



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

December 23 & 24, 2016 (Christmas Eve)

“WOULD THAT IT WERE SO SIMPLE”

The Rev. Dr. Dan Chun

Yes, 'tis the season of December traffic, Christmas rush, shopping malls, and trying to find some Christmas peace in the midst of all the chaos and the noise. Would that it were so simple and sweet. At times we desperately need a *Silent Night*. And yet, Christmas is such a joyous time for all creatures of God – humans and animals.

Recently I visited someone's home and their dog *Scooter* was so happy to see me. It was as if he was excited about Christmas! He got up and stood on his hind legs! Take a look at this. (A video of *Scooter* greeting Pastor Dan was shown.) Would that we would all be that excited about Christmas!

The Christmas story may be hard to understand for many people. God actually came to earth, incognito – disguised as a baby born in a manger to a mere carpenter. Then when He was 30 years old, He revealed Himself as the Son of God. For some that can sound like a fairy tale. For others it can sound like science fiction or some crazy new *Netflix* or *Amazon* movie. Would that it were so simple.

Sometimes the easiest things in the world to believe or say are difficult to do. I am reminded of the Coen brothers' comic movie *Hail Caesar* starring George Clooney. Also in the cast is the great British actor Ralph Fiennes and new actor Alden Ehrenreich who, in 2017, will play Hans Solo in the new *Star Wars* movie.

There is a great funny scene in *Hail Caesar*, in which Ehrenreich plays a country and western singer named Hobie Doyle, who is given a role in a black and white British period film simply because he is famous, even though he is a horrible actor with an accent that doesn't fit a British movie! And when they film him, the director played by Ralph Fines gets frustrated until finally they get it right in the final cut in the black and white version. Let's take a look at this classic scene. (A clip from the movie was shown.)

It's complicated. Would that it were so simple. But is the Christmas story complicated? Actually, it is simple. I don't mean to be overly simplistic when I say that Christmas and faith are just a result of wanting to believe.

The uncomplicated question, I pose to you today is: Do we want to know God? Do we want to hear Him? I believe Christmas is one of the greatest opportunities to know God, if we really want to. The question is—do we want to? But you say to me, ah—would that it were so simple. It's complicated.

Jesus would tell you today: “Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.” (Mark 10:15)

This Christmas, be like a child; just receive. It is that simple. I believe that God is all around us, and if we want to see Him, He is there.

Lately, one of the things I have been teaching our church is to look for the presence of God in our life every day. Every night before you go to sleep, think of at least one time that day when you felt the presence of God, and then say thank you. Often we don't think God exists simply because we cannot feel His presence.

We don't look for Him, that's why. We don't raise our antennas of awareness to hear Him, see Him, feel Him, and smell Him. Yes, even smell. The smell of a good, daily meal, for example, is part of the presence of God who blesses us in a country where there is abundance. That is why many of us say a prayer of thanks before we eat. The presence of God!

If we power up our awareness, we will realize that God is always with us. Would that it were so simple? He's calling to us. He loves us.

Christmas means God was trying to make it simpler. He came down to earth in the form of Jesus to tell us, to show us, to be with us to let us know that God exists. God first gave us the Bible as a written love letter to us about Him and how we should treat each other.

But then He Himself comes as Jesus. And then later He bathes the earth with His Holy Spirit who, according to Jesus, would be a Comforter and a Counselor, so that we can supernaturally have even more of His wisdom and presence.

We just need to open our eyes and ears and hearts and look for God daily, and then remember just before we go to sleep how we experienced His presence. Ah, but we can say, "It's complicated, Dan. You don't know my past. You don't know the hurts I have had and have."

I would never be one to question how hard life has been for you. How traumatic it might be. But I tell you tonight, Christmas is all about God loving you. It's all about God touching down on earth to be closer to us. It's all about how God our Father loves us, as Leon sang earlier, Stepping through this sacred sky, suddenly our eyes behold heaven's perfect plan unfold, Son of God.

We may not have had the perfect parents, but God is the heavenly perfect parent we have always wanted. And I know we can feel far from God at times because we are not perfect and we might imagine, like a stern father, His discipline or punishment. But it's not like that at all.

Let me help with this fear or concern some of us might have. My friend Pete Grieg once shared how there is one thing that really bothers him during worship services. It is not a bother to me, nor to our church, but it was a bother to him. When he attends his church in England, sometimes the people running the slides of the lyrics of the songs get it wrong. Sometimes the slides are out of order, or slow, or someone forgets to change it. This really irritated Pete.

He said, "Here I am trying to sing and worship and then the words on the slides get out of order or are late. Why can't they get it right? It's wrecking my intimacy with God. How hard is it to just hit the button at the right time?"

Then one day during worship, as his church was singing, the slides came up wrong again—wrong order, late, too early, too slow, too fast. But this time, Pete didn't get mad! In fact, he felt badly for the boy who was running the slides.

He wanted to defend the boy back there. Why? Because that boy doing the slides that day was his son! As his son made mistakes, Pete wanted to defend his son! "Do you know how hard it is to run the slides on time going from verse to chorus to verse to chorus? Do you realize there is an automatic delay when you hit the button?! It's not easy to do this! That's my son!"

