



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

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"Short Arms: God WILL Give You More Than You Can Handle"

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Good Morning! I'm Chris Pan. I'm on staff at the church and am always grateful for the opportunity to speak and to serve this church.

Today, we are continuing in our "How To Pray" sermon series. Pastor Steve gave an amazing sermon last week on praying from the vortex of pain and despair, about being honest with God. He included prayers about breaking people's teeth, Jersey-style, so I encourage you to listen to it on CD or through the app. This morning, I'll be speaking about how God is able...and how sometimes we are not. My sermon title is "Short Arms: God WILL Give You More Than You Can Handle."

A few months ago, I spoke about the journey of prayer—moving towards mindfully responding to God's presence in everyday life. You may be thinking, "He looks different from last time." Yes, I do! I got LASIK eye surgery two months ago, and for the first time in 30 years, I'm not wearing glasses.

I was very nervous about getting eye surgery. I was worried that I would go blind and was generally just very anxious about surgery.

But the week before surgery, at my last pre-surgery appointment, my surgeon asked, "How are you

doing?" And I'm terrified, but I play it cool, and say, "I'm a little nervous."

And she said the most profound thing to me, with all kinds of spiritual implications. I said, "I'm nervous" and she said, "That's okay. I'm not. I'm really excited for you."

I was blown away and immediately felt so much better and calmer about surgery. Because it was true—she wasn't nervous at all, and she was the one doing the surgery. She's done thousands of surgeries. She didn't say that the risks are really low and the technology is really advanced. I knew those facts, but it didn't make me feel any better. She also didn't say, "You're nervous? I'm really nervous TOO! I don't know what's going to happen! You could go blind!"

She said, "It's okay that you're nervous. I'm not." So I relaxed and the surgery was fine. I knew that I was in this skilled surgeon's capable and caring hands. She knew what she was doing. She'd been there before, and she was excited for me.

Are you nervous or scared about something in your life, or in the life of someone you love? Are you worried about something and you don't know how it's going to

turn out? Or do you know someone who is there?

Hear this spiritual truth. God is like my eye surgeon, in fact, way more so. God is able. God is capable and caring, and He knows how it's going to turn out. We can tell Him, "You know God, I'm nervous, or scared, or terrified about this thing in my life." And God says to you, to us, right now, "That's okay. That's okay that you are nervous, or scared, or terrified. I'm not. In fact, I'm really excited for you."

Will you stand with me, if you are able, as we read our passage for today from the Gospel of Mark, Chapter 4, verses 35 through 41? Jesus is with His disciples, after a long exhausting day, crossing the Sea of Galilee in a boat, when a storm hits.

35 On that day, when evening had come, [Jesus] said to [the disciples], "Let us go across to the other side."

36 And leaving the crowd behind, they took [Jesus] with them in the boat, just as He was. Other boats were with Him.

37 A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped.

38 *But He was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke Him up and said to Him, "Teacher, do You not care that we are perishing?"*

39 He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm.

40 He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?"

41 And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey Him?"

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God! Please be seated.

The disciples, in that boat, think they are drowning. In fact, they know they are drowning; some of them are fishermen who know about seas and storms. The waves are crashing all around them...and Jesus is asleep. And they wake Him up saying, "Don't you care that we are perishing? That we are drowning?"

Many of us are going through storms in our lives right now, or storms are headed our way. And Jesus has the power to say to the storms in our lives, "Peace! Be still," and He says to us today, "Why are you afraid?"

The disciples say, "We're terrified!" And Jesus replies, "That's okay, I'm not."

We believe in a God who is able and caring. A God who is not nervous or surprised by the storms in our lives. He is able to calm the wind and storm and sea, not just on the sea in Israel 2,000 years ago, but in the real and heart-breaking storms in our lives today.

I'm a firm believer that the best way to learn how to pray, is to pray! Because one word from God is worth 1,000 sermons. So, we're going to do what we did last time I preached. We're going to take some time for Lab. Lab is where instead of just listening to someone lecture about frog anatomy, you actually dissect a frog. So, Lab is where we don't just listen to someone like me speak about prayer, we actually pray! So let's pause for Lab and actually pray.

