



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

April 19, 2015

"Back Through the Wardrobe"

The Rev Sim Fulcher

"I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life." (1 John 5:13).

We just viewed a clip of "The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe." If you're familiar with the C.S. Lewis' Chronicles of Narnia, you'll remember that the story was set in a big house in the countryside not far from London. It was the house of an old professor. Lucy, along with her sister and two brothers, had been sent there to escape the air-raids over the city during World War II.

In their first full day in the house it was raining, so they stayed inside and explored the big rambling house with its spacious rooms. And as they explored, Lucy found herself alone in a very large room with only a big covered wardrobe up against the far wall. She thought it might be worthwhile to walk over and try the door. She did and she discovered Narnia. Narnia—the land beyond the wardrobe door—a magical, enchanted land.

Let's change that scene a bit. Fast forward to the year 2000. Instead of Lucy, put my wife and me in the picture. Instead of the wardrobe door at the end of the room, put the door at the end of

the long corridor that extends from a Delta airlines flight that left Atlanta ten hours earlier. You don't need to change much more. When that door opened for us into Honolulu International Airport almost exactly 15 years ago, Mimi and I stepped into a magical, enchanted land that—for us anyway—would give Lucy a run for her money.

I'm not speaking of the land of Hawaii itself with it's natural climate control, soft trade winds, lofty mountains, and rainbows. Or the clean air, the exquisite ocean colors, and flowers with colors so vivid you have to walk up and touch 'em to see if they are real. (I remember; after being here a month I told Pastor Dan the move was so physically and psychologically exhausting that I felt like I had died. Dan said, "You did. And you came to Paradise." Just like Dan, eh?)

Paradise is exactly the word for Hawaii, but the magic I'm talking about is of another dimension—more like what Lucy experienced in Narnia along with the others who eventually joined her. It's not so much the land I'm speaking of, it's what happens in the land. As with Lucy—so with us. It's what we've experienced here at First Prez that has been magical.

It literally started when we went through that Delta door. That was back when you could go directly to the gate and greet people as they stepped off the plane. In this slide you see the First Prez welcoming team surrounding Mimi and me at the Delta gate.

We had no idea anybody would meet us at that gate. Oh, we expected a ride to be at the curb outside the baggage area—but a welcoming party? No way! Nothing even close to that had ever happened to us before, so it was the farthest thing from our minds.

To show you how far from our minds: On the flight in we discovered Mimi had lost an earring. We looked for it in vain all during the last hour of the flight. We felt it was somewhere on the floor, but in the cramped seating conditions it was too hard to look for it. We would have to wait until the plane landed and everybody got off, which we did, and which seemed to take forever.

We told the last flight attendant who was getting off that we were okay—that we didn't generally crawl around on the floor of airplanes. She smiled and left.

Totally alone on the plane, we found the earring under the seat in front of us.

Our delay no doubt added to the jubilation that greeted us when we finally came through that door. After all, when you're waiting at a plane for somebody and the pilots leave, and all the flight attendants leave, and the cleaning crew starts in, you tend to lose hope anybody else is in there. Needless to say, they were glad to see us.

And what a happy, joyous surprise for us—at least ten people from First Prez waiting in an empty airport hallway with cheers and leis and hugs. We were blown away by First Prez that very first moment and every other moment since—for 15 years!

I did not randomly choose the phrase "blown away." It fits in more ways than one. The Bible compares wind and the Holy Spirit. In their nature they are the same. Both unseen, both powerful, both unpredictable. Mimi and I have been asked what will be our big take-away when we leave the islands for the mainland next month. We have to say it has been the ways and wonders of God's Spirit at work at First Prez.

That started long before we set foot in Honolulu while we were still in Kentucky. Many of you have heard my story that stars Elder Alice Yoder. I should say small Elder Alice Yoder with a very large voice. If you were here last August at the celebration of my 50 years of being an ordained pastor, you even saw a live demonstration here on this platform. (By the way, if I had to name one thing that tops everything for us at First Prez it's that off-the-chart celebration in August from which we will never recover.)

Yes, it's true. Alice phoned from, well, Mimi didn't hear where from. If Alice said Honolulu it would not have computed in Mimi's brain anyway. "Sim, somebody on the phone needs a pastor!" Mimi called out from the back door. It was dark. I was in the backyard walking the dog, and I thought to myself, "Oh no, it's 10:30pm. I haven't had dinner, and it's been a hard day. I hope these poor people who need a pastor don't live too far away." Mimi brought me the phone.

"Hello?"