It was then that it hit Pete. That is how God our heavenly father is with us. When we mess up, or have sinned, or haven't done the right thing, God our heavenly Father says, "That person is my daughter, my son. I have great love for them. I offer them My grace and forgiveness and love. Give them a break. I would give My life for them."

God is a merciful God. God loves us unconditionally. And when Jesus came to this earth. That was His message. As a man fully human and yet fully God for He was God incognito, we can see time and time again in the Bible that He ALWAYS defended those who messed up. He never got mad at sinners, unless they were super religious or were mean to others.

Jesus didn't get along with super religious people who just followed the rules and felt they were holy and righteous. He hated self-righteousness. No, Jesus loved to hang out with those who have always felt like an outsider, those who feel they don't fit, those who feel they are not perfect, those who feel lonely and vulnerable.

Jesus said in the Gospel of John, when you pray, always pray in MY NAME. End your prayers with "in Christ's name," or "in Jesus' name, Amen" (John 16:23), for then I will know you are talking to Me and that you trust Me. When you pray in Jesus' name, you also have my authority. It's like having the right postage stamp on your letter. It's like using a VISA or a MASTERCARD; you have the right backing for your requests for payment.

It's important to have the right authority behind you in what you do. Let me tell you another story that might explain this.

Earlier this year, my wife Pam and I were at a conference in England. One night we took a late night walk near St. Paul's Cathedral in London. There's St. Paul's in the background in the picture as we stood on the Millennium Bridge that goes across the Thames, made famous in movie Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince.

It was around 11:30 at night. We love walking the streets. But that night as we walked, my sixth sense got activated. For some reason I looked behind us, now and then, and I turned to Pam and said, "I think, we are being followed! That man way back there, like 25 yards or so, I think he is following us."

Then I thought, "I'm just being paranoid like 'man, I am seeing way too many spy movies.'" But as we walked along I would look back and I would see the same man and he was walking faster behind us. Coincidence?

Finally he was really close, and then he got in front of us, and I thought, "Whew, he is passing us." But no, he then stopped in front of us and said that he was from Rome. He was traveling by himself and asked would we mind taking a picture of him. I said, "No problem."

But then he asked, would I MIND being in HIS picture? Side note: Your pastor is not always the sharpest tool in the toolbox and I said, "Sure." Sometimes my naiveté is higher than it should be. So Pam takes his cell phone, and he puts his arm around me, which I didn't know he was going to do, and we pose for the picture. I held tighter onto my little satchel – I'm not that naive.

Pam took the picture, and then we started to walk away. And then he asked, "Could you walk up the stairs closer to the front door of St. Paul's Cathedral so I can get a picture of the church behind me with you?"

It was then that I looked around and realized that while there used to be a lot of tourists near us, there was NO ONE near us now. I looked at him on the stairs and then how far he wanted us to go up the stairs toward the church, which would take us even more into isolation. I thought, “Hmm maybe that is not a good idea.” SUDDENLY, two plain-clothes men came out of the darkness and blinded us with their flashlights!

They shouted, “Police!”

Police? But we didn’t do anything? They came upon the three of us—me, Pam, and the stranger who wanted his picture taken. The two men flashed us their ID’s and said, “Give us your passports.” But we didn’t do anything wrong! It was then Pam and I thought, “Wait a minute. You guys don’t have British accents. You are not in uniform. You may be plainclothes police but why is it you have an eastern European accent?”

“Give us your passports!” they demanded.

Children and adults, what I did next is NOT something any of you are supposed to do. This is Pastor Dan not being super smart. Everything you read, says if you are about to be robbed, don’t fight, give them everything they want, better to lose money than your life. Right?

But I’m Chinese and they are about to take our passports which means it will cost me money to replace them! Would that it were so simple? I say that ruefully.

So your pastor, still being *one taco short of a combo platter*, said to the police, “No, let me see your ID again.” Then I reached for the ID’s still in their hands and they said, “Don’t touch them! Give us your passports.” And me, still being the idiot for the night, started to debate with them. “What do you mean I can’t touch your ID’s? How do I know you’re the police? Let me see your ID’s, and no, you are not getting my passport.”

My Spiderman sixth sense started to activate. I thought, “Gee, two against one. The odds aren’t fair to them.” All of a sudden I wished that all of my lessons in Gung Fu and Karate would come flooding back into my mind and limbs. After all, I was a black belt in Gung Fu, where in my martial arts class for some reason the black belt was the lowest rung and the green belt was the highest. But I was still a black belt and at that moment, I felt like one.

It was then that the two men asked, “Where are you from?” Pam and I said, “Hawaii” wishing at that moment I had 100 *bruddahs* behind me. They said, “No, what country are you from?” I thought, “Darn, they know their geography.”

At that point I was thinking what if they are some anti-American terrorists. I felt my body tensing up getting ready to go into the Fighting Tiger stance.

