



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

March 24, 2013, Palm Sunday

"Stay Alert"

The Rev. Dr. Dan Chun

(The sermon opens with the scene of the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem from the movie "Jesus of Nazareth.")

The disciples must have felt like they were in the entourage of a rock star. Here they were, entering on a main street in Jerusalem and thousands of people were shouting and cheering. They had probably never felt that much admiration.

The Gospel of Mark concisely described it this way:

Mark 11:7 Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it.

Mark 11:8 Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields.

Mark 11:9 Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!"

Mark 11:10 Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

A few years ago I was talking to the personal assistant of Bear Grylls, the star and host of *Man Vs. Wild*, and *Born Survivor* and *Ultimate Survival*. I asked the assistant what was a highlight of his career so far.

The assistant answered the highlight for him so far was the time

when he was walking through Chicago's O'Hare airport with actor Ellen DeGeneres and her manager. There was excitement in the air and much adulation from the throngs of people who took pictures of her, ran up to touch her and get her autograph.

The disciples must have felt the same way as they walked through the Holy City of Jerusalem with the famous Jesus of Nazareth—prophet, rabbi, miracle man.

But in spite of all the celebration, we know that the disciples and the crowd there missed the mark. They may have thought that Jesus was going to build a beautiful city, as the last song Aaron Banes did said, called the City of Man. It would be the best town of humankind. It would be built by men, for men, to honor men. But they got it wrong; Jesus was into cities built by God.

Maybe the crowd that was affirming Jesus that day thought that He would be like a general who would overthrow the evil and mighty Roman army.

The crowd thought that Jesus would be a great political leader, and be like a king because kings often rode donkeys as Jesus was doing that day. They thought Jesus would be a motivational speaker who, on pure charisma, would bring people together.

But they missed it. They were shouting "Hosanna," meaning "save us," but what kind of deliverance did

they want from Jesus? And what was Jesus actually saving them from?

The disciples missed it even after living with Jesus for three years. They didn't fully realize that Jesus was actually the Messiah, the one the Jews had been waiting for centuries, the Christ, the Anointed One; the only one in human history who was fully human and fully God; the only one who would bring a solution to the Jews' oppression.

However, it was not going to be a political or military revolution, but a spiritual one; a revolution that would transform people for eternity, give them hope and strength, and a deep friendship with God.

The disciples missed it, the religious leaders of the times—called the Pharisees—who were more into the Law missed it. The people of Jerusalem really missed it because less than a week later, they were shouting for the Romans to crucify Jesus because He seemed too weak, and not the strong leader they had thought He was going to be.

God was right in front of their eyes, but they missed it. Jesus riding in front of them but they missed the meaning of the moment.

Here's a scary question: is that like you and me? Not seeing Jesus in our lives even though He's right there? Have you ever watched an event and missed what was really going on?

If you have seen this video that I'm about to show, please be quiet, and don't say a word to spoil it for others. It's a test about staying alert. Let's roll the video. (*Video of "Test Your Awareness" is shown.*)

How many of you counted 13 passes among the members of the white team? How many of you saw the moonwalking bear?

On that perhaps sunny Palm Sunday day in Jerusalem – how many of them saw just a popular man riding on a donkey? How many of them saw the Messiah?

The thrust of this sermon is that we must be alert and stay alert. There are times when God is in our midst. There are times when God is talking to us but we don't hear Him. We say, "Woe is me! I wish God would talk to me," when He actually has and continues to but somehow we are just not attuned enough to His voice.

In the old days before cable TV, and you younger people will be stunned to hear this, many of the TV's had antenna sticking out in a V-shape from the back of the TV. When there was static or fuzziness on the TV screen, you could position the antenna in different angles in the hope that you can pick up a better signal and get a clearer picture on the tube.

One could also put tinfoil on the antenna to make it wider and more capable of receiving TV signals. Or sometimes your dad or mom would say, "Hey, move the antenna," and you would. Then they would tell you to keep holding the antenna because on contact your body has just become THE antenna!

There are times when God is talking to us, and He wants us to be THE antenna, but we don't realize it. Our tuners are off.

Palm Sunday has a challenge for us: don't be at a parade and celebration of Jesus and miss the fact that it is Jesus Christ Himself who is in your midst. We need to stay alert in life for God.

