



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

April 13, 2014

"Hero at Large" (Palm Sunday)

The Rev. Dr. Dan Chun

In the 1980 movie *Hero At Large*, John Ritter plays the role of Steve Nichols who is a down-and-out actor who can hardly pay his rent. Nichols takes a job promoting a movie called *Captain Avenger* to actually play the character Captain Avenger at movie theaters along with 60 other actors spread throughout New York City area.

But one night after playing his gig, while still in costume beneath his trench coat, he goes to a corner drugstore to get some milk, when suddenly something goes terribly wrong as two robbers enter the drugstore. (A video clip of *Hero at Large* was shown.)

After Steve Nichols saves the two storeowners from the two thugs, something happens in his heart. He thought he was just portraying a hero, but he discovers that he has the making of a real hero inside of him.

People all over the city talked about this mysterious Captain Avenger who helps people, so Nichols begins to listen to the police radio. In a later scene, he chases down two drug dealers and gets them arrested. His fame begins to spread throughout the city. But is Captain Avenger a REAL hero or not?

Our nation is enthralled with heroes. Even the theme of this year's Academy Awards was heroes.

At the Hawaii Convention Center recently was the 10th annual

Kawaii Kon, Hawaii's largest Anime and manga convention. People from all over the world came to Honolulu dressed up as characters from Marvel, DC Comics, or Japanese Anime.

Last year nearly 8,000 people showed up for Kawaii Kon. Gee, the HIM Conference hit a new record of more than 5,000 attendees, but these cartoon guys are even more popular!

Driving by the convention this year, I saw that there was Batman, a guy with a black cape and a cane, and people with spears, swords, and weird weapons.

Kawaii Kon is amazingly organized. It even has written guidelines for what kind of fake weapons attendees can bring in and how they should hold them or use them.

There were Japanese heroes at Kawaii Kon. If you like Japanese animation, manga, that's the place to be. Men, women, kids are all dressed up in costumes for the three-day convention. There was a huge exhibit area, guest panelists, TV and film screenings, video game tournaments, and even a Moonlight Ball.

For some, Kawaii Kon is life changing. According to *Honolulu Magazine*, there was a year when a woman brought her grandfather, who suffered from dementia, to Kawaii Kon. When the grandfather got there, he brightened up as he recognized a figure in costume from *Gatchaman*, a Japanese animated show from the '70s

that was about a group of warriors who fought against evil. The grandfather hadn't smiled for months till he got to the convention. And on the way out, he was smiling and even humming the theme song from the animated show. He saw *Gatchaman* as heroes.

I just saw *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*. Great fast-paced film. Makes you want to be a hero. (Tip for the day: stay till the end of the film credits or you will miss not one but TWO sneak previews.)

But here is the question of the day: Who are the "real heroes" in real life? Who just talks a good game? Who are just fantasy (animated and make-believe characters)? Who really walks the talk?

Two thousand years ago, Jesus of Nazareth paraded into the holy city of Jerusalem and was welcomed like a hero on what we observe today as Palm Sunday. Let's read from the Word of God on what happened that day.

Matt. 21:1 When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples,

Matt. 21:2 saying to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me.

Matt. 21:3 If anyone says anything to you, just say this, 'The Lord needs them.' And he will send them immediately."

Matt. 21:4 This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,

Matt. 21:5 "Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey."

Matt. 21:6 The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them;

Matt. 21:7 they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them.

Matt. 21:8 A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road.

Matt. 21:9 The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

Matt. 21:10 When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, "Who is this?"

Matt. 21:11 The crowds were saying, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."

This is the Gospel of God!

Like an identified hero, Jesus was welcomed and honored by people shouting "Hosanna," which literally meant "save us." It was like they were saying, "Save us, Jesus, for You are our hero who can rescue us."

But rescue them from what? The Romans? He didn't do that. Rescue them from the Pharisees? He didn't do that. Rescue them from crazy zealots? He did not do that either.

In fact, just days later, the crowds in Jerusalem were asking that a zealot named Barabbas, a known terrorist against the Romans, be released and that Jesus be crucified. Where was their hero Jesus now? He was condemned by the people, not praised. These were different people, perhaps? But if they were different people, where were the people who thought Jesus was a prophet, someone wise, profound and special?

