Dec. 31, 2022/Jan. 1, 2023

SMALL STEPS OF FAITH

Selected Scriptures

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Wow! Thank you, Church Family. That's so soul encouraging to lift up our voices to God together. You know, when we come to the start of a new year like this, I've always found that there are kind of, or seems to be, two types of people. I want to see who you feel like you might relate to more. First there's Person A, and Person A I'll call Planner Pete. Now Planner Pete ordered their 2023 calendar or daily planner all the way back in October. Planner Pete has moved on from Christmas, cleaned the house, put away the gifts, and spent the last week, if not longer, contemplating their goals and resolutions for this coming year. Planner Pete has already decided what this coming year is going to be all about, and Planner Pete has a plan.

Then there's Person B, and Person B I'll call Fly-by-the-Seat Pete. Now Fly-by-the-Seat Pete is honestly still in Christmas mode. For Fly-by-the-Seat Pete, this last week between Christmas and New Years has been nothing but a blur. Fly-by-the-Seat Pete is trying to wrap his mind around the fact that 2022 is over. Fly-by-the-Seat Pete is excited about a new year, but if they're being honest, they haven't planned much past what they'll be having for lunch today. Now whether you relate more to Planner Pete, or Fly-by-the-Seat Pete, there is something that is true for most, if not all of us. We all will spend time reflecting on the last year and looking ahead to the next year. Each of us would like to do better, accomplish more, grow closer to Christ and become more like Him in 2023 than we were in 2022. And unless the Lord returns or calls us home, each of us has opportunities ahead that are yet to be discovered, and that can be a very exciting reality. It can be kind of scary, or probably for most of us, it's a little bit of both.

So, as I was praying over what I wanted to share today, that would be an encouragement and a help not only to Planner Pete and Fly-by-the-Seat Pete, but also to everyone in the room, whether you are 9 or 99, 4 or 44, here's what I came up with: Just start small. You know, wouldn't you agree that a great life is actually made up of many small decisions made on a daily basis? You know, people in our culture may try to tell us that a great life is made up of a few large breakthrough moments, and even though it can appear that way sometimes in the lives of others, usually those breakthroughs come as the result of many small choices or decisions that many of us just don't see.

You know, I believe one of the main reasons that so many people struggle to find and maintain a vision for their life, is because they don't have a vision for their month, for their week, or for their day. You see, I want to propose to you that the way to move forward into this new year may not be to do something big today, to make a huge life change today, but rather to start doing something small on a daily basis. Today I want to propose to you that an extraordinary 2023, and really an extraordinary life, is built by taking a thousand seemingly unexceptional steps, one day at a time.

For example, a great marriage is not developed and maintained because of that one time you had a candlelit dinner in Paris overlooking the Eiffel Tower, and now your marriage is good to go. No, a great marriage is developed and maintained in the day-to-day common place communicating

with each other, serving one another, learning to forgive and trust one another, sacrificing, and maybe regular small date nights.

Great parents aren't made by taking your kids on that two-week Disney cruise to the Bahamas, although, "Kids in the room, I'm sure you'd love that. I'm all for you if you get that." But great parenting is built in the daily conversations with your children, reading books to them, eating dinner together as a family, yes, disciplining them, and sharing the truths of God's Word with them.

A great career is not made by making that one huge business deal, getting that one huge commission check, or that one huge promotion, but rather by showing up daily to work with a good attitude, working hard, treating your co-workers with kindness and respect, and doing the right thing, even when no one is watching. And, kids, a great school year is not accomplished by acing that one spelling test that one week of school, but rather by going to school every day with a good attitude, giving your best in each class, on each assignment, doing your homework day after day, after day. You know, all of these examples can seem so ordinary at the time. They probably won't get noticed or celebrated by others, but over time, they develop into greatness: great marriages, great parents, great employees, great students, and most importantly, more mature Christ followers.