How can we do that? First of all, recognize that:

We have selective awareness. As humans, we can't help it. We can't take in everything at one time. So we focus in on what WE THINK is the most important, the most alluring, the most entertaining, or the most pleasurable thing at the moment. So sometimes we are able to focus on job security or high achievements or making lots of money but not on what God wants us to focus on.

But to live a godly life, we need to have selective awareness for God and HIS principles for living, which might be diametrically different from what the world says we need. We need to choose to be disciplined enough to only want Him and follow Him.

Sometimes we are selectively aware of the wrong things – money, fame, power, pleasure, sex, gluttony. I can't blame you because there is a barrage of advertisements on TV, on the radio, on the Internet, on our phones, and iPads that are trying to make us be selectively aware of ONLY THEIR products, which the advertisements claim will bring you ultimate fulfillment in life.

Jesus says He brings you Living Water, while the advertisement says, "Bring on the real thirst-quencher – 7-Up!"

The Bible talks of the signs and wonders of the Holy Spirit, and A&W Root Beer talks about that "ambrosia-like frosty mug sensation."

The Apostle Paul tells us that with Christ all things are possible, but

Adidas tells us that with their clothes "impossible is nothing."

The Bible says that heaven is a great place, but Alaska's ad says their state is "beyond your dreams, within your reach."

Jesus tells us that He is the Bread of Life, but Chipotle Mexican Grill says it is "the food with integrity." (How can the maker of refried beans say it is the food with integrity? What a gas!)

The Bible says Jesus is the Lord of Lords and the King of Kings, but then Coke tells us that its soda is "the real thing," while Colorado tells us that through them we "enter a higher state."

How do we hear God's truth in the midst of this media madness? Is it no wonder that we are often confused on what we ought to be choosing in life. We tend to choose success instead of sacrifice, pleasure instead of principles, honor instead of humility, or recognition from other people instead of approval from God.

To be sure, we have been doing this since childhood and our teen years. It's called peer pressure. It's called keeping up with the Joneses. It's called wanting to be with the in-crowd so we don't stick out.

We want to be accepted so we do things that make us acceptable to our peers though these things may not be the best for our relationship with God. Courage as a trait means walking to the beat of a different drummer—not always doing what the crowd is doing.

It is amazing how the people of Jerusalem loved and praised Jesus, but then turned around a few days later to shout and plead for His death after realizing He wasn't what they thought He would be. He didn't seem powerful enough.

Listen up! Have we done the same thing?

There are times when Jesus doesn't "perform" the way we want Him to. We say He's too slow. We complain because He didn't give us what we wanted. He seems too weak. In our hearts we are saying, "Then forget Him; I will pray less; I will trust less; I will tithe less. I will pay attention to Him less." And by doing that, it's like we are saying, "Crucify Him. Put Him away!"

We are not hearing God. We're not realizing what He's doing, and we forget who He is because we are not staying alert, which leads to the next point.

There is static in life. To be true there is a lot of static in our lives that blurs the signal from God. And often it is self-induced. Busy calendars will weaken the signals from God every time.

Sometimes it is laziness or apathy. When was the last time we sat down to read the Bible, or to journal? Too busy or too lazy? It's hard to hear God then.

Sometimes it is sin that blocks the signals from God. Our sin hardens our heart, plugs our ears, and blocks our eyes and so we don't see or hear Jesus. Sin creates arteriosclerosis—the hardening of our heart's arteries—so we can't love others like Jesus.

Pride is a big hindrance to seeing Jesus. Do we believe we don't need Jesus in our lives and so we live by our own creed and our own principles? We become our own god with our own created religion. We say we don't need to talk to Jesus because we got this; we got this life. We can do it on our own!

Sometimes it is pain that is making it hard to see God. I

understand. Sometimes the pain of tragedy or disease in our life is too much to bear. But remember that someday the pain will subside, and we will be able to hear God more clearly, if we can hang in there in faith.

The best Christian life is the life where we talk to God constantly. It means talking to Him all throughout the day and to regularly reading His Bible to let His words permeate our thoughts.

The truth is that we will never hear His voice clearly unless we saturate our souls with His Word – the Bible. Please take the time to read His word on a regular basis. His principles and His will for us will be made more evident if we know His words.

Hey, here's something revolutionary. It's okay to be spiritually neurotic! I am being humorous here, but what I am saying is that if we live a life where we are spiritually neurotic that we don't want to do anything without checking in with Jesus first – that's okay. Asking WWJD (what would Jesus do) regularly is not a bad thing. It's not a weakness, but rather a strength.

