, or what we think of as that era. And I buy right into it—not only did I watch and rewatch *Band of Brothers*, a miniseries following a paratrooper company from World War 2, but every day I watch reruns of the Andy Griffith show, you guessed it, set in the 50s!

I think I know why we as a country are so nostalgic for that time, and it's not just because that was the era that hatched the baby boomers. I think as a country we long to accomplish clear, morally unambiguous goals. We long to do something worthwhile. We want our day to be a day of big things.

If the Jews of Zechariah's day had desired big things, they would have been better off. A wise person has said that you can never go home again, and that must have felt true for the Jews. They had spent seventy years in exile in Babylon after a massive siege and military defeat. Those seventy years they felt the loss of the many who had died in battle and who had starved in the siege, and they nursed their grudge against their neighbor Edom, for taking harsh advantage of their weakness. These people were tired. The elation of not only returning home but having funds and official approval from king Cyrus of Persia to rebuild their Temple must have worn off quickly when they saw the task before them. It was enough to be home. They weren't up to big things.

It's in this context that Zechariah the priest saw his eight visions, all in one sleepless night, on Feb 15, 519 BC. When Zechariah saw this vision, it had been seventeen years since they'd finished the foundation, but they hadn't gotten any further. The Samaritans and other neighbors opposed the project vigorously and truth be told, some of the money earmarked for the building project was instead being used to buy cedar

paneling for the Jewish leaders. Even if the Jews were successful in rebuilding the Temple, it wouldn't approach the memory of Solomon's Temple, and certainly not the Temple so clearly seen by Ezekiel in his vision in exile. This was a day of small things for the Jews, and even those must have seemed pretty daunting.

Zechariah's visions are classified as apocalyptic, along with Daniel and of course Revelation, and others. It's a rich irony that "apocalypse" means literally "revelation," since apocalyptic imagery often seems better suited to concealing than revealing. At its strangest, it's as inscrutable and otherworldly as a Salvador Dali painting. And it's not just that we are dim or confused: Zechariah himself asks three times what it all means. If we put ourselves in his sandals for a moment, though, this vision begins to yield some of its secrets. First he sees a golden lampstand filled with oil. For a priest, this lampstand would have brought to mind the golden lamp of the Tabernacle, a lamp which was never allowed to burn out, a lamp which represented God's presence. The angel even says a little later that the seven eyes on the lamp are the eyes of God—again, God's presence and watchfulness over his people. Next he sees two olive trees on either side of the lampstand. For a Near-Eastern culture the olive trees are symbols of prosperity, and the source of not only food but oil. Zechariah's angelic tutor tells him that these trees represent the governor of Jerusalem, Zerubbabel, and the high priest, Joshua. Oil runs through this vision as well, in the lamp stand and flowing to the trees on either side. The oil, representing the Spirit of God, is tied to these leaders so closely that in the final verse of the chapter, when they are referred to as "anointed" the Hebrew literally means "sons of oil."

For a priest without a temple, these are encouraging images! The interpretation the angel gives of the vision bears this out: The Temple *will* be rebuilt by Zerubbabel's hands, and the angel says that Zechariah's brothers and sisters, relatives and countrymen, will rejoice with the excitement of it. And here's the best part: the Temple will be rebuilt not with military might or physical strength, but by God's Spirit. At first this may sound a little strange. After all, building projects are usually accomplished by physical strength! Yes, but the angel says that all the things which stand in the way

of their success—things represented in this passage by the mountain—will be brought low by God's Spirit. When God backs a project, he takes an active hand! The Jews, remembering the Exodus, knew what God could do when he decides to.

And if this weren't enough, there's an even deeper message of hope which runs through this passage and all of Zechariah. I love Zechariah, not just for its vivid dreams but also because it says so much about Jesus. In fact, it has so much to say about the Messiah that in the Gospel passion narratives Zechariah is quoted more than any other prophet, even Isaiah. In this chapter, both the high priest and the governor Zerubbabel of the line of David are referred to as "branch," which is a messianic symbol. A century before, when the exile was imminent, Jeremiah had prophesied "The days are coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch." To make this reference even clearer, Zechariah's angel actually called Joshua and Zerubbabel "anointed," which in Hebrew is, you guessed it, "messiah." And using our 20/20 hindsight we are privy to God's almost comical bluntness when we remember that the name of the high priest Joshua, if translated into Greek, was Jesus!

