

Small Acts Matter When You Can't See Results

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 07 December 2025

Preacher: Anthony Parrott

[0 : 00] Guilty pleasures. I pulled some from Reddit, from one of these threads.! Making goofy faces in grocery stores at children that are too young to express themselves! I relate to this one. I love doing this.

Ordering a large deep dish pizza on Sunday and binge-watching an entire season of a TV show while eating pizza all day. Anybody want to raise their hand to that one? That sounds great. Next one. Picking my nose. So satisfying.

Did anyone admit to that this morning? Was there any more? Driving around aimlessly for long periods of time listening to music. Yes. Love that one. And fan fiction. Fan fiction. Which I heard at least a few of those this morning.

Despair. Despair. Okay, this is not from Reddit. This is my first point. Despair. Why am I bringing up guilty pleasures? Because despair can be a guilty pleasure.

Despair can be a guilty pleasure. Despair can be awfully seductive. As we enter into the colder and the darker months, as we continue in a year that we wish would just go ahead and end already, despair can often be its own guilty pleasure.

[1 : 14] One of my favorite authors and YouTubers, John Green, in his book, *The Anthropocene Reviewed*, which is this beautiful book where he gives five-star ratings to just various things in life.

And I've read sections of it. My wife keeps telling me that I need to finish reading the whole thing, which I do, but I'm going to quote from it anyway. In *The Anthropocene Reviewed*, he reflects on what he calls the temptation of despair and named what I think many of us can feel the simplicity of it.

Despair offers a horrifying kind of consistency. Everything is terrible. Everything is terrible. Nothing matters. Why bother? In a worldview that requires absolutely no nuance, no wrestling, and no hope. And honestly, in December 2025 in Washington, D.C., a simplicity of what to hold on to, like despair, can feel awfully comforting.

To name what you and I and our neighbors are going through, federal troops continue to patrol our streets, our police department federalized against our will, homeless neighbors removed from encampments with nowhere to go, the city's budget slashed by a billion dollars, all of this justified by claims of a crime emergency when crime rates are at 30-year lows.

[2 : 37] And then you zoom out, and there's the climate, and there's rights being stripped away, and the constant churn of cruelty presented as policy. And so despair can whisper, this is how it is.

This is how it will always be. Nothing you do matters. And I think that whisper is where we're meeting John the Baptist this morning in what Emily read.

So this sermon is like the D.C. Metro. It comes in six parts. Number one, John's crisis. Number two, Jesus's answer. Number three, what this means for us.

Number four, what do we do with hope that trembles. Number five, what is the good news. And part six, our invitation and challenge this morning. So part one, John's crisis.

What do you do when your Messiah disappoints you? The book of Matthew says that when John was in prison, so notice, he's not in a good situation right now, and he hears about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent word by his disciples, John's disciples, and said to Jesus, are you the one who is to come, or are we supposed to wait for another?

[3 : 46] And that phrase, in prison, it's not a throwaway detail. John isn't in the local county lockup. He's in Herod Antipas' fortress prison. And this Herod, his family ruled through brutality and fear for decades.

His father was the one who would slay the children under two in Bethlehem. And now Herod Antipas has come into power. He has taken John, John who has preached against Herod's policies

and marriages and lifestyle, and he has had John thrown into prison.

And if you know the rest of John's story, he will eventually have John beheaded at a feast, at a banquet to satisfy a grudge. John is pretty well aware of this.

Once you're thrown into Herod's prison, you're likely not getting out alive. And from that cell, he's hearing reports of what Jesus has been up to. So John sends his disciples with a question, which I think is pretty desperate.

You know, the Bible doesn't give us a lot of intonation or italics or characterization, but it sounds pretty desperate to me. Are you the one? I'm in prison. You're supposed to be the Messiah.

[5 : 02] Or do we have to keep waiting? Now, what we have to understand is that John has very specific ideas about what the Messiah would do. Earlier in Matthew's gospel, we actually get to hear John preach about the coming Messiah.

And this is what John says. So John has a pretty strong mental image of what Messiah will do. It's an axe. It's a winnowing fork. It's fire. It's separation. It's judgment. John expected the Messiah to come and clean house, cut down the corrupt, separate the righteous from the wicked, burn away the oppressors, establish God's kingdom through dramatic, visible, unmistakable action.

And so then Jesus shows up and John says, I must become lesser. He must become greater. John shrinks into the background, is eventually thrown into the prison. The Messiah shows up. Jesus shows up and starts eating with tax collectors and healing Roman soldiers' servants and hanging out with prostitutes and sinners, making friends with the religiously suspect and the economically exploited and exploiters.