You know, this idea that we're discussing makes me think of Daniel from the Bible. We just talked about Daniel down in LBC Kids about a month ago. And Daniel is one of those remarkable individuals in the Bible that we have so much respect for as he accomplished so much in his life. And if you look at the book of Daniel from chapter two through chapter six, he interprets two of the king's dreams, he sticks to his convictions about praying to the one true God, which gets him thrown into a den of lions, but he lives to tell about it. And then he becomes one of the leading government officials in the mighty nation of Babylon. But what we cannot overlook is Daniel chapter 1. You see, in Daniel chapter 1, many of the Hebrew people were living in and around Jerusalem, and all of a sudden, the nation of Babylon invaded and took them into captivity. And part of King Nebuchadnezzar's (the king of Babylon's) plan was to find the best and the brightest young Jewish men and put them in his service. He was going to train them for three years, and then they would serve the king in the palace and help strengthen his kingdom. And part of this program was that these young men would also get to eat from the king's table the best food and drink, in order to make them strong and healthy and prepared to serve the king. But I want us to look at what it says in Daniel chapter 1, verse 8 and today I'm going to be reading from the Kids Adventure Bible. This is the Bible that we use down in LBC Kids, and each week we put it in our kids' hands and encourage them to open it up and see the stories for themselves. And so, kids, I'm going to be reading from our Bible today. Alright, look at what it says in Daniel chapter 1, verse 8, and this is the NIrV translation.

> **Daniel decided not to make himself "unclean" by eating the king's food and drinking his wine. So he asked the chief official for a favor. He wanted permission not to make himself "unclean" with the king's food and wine.** (*NIrV, Daniel 1:8)

And later we go on to find out that what Daniel requested instead, was vegetables and water. You know, I can remember reading that story when I was younger and thinking, "Daniel, what are you thinking, man? You know, here is the king of Babylon, and he has chosen you and is setting out in front of you this grand buffet, and you're going to deny that and ask for salad and a water?"

Well, I later learned that the king of Babylon did not worship the one true God, and part of his religious practices would have been to take the first part of his meat and wine and give it as a sacrifice to his false gods. Now this was obviously not okay in the eyes of the one true God, and it would have been a sin to eat the food that had been sacrificed to these false gods, and Daniel knew that. But I'm sure that the other young men were trying to pressure Daniel, saying things like, "Come on, Daniel, they have filet mignon and bacon wrapped sirloin. Come on, Daniel, we're in Babylon now, not in Jerusalem. What happens in Babylon stays in Babylon. Plus, Daniel, you don't want to make the king mad. Come on." But you know what? I think Daniel had the wisdom at a very young age to understand that oftentimes God will not open up large opportunities until we prove ourselves faithful to Him in small things.

And you know what? Jesus went on to make this very same point during His earthly ministry. In Luke chapter 16, verse 10, we read the words of Jesus, and He said this:

> **"Suppose you can be trusted with something very little. Then you can also be trusted with a lot. But suppose you are not honest with something very little. Then you will not be honest with something very large.** (NIrV, Luke 16:10)

Friends, I want to say this again. An extraordinary life is built by taking a thousand seemingly unexceptional but obedient and faithful steps one day at a time. I've asked our kids director, Megan Kuehl, to come and read a short story that illustrates this point so well. This is a story that many of the adults and probably most of the kids will be familiar with, because it's one of Aesop's Fables. Let's listen as Megan reads:

> All right, we are going to read ***The Tortoise and The Har****e* this morning.
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> *The hare and the tortoise were neighbors. Hare was always in a hurry, rushing from one important task to the other. He was so fast and busy that sometimes he could barely remember where he was going. Tortoise, on the other hand, plodded steadily along. He didn't go to many different places in a day, but he always got to where he needed to be.*
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> *One day Tortoise was walking slowly along the road when Hare sped past him. Hare looked over his shoulder and called out, "Hurry up, Tortoise, you'll never get there." "I will," Tortoise said calmly. "I may be slow but steady." Hare turned back and ran around Tortoise three times laughing. Then he ran on. Half an hour later Hare came back. Tortoise was still going in the same direction, and he hadn't gotten very far. "You're so slow," Hare said. "How do you ever get anywhere?" "Look," Tortoise said, "One step at a time. One foot after the other, slow but steady." "You're hopeless," Hare said. "It will take you all day just to get to the end of the road.*
>
> *At last Tortoise was too cross to ignore Hare any longer. "I get everywhere I want to go," He said, "And if you don't believe me, I'll challenge you to a race. You can pick the route, the day, and the time." Hare laughed until he fell over. He rolled around on the ground, tears running along his whiskers. "A race?" he gasped. "Between you and me? That's ridiculous! You don't stand a chance". "Are you scared?" Tortoise asked,*

"because if not, let's do it." Hare could hardly stop laughing but arranged the race for the next day and asked Fox to judge it.

They would start from an old oak tree and race all the way to the river. Tortoise set out early that evening so that he would be at the start line on time in the morning. Hare went home for a long sleep and got up late. He ran to the oak tree and found Tortoise ready and waiting. All the other animals had come out to watch. "Fox is waiting for you at the river," Bear said. "We can start whenever you're ready." Hare and Tortoise got into position. "On your mark," said Tortoise. "Get set," said Hare. "GO!" shouted all the animals. And off went the tortoise and the hare. Hare sprinted ahead bounding along the path. Tortoise lifted one foot and put it down. Then he lifted the other foot and put it down…slowly, slowly. By the time Tortoise reached the first bush, Hare was a tiny spot in the distance. By the time he reached the second bush, Hare was nowhere to be seen.

After a few minutes, Hare could see the river ahead. He paused and looked around. He couldn't see Tortoise at all. "He is so slow," he laughed to himself. "He won't be here for hours. I might as well have a rest." So Hare sat down under a tree not far from the finish line. The sun was warm and the lazy buzz of bees visiting the flowers around him was soothing. Soon Hare dozed off.

Back along the path, Tortoise kept on – slow but steady – one step at a time, one foot after the other. After an hour, Hare woke up and peered into the distance. He could just see Tortoise coming toward him – slow but steady – and still far away. "He's so slow," Hare said to himself. "He won't be here for hours. I might as well go back to sleep." And that's just what he did. Tortoise kept on – slow but steady – his heavy shell wobbling along the path. Hare slept on in the hot sun.

When Hare woke up, he couldn't see Tortoise anywhere. "Where has he gone?" he said. "He won't be here for hours. I'm sure I could just go back to sleep." But it was late afternoon, and the sun was low in the sky. "I'm sick of this race," he said to himself. "I should finish so I can go home and nap in my own bed." And he sprang up and ran as fast as he could to the finish line.

Tortoise was waiting for him by the river! "Where have you been?" asked Tortoise. "I've been here for hours. You are so slow!" Hare tried to explain, but neither Tortoise nor Fox would listen. "But I'm faster!" Hare complained. "It's not fair." "The rules were simple," Fox said. "Tortoise won! The race was to get here first." Tortoise smiled, "Not to run fastest; slow and steady wins the race." And slowly, steadily he turned around to begin his journey home.

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You know, isn't it interesting? If you're like me, when we read that story, we can't help but cheer for the slow and steady tortoise. But it's also kind of interesting, because in real life, rarely do we ever actually want to be the tortoise. You know, in the Bible, there is a race that is spoken of in the book of Hebrews, right after chapter 11 which is called the Faith Hall of Fame, speaking of all these heroes of the faith and lessons that we can learn from them about their faith. Right after that, I want to read how Hebrews chapter 12 starts out, and in the NASB it says:

> **Therefore, since we also have such a great cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us rid ourselves of every obstacle and sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking only at Jesus…**
>
> (*NASB 2020, Heb. 12:1-2a)

You know, in that verse I think we sometimes focus too much on the running, like that of the hare, and not enough on the endurance, like that of the tortoise; or most importantly, focusing our attention fully on Jesus and His will for us. So, in the time that we have left this morning, I'd like to give you three small steps to consider as we head into this new year. And, kids, these three steps are blanks in your handout, so get ready to fill them in.

