*SMALL THINGS*

Proverbs 30:24-28, 13 January 2013

In Jaco’s absence from the pulpit, while he and Jaqui do their bit for congregational growth, you have been burdened by having to hear me share the word with you.

Now there is no greater learning experience than having to stand up and preach to an audience of 150 to 200 people on a subject that until a few weeks ago I knew very little about. It is a great challenge with great rewards and I am privileged once again to be allowed to do this.

The title of the sermon is “Small Things” and unlike Jaco is wanton to do each week, I will not subject you to a one sided commentary about the virtues and potential of 15 large and robust marine creatures from the East Coast, nor will we discuss our Biltong source from 120 km to the west of us, nor Cheetahs, Mighty Elephants or the once stately but now practically extinct Lions. We will focus on small but important things.

Because it is the New Year, I thought that it would be appropriate to think about some scripture from the Books of Wisdom in the Old Testament, which will focus us on several aspects of how to approach the New Year with a sense of purpose and perspective.

I have chosen for this week a piece of scripture from Proverbs 30 about 4 small animals and how their relationship with their environments can illustrate to us how we should interact with each other and with God. Next week I will address God willing, another piece from Proverbs where we will examine how to view what we have on earth in relation to God’s kingdom.

**Reading**

The reading this morning comes from Proverbs 30, verses 24 to 28. It should be noted that these are the Proverbs or sayings of Agur, son of Jakeh, and not of Solomon, the Chief Author of the book of Proverbs.

Proverbs 30:24-28

24 "Four things on earth are small, yet they are extremely wise:

25 Ants are creatures of little strength, yet they store up their food in the summer;

26 conies are creatures of little power, yet they make their home in the crags;

27 locusts have no king, yet they advance together in ranks;

28 a spider can be caught with the hand, yet it is found in kings' palaces.

This is the word of the Lord, Thanks be to God.

I am constantly amazed at the variety of life on earth. Mammals, fish, birds, plants, there are a great variety of each. This variety in nature from the unique miniscule detail of each sub species of organism to the nature vastness of the universe in general speaks loudly of God's existence and designs. In Psalm 19:1, David recognises Gods role in all of nature when he wrote:

The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.

As some of you may know, I am personally very lucky to be involved in the study of very small natural systems and ecosystems and I am constantly reminded of how much more complex and yet elegant natural design is when compared to the designs of humans.

Does anyone here work for Eskom? Imagine next time Duvha Power Station has a major upset where the turbine goes through the roof, that the engineering is so sophisticated that it repairs itself or reproduces another turbine. The same may be said for the machinery at Columbus, the maintenance department would not be needed, the machine would just repair itself. Well it may seem farfetched and there is in fact research currently underway in the field of nanotechnology to develop such materials, but this is a long way off and unfortunately is focussed on military applications. (This says a lot about man in itself). And yet when we look into the smallest natural systems, that design is already there. It is God’s perfect design.

Our materialistic society tends to focus on big things and projects that are profit focussed, and we tend ignore the small things of everyday life in many cases regarding them as nuisances if they don’t yield quick results. This attitude has been around for a long time.

During the rebuilding the temple, the prophet Zechariah asked the question in (Zec 4: 10.)

"For who has despised the day of small things?” referring to the people who were opposed to Zerubabbel’s rebuilding of the temple regarding his effort as fruitless and futile.

After all these years there are still many who despise the day of small things. Below is a list of small things that happened on a particular day that made a significant difference to the lives of those involved:

*"The head of one Company was late because his son started kindergarten and he was there.*

*Another fellow was late because it was his turn to bring doughnuts to the office.*

*One woman was late because her alarm clock didn't go off in time.*

*One was late because of the being stuck in traffic because of an accident.*

*One spilled food on her clothes and had to take time to change.*

*One’s car wouldn’t start.*

*One went back to answer the telephone.*

*One had a child that dawdled and didn't get ready in time*

*One man put on a new pair of shoes that morning, developed a blister on his foot and stopped at a shop to buy a Band-Aid.*

These are the kind of "irritating small things" that annoy us so much as we rush through our daily lives. But I am sure that every one of these people who are alive today because they were late for work, and probably irritated on September 11 2001, will not be nearly as frustrated in the future when things like these happen to them again.

You see little things have a purpose in God’s greater plan for us.

So now we return to the four very small but wise creatures referred to in our reading from Proverbs 30.

Ants are creatures of little strength, yet they store up their food in the summer;

Dassies are creatures of little power, yet they make their home in the crags;

Locusts have no king, yet they advance together in ranks;

Spiders can be caught with the hand, yet they are found in kings' palaces.