If you are Zechariah, what does all this messianic imagery mean? It means that God's anointed ruler is here, and will complete the Temple so that God will again dwell in the midst of his people. For a people who spent seventy years in exile without king or country, this is no small thing. It means that a leader of David's line, Zerubbabel, is on the scene, a leader who knows where to go and how to get there, and will not fail. In addition, God has anointed a high priest to act as intermediary, to contend with their sins. And there's a second message which Zechariah may or may not have understood. In this book, when the messiah is referred to, it often refers both to a leader of his day and to the capital-M Messiah who will lead Judah in the last days. So when both Joshua and Zerubbabel are referred to as "branch" and both are anointed, it is a prophecy about Jesus, *the* Messiah. It says that Jesus is both our king and our high priest, that he takes away our sins and he leads us as our sovereign.

Whether or not this was all clear to Zechariah, this was a powerful vision of hope for him and his people.

But the thing I find just as powerful is what is *not* said in this chapter. The Jews had sat down on the job. They were told to rebuild the Temple, sent home from exile in miraculous fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophecy, and even given money to do it. Frankly, they had no excuse for their inactivity, or for their attitude. But in this vision God doesn't condemn them. Far from it, he gives them *more* gifts! And the best of these is his Spirit, which would accomplish what military might and physical strength couldn't.

It is not so rare for us to be in a situation similar to the Jews of 519 BC. God has given us many gifts, no doubt about it, and often calls us to take small first steps. Patiently he waits for us to use our gifts to build up his Body, which in the new covenant is the Temple of his Spirit. And all too often, despite these gifts, despite time and resources, often for no good reason at all, we stall. We stop in our tracks, enjoy his gifts without doing his work, and pretty soon we've forgotten what we were going to do in the first place.

This vision says to us as clear as day that our Messiah is here to lead us. Jesus intercedes for us taking away our sins, and not just yesterday's sins, but today's as well, even the sin of sitting down on the job. But what's more, Jesus isn't just our high priest. Being our savior is a bigger job than that. If he were only our high priest he wouldn't also be our sovereign, our leader. In war stories, like *Band of Brothers*, the good leader shows his true colors by knowing what each of his soldiers needs, and knowing where each of them needs to go and how to get there. Jesus has a goal in mind for you, sometimes big and sometimes small. Jesus knows where you need to go, and he cares very much that you have the resources you need to get there.

It so happens that lately I have stalled spiritually: A number of difficult things are going on in my life, and I'll tell you, I have sat down on the job. In reading this chapter, I found myself thinking, Here's where I motivate myself to get back on track. Here's where I make a list of the ways in which Jesus is our king and not just our high priest, and get up again and get back to the work God has for me. And if I think that, I miss the point of this vision. God didn't tell Judah to pick themselves up by their own bootstraps. Rather than demanding rejoicing, he promises it! Rather than

demanding results, he specifically and clearly says that his Spirit will produce the results he wants. It is just when we are poor in spirit that we are blessed by his Spirit. He even throws in what amounts to a guarantee: You just watch, my man Zerubbabel will rebuild the Temple, and that's how everyone will know that I, your God, am speaking. This isn't to say that I should sit back and do nothing. If the Jews hadn't gotten to work, the Temple wouldn't have been rebuilt. Similarly, I am like a patient who needs physical therapy, I have a role to play, and it doesn't matter how good my doctor is if I don't do my part. Not by power nor by might though, but by God's Spirit. As Paul says in Philippians, "it is God who works in you *to will and to act* according to his good purpose."

Again in Philippians, Paul says, "Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things." In this way we might think of the great accomplishments of our country in the 40s and 50s, America's era of great accomplishments, our "day of big things." But don't despise our day of small things! It is by these small things that God builds his Temple and dwells among us. The Spirit of our Lord knows what you need, and if you stall his Spirit will sustain you. Follow Jesus, your leader. Go about God's work of building up his Body. It is there you will find rejoicing.

~Tim Collins