If you prefer, you can close your eyes now. Take a deep breath. Speak to God about the storms in your life. Ask Him, "Don't You care that we are drowning?" And listen. Listen to Jesus say, "Peace! Be still!" to your storms, and "Why are you afraid?" to you. [Pause for prayer]; God, may it be so.

I think about the disciples in that boat—waves crashing all around, about to drown. And I'm sure one of them thought, "But someone at synagogue told me that God would never give ME more than I can handle!"

Have you heard that? "God won't give you more than you can handle." You know, that's not actually in the Bible. You know what is in the Bible? God giving lots of people more than they can handle. So, let me tell you, God WILL give you more than you can handle. He gave the disciples in our passage today more than they could handle. Why? So they'd do exactly what they did: turn to God and say, "Don't You care that we are drowning? Are You able to rescue us?" So that they would rely on God, and not themselves. And we would see His glory, not theirs.

If the disciples could handle the storm on their own, we'd be reading a story about what great navigators and boatmen they were.

We'd praise their strength and ability and intelligence and talent and skill. But they needed Jesus to rescue them, to display His glory. That's what having more than we can handle does...it makes us rely on God, and not on ourselves.

It wasn't just the disciples in the boat that day with Jesus who got more than they could handle. The Bible is full of people who got more than they could handle. Moses was a terrible speaker, had a speech impediment, and God sent him to *speak* to Pharaoh to set free the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. Gideon was a wimp in Old Testament, hiding, and God sent him to be a warrior, to lead an army. David was just a boy, and God sent him to fight a giant named Goliath. Mary was an unwed teenager and God said, "You will be blessed and bear a child named Immanuel, which means God with you."

They all got more than they could handle. Paul, a great missionary and church planter and author who wrote 13 books in the New Testament, experienced great suffering, more than he could handle.

Paul writes this in his second letter to the Corinthian church, Chapter 1, verses 8-11.

8 We do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, of the affliction we experienced in Asia; for we were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself. 9 Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death so that we would rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead.

10 He who rescued us from so deadly a peril will continue to rescue us; on him we have set our hope that he will rescue us again;

11 *as you also join in helping us by your prayers, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many.*

Look at verse 9 again. Do you see the “SO THAT”? Paul was utterly, unbearably, crushed that he despaired of life itself. He writes, “We felt we had received the sentence of death SO THAT we would not rely on ourselves, but on God, who raises the dead.”

If we say, “God won’t give us more than we can handle,” then we focus on our resources, our ability, our strength to get through difficulties and suffering. But, when we embrace the fact that sometimes, God will give us more than we can handle, we focus and rely on God and His resources and rescue for us. We look to God for help and hope and rely on the power of His Holy Spirit that dwells in us. We see His power that raises the dead.

Look again at verse 10: “He who *rescued us*” (past tense) from so deadly a peril *will continue* to rescue us” (present tense). On Him we have set our hope that He *will rescue us again*” (future tense). God rescued us in the past, continues to rescue us in the present, and will rescue us again, in the future.

Can I share one of most beautiful things I’ve read recently? It is from the book, “Emotionally Healthy Spirituality” by Pete Scazzerro, which I highly recommend. Scazzerro writes about suffering, and pain, and relates this thought: We all want to be in the light of the sun. So we head west, chasing after the sun, chasing the sunset, which we’ll never catch. Sometimes, the way to go is not west, after the sun, but east, into the darkness, into the night, so that we

can meet the sun when it rises. Meet the sunrise.

God will sometimes give us more than we can handle. And sometimes, we’ll have to head east, into the darkness so that we can meet the sunrise. Sometimes we have to head into the storm, to see Jesus’ glory. But God has rescued us in the past, is rescuing us now in the present, and will rescue us again in the future.

So we come back to prayer, and to living life with a conscious dependence on God, with a mindful awareness, responding to God’s presence in our life.

Can we pause again, to speak and listen to God? Take a few moments now, close your eyes if you wish, take a deep breath, and be with, and respond to God. [pause for prayer]; God, may it be so.