Number one: *Start where you are*. You know, down in LBC Kids, we love to talk about the miracles of Jesus, and one of Jesus' most well-known miracles, I bet a lot of our kids remember this story—the multiplying of the loaves and fish. In this story, Jesus had been teaching and performing miracles all day, and a large crowd had gathered. And I want to pick up reading this story in John, Chapter 6, starting in verse 4:

> **The Jewish Passover Feast was near. Jesus looked up and saw a large crowd coming towards Him. So He said to Philip, "Where can we buy bread for these people to eat?" But Jesus asked this only to put Philip to the test. He already knew what He was going to do. Philip answered Him, "Suppose we were able to buy enough bread for each person to have just a bite. That would take more than half a year's pay." Another of His disciples spoke up. It was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. He said, "Here is a boy with five small loaves of barley bread. He also has two small fish. But how far will that go in such a large crowd? Jesus said, "Have the people sit down." There was plenty of grass in that place, and they sat down. The number of men among them was about 5000. Then Jesus took the loaves and gave thanks. He handed out the bread to those who were seated. He gave them as much as they wanted. And He did the same with the fish. When all of them had enough to eat, Jesus spoke to His disciples. "Gather the leftover pieces. Don't waste anything." So they gathered what was left over from the five barley loaves. They filled 12 baskets with the pieces left by those who had eaten.** (*NIrV, John 6:4-13)

Wow, Jesus did this amazing miracle here, all because one small boy was willing to start where he was and give what he had. Friends, the truth is, each of us has some loaves and some fish, and it may not seem like much, but the decision is ours. What am I going to do with what God has given me? You know, what if that young boy had said, "Well, I don't have enough to feed everyone, so I'll just wait, and once I have enough to feed everyone, then I'll give what I have to Jesus." Well, Jesus never would have been able to use that boy's gift, because he never would have had what seemed like enough. Rather, that young boy just started where he was, and gave what he had.

And so the question for all of us is: Where is it in my life, that maybe I'm not where I want to be? Maybe I don't feel like I'm making the progress I think I should. Maybe I don't feel like I have very much to offer. But I just need to start and do something. You know, maybe it's in the area of personal Scripture reading. This time of year, there's all kinds of great Bible reading plans that come out, and a lot of people will start that. But if you have never consistently read the Bible by yourself and for yourself, can I suggest a small way to start? Start with the book of John, and just read one chapter a day. Even if you miss a few days, there's 21 chapters in John. You will read through that Gospel in the month of January. Or maybe start by reading a Proverb chapter each day. There are 31 chapters in Proverbs and 31 days in the month of January, and if you will commit 5 to 10 minutes to reading a chapter a day, you will gain so much wisdom from the text. Just start small.

You know, a couple of years ago, I had a moment of genius during a discussion with my wife. Now don't laugh. They say even a broken clock is right twice a day. So my wife was preparing to do something for some event, and she was starting to get a little bit frazzled and considering just not doing it at all. So I said to my wife, "Don't try to do so much that you end up doing nothing at all." So, here's my question for you. Where is it that you just need to start where you are, and with the loaves and the fish that you have?

Number two: *Bring fresh energy to previous plans.* Do you know what one of the most dangerous statements in our lives is? "That's just the way it's always been." You know, this is a statement that we've probably all said at some point, but the reason that this statement is so dangerous is because in making this statement, we have lost our "way". We have lost the purpose behind whatever it is that we are doing. You know, can we agree that sometimes in life, we just get used to stuff? We just get used to going through the motions. Something starts, and when it starts it has purpose. It has meaning. We prayed about it; God led us into it; we stepped out with great faith, and the Holy Spirit was guiding us along the way. But as time goes on, we lose sight of the purpose. We lose sight of our dependence on the Holy Spirit. But we just keep going through the motions of whatever it is that we are doing, until we get to the point where we say, "That's just the way it's always been." I know I've been guilty of this.