Where's the fire? Where's the judgment? Where's the revolution? Are you really the one? John asks. Did I get this wrong? And I think this is what hope sounds like when it's running empty.

[6 : 50] A little bit like cynicism, a little bit like running up, giving up. It's that trembling question of someone like John who has given everything, his whole life, his freedom, soon his life itself, for a vision that doesn't seem to be materializing the way that he expected.

How many of us, you don't have to raise your hand, but how many of us know that feeling? Part two, Jesus' answer. Jesus says, look at what's actually happening.

Jesus responds and it becomes so important for us because Jesus doesn't get defensive. He doesn't say John should know better. He doesn't offer theological reassurance or spiritual bypassing or make promises about the future.

Instead, Jesus says, go and tell John what you hear and what you see. And he gives a list. Now, this isn't a random list.

Every single one of those echoes the prophet Isaiah's vision of what the world would look like when God's reign breaks in. Jesus is saying, don't ask me to prove I'm the Messiah by your criteria.

[8 : 12] Look at what's actually happening and ask yourself, does this match what God has promised? And notice what's not on Jesus' list. There's no mention of destroying enemies.

There's no mention of political liberation. There's no mention, in this case, of releasing prisoners, which had to sting for John. No mentioning of overthrowing Herod. No mention of fire or judgment. The kingdom is breaking in, but not the way that John expected. And then comes this stunning verse in verse 6. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.

Another way to say that. Blessed are those who don't stumble over me. Blessed are those who don't let their disappointment in how I'm doing these things cause them to fall away. Because here's the brutal truth from John's perspective.

The empire, it's still intact. Herod still reigns. Rome still reigns. John is not going to be released from prison. And in a few chapters, Matthew will tell us that Herod has John executed.

[9 : 14] Jesus knows this. And he still says, look at what's happening. Can you see it? Can you perceive it? Which connects directly to our Isaiah text.

I'm about to do a new thing. Now it springs forth. Do you perceive it? The word perceive is so important, particularly in Advent, a season of waiting and expectation.

God isn't asking, do you see spectacular miracles? God is asking, can you see what's actually happening? Or are you so locked into your expectations that you can't recognize God's work when it's right in front of you?

Part three, what this means for us. John Green has this line I always come back to. He says, destruction is often fast, loud, and dramatic.

A reparative work tends to be slow and quiet and unspectacular. A service can close in a matter of weeks. Rights can get stripped away with the stroke of a pen.

[10 : 24] Troops can occupy a city overnight. An executive order can upend thousands of lives in an instant. A prophet can be executed at a party. But the work of restoration.

There's a food pantry that runs week after week. Or a drop-in center for homeless youth. Showing up for a protest training even when you're exhausted.

A benevolence fund quietly paying someone's electric bill. Mutual aid networks getting people where they need to go. Marching at pride even when it feels futile. Checking in on your neighbor. Organizing and caring. And refusing to let fear have the last word. I think that's what hope looks like when it's running out.

It's small but faithful. Unspectacular acts of repair that no one is going to write headlines about. It still matters.

[11 : 22] And I think this is exactly what Jesus is pointing to when he tells John's disciples what to report back to John. He's not listing spectacular victories or dramatic reversals.

He's listing quiet transformations. Person by person. Body by body. Life by life. People see. People walk.

The poor hear good news. And for Jesus those were not metaphors. They were actual people whose lives were actually changing. Not because an army marched in. Not because a regime fell. But because God's kingdom works like yeast in dough. Like seeds scattered. Like light slowly dawning. Part four. After John's disciples leaves, Jesus turns to the crowd and says this about John.

And truly I tell you among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist. Jesus says this about a man who from a prison cell just sent a message questioning whether Jesus was really the Messiah.

[12 : 28] Even in John's doubt according to Jesus John is still the greatest. Even questioning even running out of hope even asking are you sure you're the one from a dark place?

Jesus does not see John's crisis of hope as disqualifying. He sees it as part of what makes John faithful. And the pastoral word that I need you to hear this morning is that hope that trembles is still hope.

You don't have to have it all figured out. You don't have to be certain. You don't have to manufacture optimism or pretend things are fine when they're not. You can bring your exhausted trembling barely there hope to God and say I don't know if I can keep doing this.

Are you really at work here? Does any of this matter? Those questions don't make you unfaithful. They make you human. They make you honest.