Can I tell you another reason we get more than we can handle? Because we have short little arms. We think we can handle more than we can, but we have to come to terms with our own limitations—to not rely just on ourselves.

My six-month old nephew was visiting recently, and you know what I love about babies? How short their arms are and how big their heads are in comparison to their bodies.

Look at a baby sometime. [photo of a baby]; Their arms can’t touch over their head, because their arms are short and their heads are proportionally too big. And I think that even as adults, we are still like babies—with big heads that think we are stronger than we actually are, think we can handle more than we can with our short little arms.

You know what else has a big head and short tiny arms? Tyrannosaurus Rex. The dinosaur, T-Rex. There’s a web comic that I like called “T-Rex Trying”, by Hugh Murphy. And it shows the ridiculous results of a T-Rex trying to do everyday things with its short arms.

[Pictures of T-Rex Trying] This is the first one, called T-Rex trying to paint his house. Get it? He’s got short arms so he can only paint that stripe around the house. He can’t reach higher or lower.

Here’s T-Rex trying to clean his ears using a Q-tip.

This is T-Rex with his friends, trying to do a trust fall.

And this is T-Rex trying to hold hands with She-Rex.

Can we embrace our inner baby, our inner T-Rex, and come to terms with our own limits, our own short arms? When we realize we have short arms, we have no choice but to turn to God and rely on God, not ourselves. Because you know who doesn’t have short arms? God.

God is able. Back to Moses. After the Israelites were freed from Egypt, and miraculously crossed the Red Sea, they wandered in the desert for a while. And in the book of Numbers, Chapter 11, the Israelites complained that they didn’t have meat to eat, and that it would have been better to still be in Egypt, as slaves!

So God tells Moses, “I’ve heard the complaints of the people and I’m going to give them meat to eat—not for one day, or two days, or five days, or 10 days, or 20 days, but for a whole month.”

So Moses says to God, in verse 21, “No way—it’s impossible.” The same Moses, who saw God part the Red Sea, says this to God:

21 “The people I am with number six hundred thousand on foot; and you say, ‘I will give them meat, that they may eat for a whole month’!

22 Are there enough flocks and herds to slaughter for them? Are there enough fish in the sea to catch for them?”

Moses says to God, “There’s no way to feed 600,000 people; there’s not enough animals or fish.”

And hear God’s reply:

23 “The Lord answered Moses, “Is the Lord’s arm too short? Now you will see whether or not what I say will come true for you.”

Is the Lord’s arm too short? We know we have short arms, but do we think that God has short arms, too? That’s a fundamental question, and maybe something we have to wrestle with and confess. Do we think the Lord’s arm is too short to help us, to rescue us, to guide us, to deliver us? Do we really believe that God cares and that He is able?

A few verses later in Numbers 11:31, we read:

31 Then a wind went out from the Lord, and it brought quails from the sea and let them fall beside the camp, about a day’s journey on this side and a day’s journey on the other side, all around the camp, about two cubits deep on the ground.

A day’s journey is 25 miles. Two cubits is three feet. For 25 miles in every direction, three feet

deep, there was quail—meat for the people to eat—just like God promised.

Moses says that there aren’t enough animals or fish, and God blows in birds.

Is the Lord’s arm too short? In the book of the prophet Isaiah, chapter 59, verse 1 says: “*See, the LORD’S hand is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear.*”

Is the Lord’s arm too short?

In the gospel of Matthew, Chapter 8, Jesus is approached by a Roman soldier. And the Roman soldier asks Jesus, “Can You heal my servant, who is at home paralyzed and in terrible distress?” And Jesus says, “I will come to your house and cure him.” And the Roman soldier says, “No, You don’t have to come to my house. Just speak the word, and my servant will be healed.”

Jesus is amazed by the man’s faith, and He speaks healing. Jesus doesn’t go to the house, to the servant, or anywhere. From right where He stood, maybe miles away, Jesus heals that servant.

Is the Lord’s arm too short?

