



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

May 25, 2014

"God's Call On Our Lives" (Book of Acts Series)

The Rev. Dr. Dan Chun

Acts 26:9 "Indeed, I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things against the name of Jesus of Nazareth.

Acts 26:10 And that is what I did in Jerusalem; with authority received from the chief priests, I not only locked up many of the saints in prison, but I also cast my vote against them when they were being condemned to death.

Acts 26:11 By punishing them often in all the synagogues I tried to force them to blaspheme; and since I was so furiously enraged at them, I pursued them even to foreign cities.

Acts 26:12 "With this in mind, I was traveling to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests,

Acts 26:13 when at midday along the road, your Excellency, I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, shining around me and my companions.

Acts 26:14 When we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It hurts you to kick against the goads.'

Acts 26:15 I asked, 'Who are you, Lord?' The Lord answered, 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.

Acts 26:16 But get up and stand on your feet; for I have appeared to

you for this purpose, to appoint you to serve and testify to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you.

Acts 26:17 I will rescue you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you

Acts 26:18 to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.'

Acts 26:19 "After that, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision,

Acts 26:20 but declared first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem and throughout the countryside of Judea, and also to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God and do deeds consistent with repentance.

Acts 26:21 For this reason the Jews seized me in the temple and tried to kill me.

Acts 26:22 To this day I have had help from God, and so I stand here, testifying to both small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would take place:

Acts 26:23 that the Messiah must suffer, and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles."

Acts 26:24 While he was making this defense, Festus exclaimed, "You are out of your mind, Paul! Too much learning is driving you insane!"

Acts 26:25 But Paul said, "I am not out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I am speaking the sober truth.

Acts 26:26 Indeed the king knows about these things, and to him I speak freely; for I am certain that none of these things has escaped his notice, for this was not done in a corner.

Acts 26:27 King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you believe."

Acts 26:28 Agrippa said to Paul, "Are you so quickly persuading me to become a Christian?"

Acts 26:29 Paul replied, "Whether quickly or not, I pray to God that not only you but also all who are listening to me today might become such as I am—except for these chains."

Acts 26:30 Then the king got up, and with him the governor and Bernice and those who had been seated with them;

Acts 26:31 and as they were leaving, they said to one another, "This man is doing nothing to deserve death or imprisonment."

Acts 26:32 Agrippa said to Festus, "This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to the emperor."

This is such a cool passage because it is the longest passage in the Bible on Paul's conversion. We learn things here that we didn't know in other shortened versions of Paul's life story. Here's the setting. Paul has been arrested. He is facing the big boys—King Agrippa II and Festus Porcius, the Governor of Judea.

In this message we will learn three things about God's call on a person's life. We will see that When God calls us:

- 1) He is unrelenting.
- 2) He wants us to tell others about Him.
- 3) He gives us courage.

First, when God calls us, He is unrelenting. We cannot escape it.

If we all had the time and energy and could write down our testimony, we would see how all of us, whether conscious of it or not, were being sought out by God from the day we were born. It would be fascinating if everyone took the time to sit down and write their stories. We might have ignored God, have been angry with Him, have ran away from Him, or were just totally unaware of Him, but God was there.

We are fortunate to have Paul's story. And his story probably has many of the same elements in our lives. But what is

key for all of us in our discovery of our need for God is to remember how we are not as holy, not as pure, and not as clean as we thought we were.

For Paul it was a big shock. He had studied to be a Pharisee. He was educated. He was passionate about the cause of Judaism, so much so that he would bend the law to have Christians jailed, tortured, and killed. But then Jesus appears to him miraculously on the road to Damascus and says to Paul to stop persecuting Him. Jesus says to Paul a well-known Hebrew phrase that might have been known in the Gentile world too. He says to Paul, in verse 14, "Why are you persecuting me? It hurts you to kick against the goads."

Okay, everyone, who knows what the goads are? Goads are long sticks, or staves that are pointed, used by an ox driver to make oxen move faster. It is futile for oxen to kick against goads because the master will continue to poke the oxen and lead them where he wants.

To kick against the goads means you cannot fight against God's destiny for you. It is futile. It is utterly futile to kick against God's plan for you, and in doing so, Jesus says, "It will hurt you." It hurts you to disobey God. It only leads you to an unfulfilled life.

Our vision statement is to help people find their destiny in Christ. To put it another way, we want us to follow Jesus and not kick against the goads. (That can be our new church bumper sticker: "No kick against the goads, brah.")

I do believe that God has a track, a destiny, and a purpose for us, and yet too often we don't sit down to figure it out, or we are

running from it, or we are just ignorant of it. But God, like a faithful hound, pursues us and tries to tell us what to do, hoping we would be listening.

God really has two desires for us. First, that we repent and decide clearly to follow Him. And then second, make sure our lives are a full-time ministry in His name.