Every year we observe Palm Sunday in remembrance of the day when Jesus came into Jerusalem riding on a donkey. Palm Sunday begins the Holy Week. It's but five days before He was crucified. He gave His life for humankind so that we could know of God's love and forgiveness. Jesus took our place on the cross for our sins. He took the beatings that were meant for us. He was courageous. He's a hero.

What role does He really have in our lives? So I say to us today, let us use Palm Sunday as an annual time of reflection to ask ourselves these questions:

- Are we closer to God or farther away from Him than last year?
- Are we more joyful in His presence than we were since a year ago?
- Are we serving God with more joy than a year ago?
- Do we see Him more as our hero or is He more distant?
- Do we acknowledge Him as our hero at large—a hero who is everywhere?

This is our annual check-up at the start of the Holy Week, just a week before our Lenten fast ends. How has the fast been going for you, by the way? Have we become more aware of Jesus in our lives over the last 40 days? Have we emptied out some things in our lives, and asked for more of Christ and the Holy Spirit to be poured into us? Or have we gone about our lives,

living and acting about the same as we did last year? If so, why?

What has sucked out our joy? What has prevented Jesus from entering into the Jerusalem of our hearts, the most holy of holy places in our souls? What has blocked the joy of our living for Jesus? Is it busyness, events that we keep saying yes to?

Sometimes it might be other people. There are people who are psychic vampires, you know, who suck us dry of joy in just 30 seconds. They are negative people with negative comments causing us to lose our joy.

Are they putting up roadblocks to us this past year so that Jesus can't get into our heart? And what are we going to do about that? Are we going to allow them to infect us with THEIR virus so that we become negative too and lose our joy?

There is a story I heard of a man who was eating at a restaurant when he saw a woman lay out expensive cameras and lenses on the table. She then ordered a number of dishes, and then she began to take pictures of them.

So the man asked her, "What are you doing?" She said that she is a food critic for an Oregon periodical.

The man boldly asked, "What if you order the food and you don't like it?"

Her response surprised him. She said, "Oh, if I don't like the food, I don't write about that. I only write positive reviews."

Wow, can we become the people of Jesus who only give positive reviews? Or is there a voice in our minds that says, "No, you've got to let people know when they are NOT perfect. You must let others know of their faults."

It's a way of speaking truth in love. Tell them of their imperfections. All of them!"

Why is it that whenever someone says to me "I want to speak the truth in love to you," I brace myself? I think it's because it has become a code for "you are about to be criticized."

When the Bible talks about speaking the truth in love, it never said it should always be negative. Can't affirmation be truth in love as well? Why can't we be like that Oregonian food critic who speaks the truth in love by giving only positive reviews? Why are we so critical?

In the Bible the only people Jesus criticized were the Pharisees, who were always so negative about people. For the common people, Jesus was full of love and affirmation. He saw the potential in a person. He brought joy!

When Jesus came into Jerusalem, there was great joy. People were singing, shouting, waving palm fronds, and laying down their cloaks before him. Hosanna! Alleluia! It was a picture of joy!

If Jesus is the Lord in our hearts, do we look like an alleluia to other people, or do we look like a dirge?

What do the ancient wise people say about this topic of joy? Philosopher and Jesuit priest Teilhard de Chardin, who died in the 1950s, said: "Joy is the one infallible sign of the presence of God."

St. Augustine of Canterbury (not the Bishop of Hippo) from the 7th century, said these profound words: "We are an Easter people and alleluia is our song."

From St. Theresa of Avila come these words: "I'm more afraid of one unhappy sister than a crowd of evil spirits."

St. Theresa also said, "Joy is the echo of God's life in us."

Is that how we are living? Are we echoing and reverberating with joy? Joy can spread like a virus, and so can negativity.

So we might say, "Dan, as I look back over the terrain of my walk last year, it appears full of ragged edges, pot holes, rocks, swamps, fire pits, and vines tugging at me, and I have no machete in my hand to help me break free of them."