Can we do another practical thing? Can you hold out your arms in front of you? How far do they reach? On our own, on our own power, that’s how far we can reach, how far we can help someone. It’s just a few feet. But what is amazing to me is our Compassion Wall, with pictures of over 1,000 children around the world that this church is helping. Children in the Philippines and Haiti and Rwanda, thousands of miles away.

On our own, our arms only reach a few feet in front of us. But

God’s Holy Spirit working in us and through us will do things only God can do, things we could never do ourselves. With God, we can be Jesus’ hands and feet in the world, stretching into the world to help and heal.

I’ve been on the church staff for a few years now. I was previously a lawyer. And being a lawyer was hard, but working for a church in full-time ministry is harder. So I am learning daily about the shortness of my little T-Rex arms. Learning about the limits of my own strength and smarts and how much I need to rely on God. Because THIS FAR [holding arms out in front of body] is the limit of what I can do, and the rest is up to God.

I learned this the hard way a few months ago when I worked and wore myself into the ground, thinking my arms were longer than they were, relying on just myself instead of God.

Can I show you a video that pretty accurately captures my life at that time? It’s a video of an overloaded truck in a foreign country. And that overloaded truck was my life. Maybe some of you can relate. [Video of ridiculously overloaded truck driving along precariously for a minute before toppling over on its side.]

I love that video, because it so perfectly captures what happens to our over-loaded, over-burdened lives when we rely just on ourselves and not God.

I was that over-burden truck lying on its side, and God met me in the most profound way at one point, and I’d love to share where it was. It was in the TSA security line at JFK Airport in New York. Is the Lord’s arm too short? It reaches all the way to JFK.

I was flying to our national denominational meeting on the East Coast, and I was in the security line behind a mom carrying a tiny baby in her arms, and she also had a four-year old son with her. And the mom had lost it. She had made it to the scanner, but TSA wanted her four-year to take off his jacket, and he was refusing like only a four-year old can. The mom is holding this tiny baby, she's yelling at the kid to take off his jacket, the kid's yelling back, she's yelling at the TSA agent, saying, "Why are you doing this to me?" The whole security line is stuck, and I'm in this broken, exhausted place in my life where I just want to stay out of it and get to my plane.

But I felt a tug on my heart, this sense: You should offer to help this woman. And I was too exhausted to argue with God, so I stepped forward, and asked her, "Can I help you?" And the next words out of my mouth shocked her and shocked me just as much. I said, "Can I hold your baby?" And to show how overwhelmed this mom was, she just handed me her baby—some total stranger in the TSA line!

The mom stops yelling, she helps her son get his jacket off, they go through the big scanner, and I'm on the other side still holding this tiny baby. And I step forward to go through the scanner and the TSA guy asks, "Is this your baby?" I'm like, "No, it's not my baby, it's her's; you just saw all this happen, she was just yelling at you!"

And so I walk through the scanner, still holding this tiny baby in my arms, who is fast asleep, peaceful as can be.

And two things hit me, one right after another. First, what a privilege it is that we get to be the hands and feet of Jesus in the world.

That I could help, and be a tiny blessing to this woman, for just a few minutes. It was so easy and felt so good, to be the hands and feet of Jesus.

And the second thing that hit me, immediately after the first, was this incredible overwhelming sense of the presence of God with me. That this wasn't just a blessing for her; it was a blessing for me. God was showing me and saying to me, "You are this helpless little baby and I have you in My arms."

We're going to have communion in a few moments, which is an invitation to be with Jesus in a special, sacramental way. Wherever you are this morning, but especially if you feel like you are in a boat that is being overwhelmed by the storm, or your life is an overloaded truck that is toppling over, can you hear this invitation from Jesus?

Jesus, in the gospel of Matthew, invites us:

28 "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.

29 Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

Let's take a few minutes in silence, to listen to God, and to speak with God, to just mindfully respond to His presence. Hear Jesus' invitation. What is God saying to you? What is God saying to your head, to your heart, to your hands? And what does God want you to do about it?

Close your eyes now if you prefer, and let's pray for a few moments.

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