Asking God what He thinks on all that we do in our business, home and community is a good thing to do.

Every day I am checking in with God to ask him questions like: Am I doing the right thing? Did I say it the right way? Is there someone I need to talk to today? Where have I blown it today?

Sounds neurotic? Hopefully, spiritually neurotic.

I don't like making mistakes that hurt people or God. Checking in constantly with God helps us to be alert. How can we stay alert?

If I could give you homework this week, it would be this: take some

time to write down all of the times you think God talked to you in the last month. All the ways he tried to reach you to instruct, guide, bless, or correct you.

If we could slow down and make time for this list, we would see that God talked to us in a myriad of different ways, maybe in ways we weren't even aware. Maybe He talked to you in a song you heard on the radio, a paragraph, a Scripture verse you read, a conversation you just had, a recent email or note, or maybe through a time you or a loved one got healed.

Be alert. I think you might be stunned to see how God talks to you, if you just take the time to see His hand in your life.

You might say, "But God doesn't talk to me." Hey that's the point of the sermon – He IS talking to you. He's right here. He wants our friendship. But maybe we have had a blind eye or a deaf ear all this time. Maybe we have spiritual glaucoma where we don't even see Jesus; it's blurry but He is right there!

To be sure, sometimes God talks to us very specifically. And it comes in the most mysterious way, which is the next point:

Be alert to what God is saying, even if it sounds crazy.

I told many of you that there was a time that I was in seminary and I was studying Greek, which has got to be one of the most boring things I have done on earth. In the midst of that tedious, boring work, I had this impression from God. Fortunately even in the midst of studying Greek I was alert.

The impression I got was that I was to go to the cafeteria the next day because Tom's marriage was in trouble.

The trouble was that I didn't know Tom that well. Second, I didn't know if Tom was married. Third problem: how did I know I wasn't imagining it? Fourth, what if Tom wasn't there? Then I would feel pretty stupid.

I felt pretty foolish acting on this crazy impression by going into the cafeteria where I didn't normally eat. But I wanted to be alert, and WHAT IF this was from God?

So the next day I made a brown bag lunch and went to the cafeteria. I sat there and looked around. I looked at my watch. I was feeling pretty stupid. No Tom. I started munching on my sandwich.

How do I even know if Tom goes to the cafeteria? What's his class schedule? He commutes, so why would he be here? What are the chances? Why the chances were probably a million to one that.... and then in walked Tom.

I weakly waved to him and asked him to sit with me. He sat down.

I said, "So Tom, do you come here to the cafeteria often?"

Tom replied, "No, this is my first time here."

I said, "So, Tom, we take Greek together. But I don't know you. Are you married?"

And then Tom told me that he was recently separated, and he poured out his story of pain and hurt. And from that day on, Tom and I became great friends after I shared with him that I was separated too. We had a mutual bond.

Imagine, if Tom were praying the night before, "God where are You? Why aren't You speaking to me?"

And little did he know that God then talked to this little Asian guy from Hawaii who would be studying Greek with him, interrupted his studies to say to go talk to Tom because Tom needed help. That's a personal God! And I only responded because I was alert and didn't negate God's word by just thinking it was my imagination.

God has talked to me in my sleep to go talk to someone. God has told me to talk to another person while I was buying lettuce in a supermarket. God has talked to me during the preparation of power point slides, and at the atrium in the other wing while praying.

Just this past week I was talking to a woman who went to the HIM Conference. She had a dream of a woman who had a hip problem. But the underlying message was "Be alert, stay alert for when you meet this woman."

And sure enough, at one of the seminars she attended, she saw a woman whom she didn't know of whom God said, "This one."

Nervously she went up to the woman and asked, "Can I pray for you?" And the woman said, "Yes, that would be nice. I have this hip problem."

Friends, be alert. Stay alert. Sometimes God's message or God's response may seem crazy.

A while back I was walking my dogs and I was concerned that an upcoming *Life in the Spirit Conference* would indeed be helpful enough and life-changing enough. What if the Holy Spirit doesn't show up at the Holy Spirit Conference?

I was walking, and praying and asking God to send His Spirit. Would people's lives be transformed by love in the conference? Would God send me a sign of His faithfulness?