I get it. I know some of us have had tragic circumstances come upon us. But at that moment I must ask: Did you move towards God or away from Him over the last year when you needed help? Did you rely on His strength or your own? Were you fearful of the future you imagined, or reassured by the future and hope God promised you?

Dr. Stella Matsuda shared last week that she has had two bouts of cancer. She said, "I can't imagine going through cancer without God." She grabbed the hand of Jesus, the real hero at large, and Christ helped pull her out of the pit. She relied on Him.

For some here, huge boulders have rolled at you. When that boulder was coming at you—a la Indiana Jones, did you run to God or away from Him? Did you rely on your own spirit and your own strength or on the strength of the true hero at large—Jesus Christ?

That's what Palm Sunday is about. Jesus wants to come into our lives, our Jerusalem, to make a difference. Will you allow Him to enter into your life to bring joy? Will you trust Him fully with your life?

Joy is not a life without tears but a life with tears, PLUS Jesus. It's a life where we can smile in the midst of tears with the strength of joy knowing that with God, all will turn out good in the end. As the Bible says in Revelation 21:4: "He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying nor pain any more for the former things have passed away." (ESV)

Pope Francis said, "I cannot imagine a Christian who cannot joyfully smile." Pope Francis

It's not a happiness without pain. I'm not talking about a fluffy kind of joy but a joy in the midst of pain even in the trough of life. It's the joy Jesus Himself talked about when He arrived in Jerusalem of all places! Jerusalem would be the place of pain for Him.

When Jesus was in the upper room at the Last Supper, He knew he was just hours away from being captured and then tortured and then killed. What did He talk about at the Last Supper? Joy! Joy in the midst of pain. He said during the dinner:

"So you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your JOY from you." (John 16:22)

"Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, so that your JOY may be complete." (John 16:24)

"But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my JOY made complete in themselves." (John 17:13)

Instead of worrying, Jesus talked about joy! He was not worried but being courageous.

Why don't I worry a lot? Because Jesus is MY true hero at large.

He is at large, meaning everywhere. As I said at the HIM Conference said, God is in ALL things in my life, at ALL times, and in ALL places. He brings me hope.

And because I have the Father, Son Jesus, and the Holy Spirit, and all of the angels on our side, then no matter what goes wrong and how fearful I may become, I can have joy. I allow myself to be overwhelmed by the joy God offers by believing in Him, and not ruled by the fear that Satan so effectively sells us.

We need not fear because God is love. One of the most prolific verses in the Bible is “Be not afraid. Do not fear.”

As the saying goes, “Fear knocked on the door. Love Opened the Door. There was no one there.” Why? Because the Bible says, “Perfect love casts away all fear.” (1 John 4:18) And “God is love.” (1 John 4:8)

And now one last thing: As we think about this last year, using Palm Sunday as a measuring stick, I’m asking: Have you allowed Christ to be more of your Hero, more of your Lord, and more of your Savior since last year?

Here’s another question for you: How HEROIC have you been FOR GOD this last year? Have you risked for God? Have you tried to heroically save people by leading them to God?

For I say this, when there is joy in our hearts, when there is love, when Jesus has not only entered but resides in the Jerusalem of our hearts, then we can and want to be heroes at large for Him. The Christian life is not all about us. It’s about helping others—to be the hands and arms of Jesus so we can lead them to Him.

We will want to be that true defender of the weak and oppressed. We will want to help the poor, the

hungry, the emotionally depleted, the sick, the imprisoned and those who just don’t know Jesus. And when we do that, we will be doing that UNTO Jesus.

As it says in the gospel of Matthew 25:40: “And the King will answer, ‘Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me.’”

That is where Jesus is—helping the poor, hungry, sick, emotionally depleted and the imprisoned. Isn’t that where we want to be?

With Jesus, serving as his heroes, meeting people where they are, rescuing them from death, in His glorious and precious name. May we all be heroes at large this year. Amen. Let’s pray!

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Sunday sermon texts are also available at fpchawaii.org. The audio version can be downloaded from iTunes. It can also be sent to you by e-mail. Request the free audio version at fpchkoolau@gmail.com.