"Reverend Fulcher, I'm on the Pastor Nominating Committee. We are looking for an associate pastor. Would you please send us your complete resume and a recording of your teaching."

"Who is this?"

"I'm Alice Yoder at First Presbyterian Church. Will you send that information to us?"

There was such authority in that voice that it came across like, "You will send that information to us, won't you?" How could I dare say "No?!"

"Sure. Where...where should I send it?"

Alice gave an address that ended with the word, "Honolulu." I said "Where?" She said, "Honolulu." I wanted to ask her, but I didn't dare, so I asked myself, "Where in the world is Honolulu?" I had a mental lapse. I had put in my resumé that I'd like to go to Georgia, South Carolina, Tennessee, Alabama, or Florida. Honolulu? I wasn't ready for "Honolulu."

Well, I dutifully sent what I had promised even though I had no inkling anything would ever come of it. I sent it mainly because I thought one day I might meet this big woman and I didn't want her to beat up on me. Alice turned out to be 4 feet 11 inches tall, weighing barely 90 pounds. I haven't done the math to know how old she was then, but I know she turned 93 last month. (I got permission from Alice to give her stats—still want to keep on her good side). She's a dear friend of mine and Mimi's and she will be forever.

I promptly forgot about all that except for one night when eating with friends they asked if I had any hits on my resumé. I told them there was nothing significant, and then I remembered the call from Honolulu. We all had a big laugh. It might as well have been a phone call from the moon. Chances of moving there seemed greater.

Weeks went by. Then out of the blue a call from Honolulu. It was from a pastor named Dan Chun of First Presbyterian Church, Honolulu. We talked at least 45 minutes. It was an amazing conversation. Afterwards I told Mimi it sounded like a dream church. Mimi said that it was a dream that no church like that could happen—especially in Honolulu. "I think you've been conned," she said.

That was a weekend. Early Monday morning Mimi was on the phone to Presbyterian headquarters just down the road. (We were in Louisville, Kentucky.) Did our denomination have a First Presbyterian Church in Honolulu, she asked? "Yes," was the answer. Did they have a pastor by the name of Dan Chun?

They did. Mimi put the phone down in disbelief. “It’s true”, she said. “It’s all true! They have a First Presbyterian Church there and the pastor is a guy named Dan Chun!”

I emailed and asked Dan for a recording of a worship service. He sent us the Christmas Eve service 1999. It sat around the house for a couple of weeks until early one morning. I had just finished breakfast and I went into our bedroom where Mimi was polishing off her bank manager’s outfit before going to work. She was in tears.

“What happened?!” I blurted out anxiously. She said she had just listened to the recording Dan had sent us from Honolulu—the Christmas Eve service. She was a mess. As she dressed all over again and headed out in a hurry, all she could say about the recording was something that had to do with the Holy Spirit.

Six weeks later we found ourselves in Honolulu. Sometime during that surreal week when I was being interviewed and we were trying to visualize ourselves living in Honolulu 5,000 miles from our three grown children and nine grandchildren, (Whoops! Sorry. Six grandchildren then. Nine grandchildren now), at some point during that week at one of the First Prez meetings Mimi whispered in my ear, “The Holy Spirit lives in this church. If they call you, you’ve got to come.” I nodded.

Some of you have heard that story. But there’s another story back of that one that we’ve never told anybody. It’s because of what happened in this backstory that Mimi whispered and I nodded. It’s not a story we’re particularly proud of but we feel it needs to be told.

Mimi and I were traveling in our car from Gainesville, Florida to Hattiesburg, Mississippi. It was around the year 1973. I had been at a speaking engagement in Gainesville and I was to be interviewed by three church bodies in Hattiesburg. We had been living in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida where for the past ten years I had been the youth minister at a large Presbyterian church.

It had been a wonderful ten years—exciting and explosive. In those ten years we saw that church go from a membership of 450 to 3,000. That was largely due to a program much like our Alpha program. I was involved in it from the very beginning. The program became known as EE, or Evangelism Explosion, and is still flourishing today. Its influence covers almost every continent in the world.

Well, the Hattiesburg position sounded intriguing. I was beginning to entertain a move and this position seemed to call for those things in which I felt equipped. It was a joint position funded by two Presbyterian churches and InterVarsity Christian Fellowship on the campus of The University of Southern Mississippi—known at that time as Mississippi Southern—a good school, a large school.