Let us start with the Ant in verse 25

The Proverb writer begins by stating that ants are "not strong." Compared to us, this is true. After all, I can simply step on an ant and crush him! But in relative terms ants have amazing strength. Have you ever watched an ant? They're tireless and strong. In fact, they can carry ten to fifty times their own weight! That would be like a 75kg man like me being able to carry an object of between 1 ton and 3 tons! No need for a tractor Wilhelm. But more important than their relative strength, ants are constantly making preparation for the future. It seems they never rest,

(Particularly in Aerorand).

They are in constant motion as they go about their work. In Proverbs 6:6-8, the "sluggard" is warned to pattern himself after the ant. Many of you may have been admonished at school with -

Go to the ant, you sluggard; consider its ways and be wise!

It has no commander, no overseer or ruler, yet it stores its provisions in summer and gathers its food at harvest.

How long will you lie there, you sluggard? When will you get up from your sleep?

These two illustrations of the ant from Proverbs teach us a lot about how we should conduct ourselves in both our Church life and our life in the world which should always reflect our Christian faith. Each one of us is a relatively small part of the congregation and an even smaller part in the greater church, but we can behave like ants. We all have a role to play, we are all gifted, and we must work tirelessly together to prepare for the future of our lives, the Church on earth and for eternity in heaven with God. Simply coming to church on Sunday and tithing does not cut it, James tells us that.

Adolphe Monod, an 18th century French Protestant preacher put it this way, “Between the great things that we cannot do, and the little things that we will not do, the danger is that we shall do nothing at all.”

Mother Theresa of Calcutta said - “Not all of us can do great things. But we can do small things with great love.”

Equally in the work environment, most of the congregation are employed within company structures where the entire company’s workforce is required to shoulder the workload in order to achieve the corporate goals. In these tough economic times it is especially imperative to pull together, do what you are paid to do and more. Let us not always have our hands out asking what the company can do for us, let us all pull together and give more. This is the best planning for the future that one can do.

It is appropriate that this proverb equally be applied to our leaders, corporate and national, when they address issues of sustainable practices and priorities against the imperative of short term profit so demanded by our materialistic society.

So like the ant, we must constantly prepare for the future and we must tirelessly go about the work of the Lord.

John 9:4 says:

“As long as it is day, we must do the work of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no-one can work”.

So folks, let us decide today to be more like the ant, one of Gods little creatures.

**We now turn our focus to the next small but wise animal.**

It is not clear what animal the Proverb writer has in mind in this verse, a bit of regional zoology is required. Various translations of the Hebrew word shaphan have rendered a badger, a "cony" or rabbit, a hare, a mouse or a hedgehog. For today’s purposes we will Africanise the “shaphan” to be a Dassie.

Whatever they are, these animals make their houses in the rocks. They are small and weak and pretty vulnerable, yet they have the wisdom to find security in the rocks. The spiritual comparison is compelling. Like the Dassie we can only find real security in the Rock! This message of security afforded by the Lord is found extensively in scripture:  
  
Ps. 18:2: "The Lord is my Rock, and my fortress, and my deliverer; my God, my strength, in whom I will trust...."

Ps. 61:2 "From the end of the earth will I cry unto thee, when my heart is overwhelmed: lead me to the Rock that is higher than I."

There are also several references to Christ as the cornerstone or capstone of the church.

The believer would be wise to emulate the Dassie by finding solace and care in the Rock that is Christ!

The Hymn Rock of Ages is apparently based upon Psalm 18 that I referred to earlier but I am sure that 18th century Anglican cleric Augustus Topolady who wrote the Hymn strongly reflected on the Dassie, (or its European equivalent) and on this verse from Proverbs in the first two stanzas where he wrote:

Rock of Ages cleft for me, let me hide myself in thee.

Christ is our Rock and the Cornerstone upon which the Church and our lives should be built.

So folks let us realise that we too are small and we are vulnerable and let us look to God as our Rock and our protector.

Let us now move onto the third small but wise creature –

THE LOCUST

A single locust is hardly noticeable, except if you want to cheat in the catching of trout in which case it’s a trophy. In fact, by itself, a locust is harmless and insignificant. But when locusts travel together they get our attention. I was in the Northern Cape in the mid 1980’s and witnessed the devastation that locust swarms can cause.

But no one knows better the damage a swarm of locusts can cause than the Pharaoh who refused to let God's people go:

Exod. 10:15 tells us:

They covered all the ground until it was black. They devoured all that was left after the hail, everything growing in the fields and the fruit on the trees. Nothing green remained on tree or plant in all the land of Egypt.

The lesson of the locust, in some ways similar to a part of the lesson of the ant is that God never intended for us to work alone, doing so is ineffective, and by direct inference, that we can accomplish much by working together.

The 4th century philosopher and mathematician Aristotle said:- The whole is greater than the sum of the parts?

Locusts are a living example of this form of teamwork. In other words, there is strength in numbers. The modern world of business refers to this phenomenon as "synergy".