You know, one of the most well-known psalms of David is Psalm 51. It's sometimes called a psalm of repentance because David wrote this psalm to God when the prophet Nathan confronted him about his sin with Bathsheba. If you've ever studied the life of King David, you know he was called *a man after God's own heart*, and he took some amazing steps of faith in his life. But then there were also times where David forgot about his dependence on God and tried doing things his own way and by his own power, and that always led David into trouble. But I love this psalm because David is so vulnerable. He's so open and honest with God, and I love what he writes in verse 12 of Psalm 51. David says:

> **Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain me with a willing spirit.** (*NASB 2020, Psalm 51:12)

David recognized that he had lost sight of God's plan and God's leading and had been trying to do things his own way and by his own power, which led him into sin. David had lost the joy of his salvation in a willing spirit to follow God's plan. You know, this idea of bringing fresh energy to

previous plans, I could say, instead, “Bring fresh energy to God's plan or to the Holy Spirit's leading in your life.”

You know, some of you are here this morning, and you have had some great goals in life. In fact, you've made some amazing progress on those goals with the Lord's help and by faith, but your progress has kind of stalled. Maybe you've lost sight of your “way”. Maybe what you were doing just isn't working as well anymore. Maybe life circumstances have changed, but you haven't changed your goals with them. You need to bring some fresh faith, some fresh energy to those previous plans. You need to pray for the joy of your salvation and a willing spirit to be restored to your soul and to your plans. Now, if you're listening and what you hear me say is, “Change everything,” I'm afraid you've missed my point, because everything doesn't need to change. Our salvation will never change. Our God will never change. The truth of God's word will never change. Our call to make disciples, to love God, to love others will never change. But if I have lost the joy around those things in my life, then my perspective or motivation must change or be restored, as David wrote.

Pastor and author Jeff Manion says in his book, *Dream, Big, Think Small* (a great book): “*Your greatest impact in life will be doing the same things with the same people for a long time.”*

That's not flashy; that won't get recognized by others. But isn't it so true? But while it's true, it's also difficult to keep the fire going, to keep the “way” in front of us, to keep walking by faith and with the Holy Spirit's leading.

So, number one: *Start where you are with the loaves and the fish you have*.

Number two: *Bring fresh energy, fresh faith, and fresh Holy Spirit leading to your previous plans.*

And number three: *Harness the power of repetition*.

You know, for those of you that have ever gotten good at one thing, whether it be playing the piano, carpentry, shooting a basketball, sewing, cooking—whatever it may be—how did you get good at it? Repetition, right? Okay, chances are there's no one here who would say, “Well, I play the piano, and I've just been good ever since the first time I sat down at a piano bench.” Or, “I just came out of the womb knowing how to shoot a jump shot, or knit a sweater.” No, those things take practice and repetition. Well, we need to learn that same idea in all areas of our lives because doing something once rarely has great impact, and here's the reason why. It is not what you do that marks your life; it is what you repeat. So, think about this question for yourself. What are the things in your life that you repeat on a daily, weekly, or monthly basis? What do you repeat, and are those things drawing you closer to Christ, into His likeness? You know, there are some great things that you might repeat, that absolutely help you grow closer to Christ or help you help others grow closer to Christ. Maybe like the parent who tells their kid they love them every morning, or reads Bible stories to them every evening, or the employee who prays for their boss every single day, or the volunteer who shows up every Sunday morning to lead a table in LBC Kids. You know what? You can get discouraged and think, “I don't feel like I had a huge impact today or this week,” but friends, the impact doesn't come in one day or one week. It comes in showing up and

loving those kids and teaching them the truths of God's Word every single week over and over and over again.