“What country are you from?” they demanded again. Pam and I said proudly, “The United States.” They said, “What?” “Yes, The United States of America.”

Suddenly, they recoiled. They backed away. It was as if we had some horrible disease.

And then they said to the guy we took a picture with, “You, you come with us.” And then the three of them walked away as if friends. They were working together. We had been set up! They left us shocked, and like James Bond’s favorite drink – we were shaken but not stirred.

To this day, I don’t know why saying “United States” made them quickly walk away from us. It was as if I had a huge angel around me. One British citizen said to us later that maybe the US passports are harder to forge and so those men didn’t want to steal them. Maybe they thought we were from some developing country with passports that were easier to forge. Talk about racial profiling.

That made me think, in the spiritual world, when earthly or supernatural beings harass us, when we say “we are with Jesus Christ,” and pray, “in Christ’s name,” then we are fully protected. Not only because there may be a heavenly host of angels around us, in addition to the Holy Spirit, Jesus, and God the Heavenly Father but because followers of Jesus live in ways where we try to see God at work in our lives every day. It’s not that complicated. The Trinity and the angels are always around us.

When we fully accept the Christmas story, when we choose to look for God daily, we will find encouragement, wisdom, and strength from Him. This is not to say that followers of Jesus live a life without pain, but that even in the pain, the sorrow and the bad memories, He’ll be there for us.

We can hear God say, as He said in the Bible, “Do not fear, for I am with you. Do not be afraid for I am your God. I will help you, strengthen you, and will raise you up with my victorious right hand.” (Isaiah 41:10)

And we can hear God say, “That’s my son or daughter running the slides, so back off.” They are mine!”

When times are tough, or we feel like failures, or we feel threatened, and human ruffians or even Satan asks “Who are you with,” we can say, Jesus Christ!” Know that finally we are fully protected, and that we fully have hope, and that we know the mission and the justice we need to fight for here on earth.

It’s not that we have a genie in a bottle to do our every whim or grant our every wish, but we have a perfect Father in heaven, who is trustworthy. Followers of Christ are here to help the poor, the imprisoned, the widows, the suffering in the name of Jesus.

I know, that many of you have many challenges going on. Maybe problems with your health, relationships, finances, or emotions.

Maybe you have lost a loved one. You can begin or continue to believe tonight that God is with you. Just look for Him. He is there for you to see, hear, and feel. He won't abandon you.

Remember in Nat Higa's story that we heard earlier in the worship service, even through an UNEXPECTED pregnancy, he and his wife Syndi saw God, had the blessing of Sophie, and as a result their faith grew.

Remember in the Christmas story, through the UNEXPECTED pregnancy of a young woman named Mary, God was present. We had the blessing of Jesus coming, and we can see Him today.

Our church has a tradition on Christmas Eve. I am going to close with a prayer that you might actually feel the peace and presence of Jesus or feel a physical or emotional healing tonight.

In a moment, I am going to say a miracle prayer for you all to be healed or have a prayer answered in some way tonight. We have done this for the last 12 years on Christmas Eve. During the prayer if you have a physical ailment, I am going to ask you to put your hand on or near that part of the body. And if you have an emotional need, put your hand on your heart. And then I am going to say a prayer of healing and hope for you that God might heal you on Christmas Eve or answer your prayer sometime soon. The answer may happen tonight or maybe it will happen tomorrow or much later. I can't make guarantees because I'm not the one doing the healing. God is.

The first time we did this 12 years ago on a Christmas Eve, a woman who came to the service with a cane, in the end left the service with no need for a cane after the mass healing prayer. And there have been many other miraculous healings since then – from disease, depression, and injury. People have felt faith, hope and love.

Underneath the chairs at the end of your row, is a basket of red satin rosebuds.

Reach for the basket now. It is under the aisle chair in your row that is closest to the center of the sanctuary, or the chair in the overflow room closest to the sanctuary.

I am asking you to pick up that basket right now and then each of you may take one rose out of it and pass it down the aisle. They have been pre-counted for every one in the row. If you want more roses for your friends and relatives, then please feel free to take a few more roses from the basket or later get more from the ushers. And when I pray, I want you to hold onto that rose.

And when God answers your prayer in a way you understand, I want you, whether child or adult, to return the rose WITH A LETTER, to explain how God answered your prayer—how you saw, heard, felt God in your life with that request. And we will put your rose on our Christmas wreath for all to see next year.

In the last year, we have had roses returned to us with letters that have described many kinds of answered prayers – emotional, physical, and spiritual. Many, many answered rose prayers! Look at the wreath – all made up of hundreds of roses that were returned with letters explaining the miracle of a Christmas Eve prayer.

And now I want to pray a simple, miraculous prayer for you. Would that it were so simple. Please bow your heads as I ask for God's Holy Spirit to come upon us that we might feel the warmth of His love and His grace and His healing power.

As our heads are bowed and eyes closed I ask those of you who have a physical ailment who desire healing to please put your hand on or near the area of concern and for those of you who have an emotional issue that you desire prayer please put your hand over your heart. Let us pray.