As we drove along U.S. 10 in Alabama headed for Hattiesburg, Mimi and I asked ourselves, “If they give me a call how will I know whether I should accept or not?” As we thought about it the one dominant theme that kept coming up was the call I had to the ministry—a call that was confirmed over and over again in the church I was then serving.

If I could put that sense of call in a sentence or two it’s this: My overwhelming passion in life is to help lead every person I can to the place where they belong to Jesus Christ—that they are His; that they are His forever; and that they know they are His forever.

That comes from my own desperate search almost entirely through my youthful years into my young adult years. I believed in God. I believed in Jesus Christ. I believed the Bible. I felt God had brought me into this world. And I believed after this life that I would live forever. But where would that forever be? I longed for it to be with God, but how could I be sure it would be with God?” That was my question.

Oddly, my search didn’t have much to do with dying. When you are young, dying seems too far off to bother with. To put it bluntly, I wanted to be in God’s forever family, but I wanted to be in it now. I wanted to be a Christian and I wanted to know I was a Christian.

I looked to the church. Certainly they would know. I listened very attentively. They never talked directly to my question but I did pick up that the Ten Commandments were probably the ten requirements. So I worked at those ten. Some of them I found easy, but others are really hard because you not only have to do them outside but inside in your heart.

I understood that nobody else but Jesus had a perfect score and that I should follow his example. I had no idea what my score was or what it was supposed to be. So I still had the question: “How do you know if you’re a Christian?”

I attended a Sunday morning class and even asked the teacher, an outstanding leader in the church and in the community. He said he knew my parents, that they were fine Christians and that I had been baptized as a baby and therefore I was in good shape with God. I realized immediately that he didn't know the answer either.

Then it happened that a man who was a missionary (who would later become a Presbyterian elder) helped me to understand the true message of the Bible. His name was Andy. He led Bible studies that centered on the major themes of the Bible and why the Bible was written. Andy understood my question. Through his help with the Bible I became a Christian.

One of the passages that helped me—one I have used over and over again in helping others—is the passage we read together at the beginning of this service from I John, Chapter 5:

Vs. 11 - God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son.

Vs. 12 - Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.

Vs 13 - I write these things to you who believe in the name Of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life.

The passage is clear. I'll ask you, the congregation, to answer. According to verse 11, where is eternal life? Where again? Yes! Right! It's in God's Son, Jesus Christ.

Eternal life is not in the church. It is not in the Bible. It is not in prayer. It is not in keeping the commandments. It is in Jesus Christ alone.

If you have opened your heart to Jesus and received him into your life then you right now have Christ. You are right now in God's forever family.

Verse 13 says all this was written so that we may know that we have eternal life. It's a wonderful thing to be able to know that you are God's child forever. There's great security in knowing that.

Back to the car on U.S. 10 headed to Hattiesburg. Mimi and I decided that if the people in Hattiesburg had a need to know that they belonged to God and were His forever—a need to be confident and assured of their eternal salvation then that would be a sign from God that we were to go there—that in some way they would communicate that need.

This was not only from my personal search but from the previous ten years where I had been trained to help people with this very thing. So that was our deal with God. However, we felt one such indication could be coincidental, but that if God was in it, it would happen three times.

My first interview was with the pastor of a large Presbyterian Church, old but beautiful (the church, that is). I entered a hallway and some people around the water cooler welcomed me warmly. As I turned to head to the pastor's office one of the women said to me very clearly, "What this congregation needs is for folks to be sure of their salvation, to know for sure they belong to God." Ding! Number one!

My next interview was with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship at Mississippi Southern University. I met with the president of the

group in a student union lounge on campus. He had heard about the ministry in the church where I served and said he hoped I would come and bring some of that positive spirit with me. He said, "Sim, we have a lot of students in our group who have trusted in Christ, but they feel something else has to happen to them before they can confidently say they are Christians." Ding! Ding! Number two!

My third stop was a new Presbyterian church in a new building near the school campus. My interview with the pastor is a blur in my mind. I can't remember much about it even though I can still see the modern architecture of that church in my mind. But I remember that he said enough for me to hear that third "ding!"

Three times we heard that same need—clearly a sign from God. After we returned home they contacted me and wanted to know if I was open to a call if they asked me to come. I told them NO, that I had decided that the position was not for me at that time.

We blew it! We blew it big time! Deep down we have always felt that we ducked out on God—that it was His will for us to go to Hattiesburg, but we followed our own wills instead. For one, we didn't like the housing situation. There were other things, too, that seemed not to be a fit. But what we did was walk right out of God's will for us.