And according to Jesus they don't disqualify you from being great. So what is the good news of this text? Part five. The good news is this.

[13 : 39] Hope is not grounded into outcomes or visible success. Hope is rooted in perception in learning to see where God is actually at work even when it doesn't match our expectations even when the big changes we long for haven't arrived yet.

I have a mentor or coach that I see every couple of weeks and he's a yoga practitioner and he was going to yoga week after week after week and he had a substitute yoga teacher and her sort of tick that she would keep saying during the practice was do not lust for results.

And her point was rather keep showing up keep practicing keep the movement don't lust for results because it's actually in the lusting for results that you will hurt yourself injure yourself break yourself and get the opposite of what you intend.

hope is not grounded in outcomes or visible success hope is rooted in perception and learning to see where God is actually at work. The good news is that lives are being changed and transformed and people are hearing good news and your small faithful unspectacular acts of repair are part of how God's kingdom breaks into the world.

The good news is that you don't have to see the finish line to run the race. And in a result based culture where everything is metriced out the wazoo living a sort of faith that gives up seeing the finish line but keeps running the race is incredibly difficult and countercultural and counterintuitive.

[15 : 27] But you don't have to see have to live to see liberation to participate in the work of freedom. The good news is that even when despair is simple and hope is hard despair is false and hope is true.

It's not optimistic it's not naive it's not cheap it's true. So my invitation to you this Advent is first the challenge to choose the more difficult path.

despair is simple despair would have us believe our small acts of kindness don't matter in the face of overwhelming darkness. But what if we refuse that lie?

What if we kept showing up anyway? In the coming weeks when a church asks you to give or a charity asks you to serve when you're asked to invest in something despair says is impossible what if you were that community that refuses to stop repairing the world the people who believe in the slow quiet faithful work that still matters?

Secondly to adjust your vision to ask yourself what do I hear and what do I see and where are the quiet signs of transformation? We're familiar with that still small voice of Elijah waiting to hear the voice of God and I think the same practice is necessary to hear the moments of transformation and hope.

[16:59] There will always be louder voices to tell you of destruction. Are we listening to the quiet voices to tell us of hope? Because they're there. It just doesn't always look like what we expected.

And I see it every week in this community and this church and all the stories that not all of us can possibly be aware of the ways that we show up for one another in love. Activists organizing when they're exhausted, people caring for their neighbors without fanfare.

I see resurrection happening in small, ordinary ways. Third, keep bringing your trembling hope. Don't try to manufacture certainty.

You will exhaust yourselves. Don't fake optimism that you don't feel. Bring your questions, bring your exhaustion, bring your I don't know if I can keep doing this. That honesty is the raw material that God works with.

God, I would say, can't work with your lies, but he can work with your honesty. And finally, keep planting seeds. It's hard to admit and to confess that we may not see the harvest.

[18:07] John didn't, Moses didn't, Jesus didn't, Paul didn't, every prophet and apostle died before seeing the fullness of God's kingdom. But would we say that their hope didn't matter or that their witness didn't matter?

Of course it did. Every small and faithful act of faithfulness matters. Liberation theologian and poet Ruben Alves wrote this poem. He wrote, what is hope?

It is the pre-sentiment that imagination is more real and reality is less real than it looks. It is the hunch that the overwhelming brutality of facts that oppress and repress us is not the last word.

It is the suspicion that reality is more complex than the realists want us to believe. That the frontiers of the possible are not determined by the limits of the actual and in a miraculous and unexplained way life is opening up creative events which will open the way to freedom and resurrection.

But the two, suffering and hope, must live with each other. Suffering without hope produces resentment and despair but hope without suffering creates illusions, naivete, and drunkenness.

[19:24] So let us plant dates. Even though we who plant them will never eat them, we must live by the love of what we will never see.

That is the secret discipline. It is the refusal to let our creative act be dissolved away by our need for immediate sense experience and is a struggled commitment to the future of our grandchildren.

Such disciplined hope is what has given prophets, revolutionaries, and saints the courage to die for the future they envision. They make their own bodies the seed of their highest hopes.

So friends, this week, be a seed. Do one small act of repair, show up to one meeting, make one phone call, pay one electric bill, check on one neighbor, cast one seed of hope into the wind, and trust that God will make something grow, even if you never see it bloom.

God is at work, not at empire's loud, spectacular way, but in the quiet, persistent resurrection way. And you, trembling, doubting, running out of hope, you, you are part of that work.

[20:40] Bluetooth Bluetooth Bluetooth