You know, if I'm being honest, I can't tell you one lesson that my elementary Sunday school teachers taught me, but I can tell you all of their names. I can tell you they loved me, and I can tell you that they absolutely impacted my life. Why? Because they showed up and pointed me to Christ and taught me His word week after week after week. It wasn't about one Sunday. Really, this power of repetition might be better described as the power of faithful obedience to the will of God. You know, I love what Solomon wrote about this. In Proverbs 28, verse 20, Solomon says:

A faithful person will be richly blessed… (*NIrV, Proverbs 28:20a)

Notice it doesn't say, a "talented" person, a "wealthy" person, a "beautiful, handsome" person, a "popular" person. Now what *does* it say? A **faithful person will be richly blessed**. Friends, you want this coming year to be blessed by God? Be faithful to His will. Harness the power of daily repeated obedience.

But then let's be honest. There are also some things that we repeat, that are not helping us get anywhere in life. Like repeatedly scrolling through my social media on my phone, or repeatedly eating poorly when I'm stressed, or repeatedly watching that show on Netflix or Disney Plus, or maybe even that repeated sin in your life that just keeps coming back, and you need to repent of it and turn from it and seek some accountability instead. So, maybe the question for us today on this first day of 2023, isn't, "What big thing do I need to change in my life today?" but rather, "What small thing do I need to start repeating? Or, "What do I need to stop repeating?"

You know, one danger of any type of New Year's message like this, is that it can turn into a motivational self-help lesson, or a legalistic, "Here's what I am going to do for God this year" lesson, and I hope and pray that neither of those outcomes is what you walk out with this morning. Because here's the truth: God doesn't need a better version of me in order to accomplish His plans. God doesn't need a better version of you in 2023 in order to do His will. And on my own, I am incapable of doing anything to impress God or further my own salvation. But our vision as a church here at Lincoln Berean is*: Coming together to know Jesus, become more like Him, and help others do the same*. So, the reason that we want to better ourselves this coming year is not to impress God or impress others or receive the approval of Christ because, as we talked about so much in our Colossians study this fall, the work of Christ is complete, I am also complete in Christ.

So then, what is our motivation for this coming year? I would say it is the motive of gratitude. Because of the completed work of Christ when He came to this earth, lived a perfect life, died on the cross, and three days later rose from the grave, conquering sin and, in defeating death, because of that completed work, I have the opportunity to start where I am with the loaves and fish I have, to bring fresh energy and fresh faith to my previous plans, to harness the power of repetition and faithfulness to God, and if I will just start small and do those three things, guess what? At the end of 2023, I will know Jesus better. I will be more like Him, and I will have so many opportunities this year to help others do the same. But it is not to be done to impress God, to impress others, to earn salvation, or for the approval of God. No, no, no! It is all to be done in Christ, through Christ, and out of gratitude for the completed work of Christ. That is our motivation as we launch into 2023. Let's pray:

Heavenly Father, we thank You so much for Your great love for us. God, we thank You for the truth, the reality that You're not waiting for me, that You don't need a better version of me in order to accomplish Your plan, in order to build Your church, to expand Your kingdom, but You have allowed us the opportunity to be a part of Your work. God, because of what Christ did when He came to this earth and lived that perfect life, died on the cross and rose again, because of that work that is complete, we now have the opportunity to seek a better 2023, not for our own glory, but for Yours, dear God, for Your worship, for Your honor, and for Your glory. And so as we head into this new year, dear God, whatever 2022 was like, I pray that we would not put the pressure on our shoulders to work for God, but rather out of gratitude for the completed work of God, I pray that we would step forward by faith into this new year and trust that You have amazing plans and purposes ahead for us in 2023. God, thank You that You are a good God. Thank You for Your great love for us. In the precious name of Jesus, I pray, Amen.

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