Suddenly, my cell phone rang. It was Nick Love (our Middle School Coordinator). And while I was walking under some trees, I felt this furry thing fall on my neck. I thought it was a rat! I yelled, "Augh!"

I pulled it off but it came back on me again! What was that?

It turned out to be a green lovebird; a lovebird, while I was talking to Nick Love. A bird was always the sign of the Holy Spirit in the New Testament. What are the chances in the midst of my prayers for the *Life in the Spirit Conference* that God would have Nick Love call me and have a lovebird land on me at that exact time?

Something similar happened later. I was walking at the University of Hawaii campus and praying that God would give me a sign, and that I needed His Holy Spirit to be with me for a major decision. Suddenly three white doves appeared flying about fifty feet over me. Two flew off but one continued to circle over my head again and again.

I took it as a sign from God as the white dove in the Gospels symbolized the Holy Spirit. What were the astronomical chances that that would happen right when I was praying? The Lord was communicating that I was not to be afraid. He was with me.

But it's not just through animals. I was walking my dogs again, and I was feeling so sad. There was a challenge that seemed so beyond me. So I prayed fervently as I walked. And I apologized but said, "Lord, I really need a sign from You that You are with me. The burden is so great. My sadness is so great."

Right then, a car whizzed by me and honked their horn at me.

I turned around but I didn't see who it was. I thought it was some church members, but I was not sure.

Hours later a church member called and said that it was he and his wife who drove by and honked at me. He said his wife said that I looked so "forlorn" and asked if I was okay. He called to encourage me. I thought it was so nice to have that word of comfort.

But dull-minded me only got what God was trying to tell me four or five hours later. I was not alert enough. I had realized that God had heard my prayers! He knew of my despair and right when I was praying, He sent a word of comfort to me through a church member who drove by me when I was praying for some word, some sign, some evidence that He was with me. The fact that the member said I looked forlorn showed me that God had heard my prayer, and He was sending words of comfort.

But being alert is not all about us. Being alert is being ready to serve others.

When I walk my dogs every day I write down in my phone every neighbor and dog I meet. I try to stay alert, memorize names, give an encouraging word, and wait and see if God wants me to offer help or a prayer. You don't need to be a pastor to do that.

If we are alert in our neighborhoods and offices to be there with that comforting card or call or maybe a casserole for someone ill, it will go a long, long way in promoting God's love. Be alert. You might hear a voice that says, "Casserole for Carol."

"What? I don't even cook!"

"Get a casserole for Carol. Her husband is sick and she needs help. If you can't cook one, buy one!"

[Editor's note: After the second worship service, a woman who heard this sermon came up to Pastor Dan and said, "I heard your sermon. You would not have known this but my neighbor is Carol. Her husband is sick. And I don't cook casseroles." Pastor Dan replied, "Stay alert. The Lord is talking to you."]

Sometimes when I am in an airplane, I hear the voice from God saying, "Stay alert. Stay alert." And so I sharpen my senses to see if there is a passenger or flight attendant in need of an encouraging word or a loving ear.

Don't think that crazy idea is that crazy. Don't miss Jesus in your presence riding by on a Palm Sunday or on any day in your life.

From this day on, put that periscope up from the deep waters of work and worry and look daily and often for signs and messages from God. From this day on, put up the communication satellites of your soul to detect God's signals. From this day on, stay alert.

When you walk into your home this week, stay alert for what God wants you to see, hear or do, and then do it.

When you walk into your office building this week, stay alert to see who might be hurting or needing a kind word of encouragement or, if possible, even a prayer. You are God's minister in their midst. Be alert.

When you walk or drive in your community, be alert to the needs of how to make your neighborhood a better place.

If you are in pain or in great need today, stay alert for God will try

to reach you through Scripture, a person, or through a song.

If you are confused or don't know what to do, stay alert for God's

help and word is on the way. Focus your frequencies for Him.

If you have blown it because of the sins you've committed, stay alert for God is probably trying to say to you, "You are forgiven, and now sin no more."

If you are seeking God, I say stay alert for God is like the hound from heaven; He's after you to love you, lift you up, and start a friendship with you. For did not God say in Isaiah 41:10: *Do not fear for I am with you. Do not be afraid for I am YOUR God. I will help you. I will strengthen you and will lift you up you with my victorious right hand.*"

And all of God's people said: Amen! Let's pray.

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