Do any of you feel like that? Like at some point you walked right out of God's will for you? You feel that you went to the wrong school, or married the wrong person, or took the wrong job, or whatever it may be.

You feel God indicated one thing and you have done another.

It can get a little bit humorous. Consider: If you married the wrong person then your children aren't who they're supposed to be. And what about the person you married? They're supposed to be married to somebody else and the person they're supposed to have married is then having children that were never supposed to happen. And what about your children and their future? They've lost out before they start out.

Wow! You could be responsible for messing up the world—at least a big segment of the world. They are all out of whack with God all because of you. How do you fix that? You can't. And if you try to undo it, it just get worse.

You know, somebody should write a book on how to pick a spouse (smile).

Better yet, God has a wonderful tool many people in the Bible used.

God has what I call a "Holy Reset Button". It works this way. No matter what mistake we've made or sin we've committed or something we should have done but didn't do, if we come to God in Jesus Christ and say, "Here I am, Lord. Woe is me. I've done it wrong. Take all of me Lord and guide me in your way." Then he who makes all things new will make it all new. He will work everything together for good.

You may say, "How can that be? How can God keep up with all that stuff for everybody and make it all come out right?"

Paul Coleman is an astronomer at U.H. He's also a member of First Prez and taught a WAKO class in February where I heard him say this:

"There are more stars in the universe than grains of sand on the earth, more stars than seconds have passed since the earth was formed. There are 100 billion galaxies with 300 billion stars in each galaxy. And those are only the stars we presently know about. There are more."

The Bible tells us God has a hash tag record on each star with the star's name on it. In the book of Psalms—Psalm 147:4 we read: *"The Lord determines the number of the stars; and calls them each by name."*

God is big. He can handle our lives, and He knows each of our names on this one little tiny planet called Earth. He can make it work. Trust Him.

If Mimi and I hadn't blown it with God in Hattiesburg we would have never come to Honolulu and First Prez. We had every reason not to come. If we came here we would be 5,000 miles from our kids and grandkids. The housing situation in Honolulu looked impossible. And there were many other things against it.

We had every reason but one not to come here—the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit was calling us here and this time we weren't going to look the other way. We were not going through that agony again. So Mimi whispered, "If they call you, we've got to come."

As a result we have been richly blessed by God. It's been

our Narnia. I have experienced the greatest 15 years of my life. And I need to say the greatest boss of my life, too. Pastor Dan said if I came here he would give me free reigns to express my gifts. I didn't really believe him but he has, and it's been great fun.

Of course in the Presbyterian Church you're not supposed to say "boss." That's because the Session is the boss—the Session made up of Elders. But they've been great, too. They have been encouraging and fair and affirming all these 15 years.

And you, the congregation of First Prez. You ARE the church. It has been my greatest privilege to speak to you on occasion from this pulpit and to pray with you. At no other time and place with any other group of people have I felt what I feel when I'm up here. I'm sure the other pastors feel that way, too.

It seems the Holy Spirit is pleased to be among us when we come to worship. When you enter this place, or when the organ or piano notes start, or the first beat of the drum, or the strum of the guitar, or when the singing begins something magical seems to happen. People who've never worshipped anywhere, and don't even know what's going on when they enter this place, have told me they have felt as though they have come home.

See! It's that kind of stuff—and that's just the tip of the iceberg (No! the lip of the volcano—there's nothing frozen about first Prez). It's that kind of stuff Mimi and I will never be able to explain when we go back through the wardrobe next month—back to a beautiful world. But it won't be paradise and it won't be magical.

And unlike Lucy and her gang when they went back through the wardrobe, we'll be 15 years older. But also unlike Lucy I get to say a very warm and heartfelt and big "ALOHA!"

Let's pray:

As our heads are bowed, I want to say a prayer for those who want to use God's gracious Reset Button—for you want to get back on track. In John's letter we read from earlier we also read this: *"If we confess our sins he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness."*

So follow me silently in this prayer. Gracious God, my sin is too heavy to carry, too real to hide, and too deep to undo. Forgive what my heart can no longer bear. Set me free from a past that I cannot change and open to me the plans You have for me—plans for hope and a future. Thank you, Lord. In Jesus Name. Amen.

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Note: This was Pastor Sim's final sermon at First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu. As he and his wife, Mimi, move back to the mainland, they do so with our love and gratitude for all they have done. They will be greatly missed by us all.

Note: Sunday sermon texts are also available at fpchawaii.org. The audio version can be downloaded from iTunes. You may also request the audio version by visiting: fpchkoolau@gmail.com