The importance of working together, of emulating the locust, is clearly seen in Christ's establishment of the church that is described by Paul in Ephesians 4:16 where he writes .

“From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.”

The lesson Christians everywhere can learn from the lowly locust is this:

if we "pull together" then we can change the world!

So folks lets today also commit to collectively being like a swarm of locusts for God.

I suggested to Jess that she attend church today as she was featured in the sermon. I will now ask her please to stop killing, destroying and obliterating all signs of our fourth small but wise creature that she sees:-

THE SPIDER

It is after all one of God’s creatures despite your phobia Jess.

This creature again poses a translation problem. What exactly is the writer describing? The KJV renders the Hebrew word: “semamith" as "spider," others use the word lizard. Other translators even attach the word "poisonous" to the creature being described.

More puzzling than the animal described though, is the meaning. Unlike the earlier creatures, the analogy of the spider is not so clear. In my research for this sermon, many sources pointed to the Matthew Henry commentary of this verse.

In his commentary of the passage, Matthew Henry says: "Spiders are very ingenious in weaving their webs with fineness and exactness such as no art can pretend to come near. They spin a fine thread out of their own bowels, with a great art; and they are not only in poor men's cottages, but in kings' palaces."

Perhaps, then, the Proverb writer would have us understand this:

The beauty of the spider comes from within, and he shares this beauty whether in a poor or rich man's dwelling.

If this is the meaning, then there are many wonderful biblical examples of men and women whose inner beauty brought hope to both the rich and poor of the world. Joseph spun his web of beauty and godliness both in prison and when in an elevated position of power in Egypt (Gen 39 - 41). Job spun a web of beauty and a web of service when he was both wealthy and destitute. And let's not forget Paul. Whether preaching to the poorest of the masses or while imprisoned in the splendour of Caesar's palace, his spiritual beauty overflowed in his message of love for all who would serve God.

Another aspect of the spider that we can consider, present in the stories of both Paul and Job is that of tenacity and a never give up attitude. Consider what happens when you wipe away a spider’s web, the next day it is back, just as beautifully woven as before. That is of course Jess if you have not used doom. But be sure in that case, another spider will take up residence at the first opportunity.

Something else that we can consider from this passage is the thought of who will live in the royal palaces of heaven. The spider may be detestable to many of us but it fulfils an important role on earth.

Consider of the hard working Christians you may be tempted to avoid:

The teenager with bleached hair, earrings, and tatoos that you don't approve of.

The guy with bad breath and body odours who gets a little too close to you when he speaks to you.

The woman or Fred who sings rather loudly and completely off-key.

If you could see them now as one day they shall be in heaven perhaps you would marvel at their inner beauty!

With respect to these man made societal boundaries, Prov. 22:2 sums this up well by stating that:

Rich and poor have this in common: The LORD is the Maker of them all

Equally 1 Samuel 16:7 tells us “The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart."

Yes, that's right! It's not our appearance or hygiene that gets us into heaven; it's our hearts! This is a lot tougher to achieve than an outer facade of beauty, but I will be addressing this issue in next weeks sermon.

So in summary going into this New Year, which many are predicting is going to be a tough year by worldly standards, I urge you to take a leaf out of the hats of these four small but wise creatures in Gods kingdom by doing the following:

Working hard and diligently not only for today but in preparing for your futures both on earth and in heaven like the ant. At St Johns this will entail getting stuck in and doing your part in ensuring that we become a more vibrant and God serving congregation.

Letting Jesus be the Rock of your salvation by staying close to him always and in everything you do, not only on Sunday or when refuge is sought like the Dassie.

Working together as a team, not as individual empire builders to achieve God’s will for your lives and his Church, like a swarm of locusts.

Showing the beauty from within, to all people and demonstrating utmost tenacity in our works for God just like the spider.

I would like to leave you with a poem which my research could not pinpoint an author. It has also been put to music as a spiritual song. It talks about the little things that were used by God to do great deeds:

Shamgar had an ox goad,

Rahab had a string,

Gideon had a trumpet,

David had a sling,

Samson had a jawbone,

Moses had a rod,

Dorcas had a needle,

All were used for God.

Let us Pray

Lord our prayer today is that you model us and our behaviour on the four small creatures described by Agur in the Proverb.

Like the ant let us work tirelessly for our eternal future with you.

Like the Dassie, let us seek security and solace in you always not only in times of trouble and need. Keep us close to you in all the activities of our short lives here on earth.

Like the locusts let us swarm together as a team in doing the works of your church in every way that we can in obedience to your great commission.

Finally father let us be like the spider, in every act of our lives oozing inner beauty and love so that the world will know that we are Christians by our love.

Father we commit this day and year to you in the full knowledge that if we follow these patterns found in your nature, your perfect design, we will have a wonderful future in eternity with you.

Amen