When I say ministry I don't mean you have to become a pastor. As Sierra Jackson said last week, not all are called to be pastors who come up here on stage and give bad jokes. (Oh how I love youth services. I owe you Sierra.)

All of us are called to be ministers in our vocation, whether we are a student, a city and county worker, a secretary, or a manager. All of our jobs are our mission fields to share the love of Christ.

For me – I was destined to go into full-time ministry as a pastor. All my experiences, gifts, and skills were woven into me to someday be a pastor of this church. But I didn't know that.

In college I preached and put together ministry teams and chapel services. People thought I would be a pastor. Nope, not me. I was into radio production. Maybe like Jonah, I was running away from God. But when I graduated, I couldn't find a job in radio and so I ended up getting a job in TV. I went into television news, which was good and I learned a lot.

I then went to seminary in preparation to be a filmmaker in Hollywood. I thought it would be good to get my life philosophy and theology together. Then I went to USC film school.

But then in the last year of my masters program there, two friends, Steve and Cathy Kawamura of Kalihi Union Church, told me that I should be a pastor. Pastor? I said, "No way!" I thought being an associate pastor was the worst job in the world. Long hours, low pay, and everyone telling me what I was doing wrong. Plus, I was divorced. Why would God use me?

But then I did become an associate pastor at this church. It wasn't bad, but I was right! It was long hours and low pay, and in fact the church unknowingly paid me lower than the denominational minimum. And yes, people DID criticize me but it wasn't bad.

But I loved being a pastor. It didn't matter about the money or the long hours. I was passionate about ministry. But then God surprised me again. While on vacation in California, I was asked to be a singles pastor at Menlo Park Presbyterian Church. Who ever heard of being a singles pastor? No one grows up to be that! But I did that, and it was wonderful and very soon thousands of singles came to the program. It was another God surprise.

Then my dad unexpectedly died. And so I left the pastorate thinking I wouldn't return, and began working for Hawaiian Islands Ministries (HIM) full time. We attended Central Union Church where our first HIM Conference was held and attended by 400 people. On a side note, this year, 29 years later, more than 5,000 people attended the conference. Doing HIM was part of Pam's and my destiny.

But then after two years of that, God led me back to First

Prez. My predecessor, Pastor Bob Owens, retired, and so they were looking for a new senior pastor. I never dreamed I would be a pastor again, let alone back at my first church.

So I went through the nominating process and was interviewed, felt good about it, and lo and behold, the nominating team chose another person! That's okay; I was happy at HIM. No more being a pastor for me.

But then that first choice candidate turned down their offer, and so lo and behold. The First Prez nominating team had to turn to their second choice, scraping the bottom of the barrel, meaning me.

When it's God's will, whether in my life or in this church's life, it is unrelenting. God's will always prevails, so good thing we *neva* went kick against the goads! As an aside, when we first become Christians, when God's destiny was unveiled to us for the first time, we can get so passionate. We will do anything for Christ. We don't care about the pay or the costs, or the location; we will do it.

But then often as we got older and we start accumulating things, we lose our passion to do anything and lose our passion to risk to do anything for God. But when we kick against the goads and start concentrating on some things in our lives, then God will only bless us in some things. Don't ever lose that passion of doing anything and risking everything for God no matter the cost.

There should be a sense in us that when we die we will have bounced our last check (so to speak) because we have spent it all on God's purposes. I think that

is how Paul started to live once he stopped kicking the goads. Even though Paul had studied to promote Phariseism, which is the application of the many Hebrew laws that were often so legalistic and judgmental; even though Paul conspired to kill or jail Christians; even though Paul was zealous for the wrong reasons ... God was after Him. God's call on Him was unrelenting.

And I say God has that same kind of call and destiny on your life. But you might say, "Well, Paul had it easy. Jesus just knocked him down from a horse and said 'Stop what you are doing and follow Me.'"

But that message is not new to you if you have been part of our community here for a while. We hear through sermons or in small groups, "How do we stop what we are doing and do what God wants?"

That's what the 25 to 50 small groups of First Prez are for. That's what your personal prayer time and Bible study is for. We are always trying to turn our receivers to get God's wifi or blue tooth signals in our souls to discern and receive clearly what God wants for us. Or maybe it is not to stop what you are doing but God is saying keep doing what you are doing and more!

The great news in our reformed faith is that we believe that God chooses us. We did not choose Him. We simply responded to His choosing us, which means we cannot take credit for being saved.

God has a plan for us. And we know that from the very familiar verse in Jeremiah 29:11: "*For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for*

your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope."

Or Jesus' own words when He said: "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." (John 10:10b) God has a call for each of us. If you are unclear as to what it is, pray and ask God, read the Bible, talk to your small group, get counsel from godly friends. Seek out God's call for you. Look around. What does the world need that you can provide?

God is unrelenting in wanting you to know what it is, and He is sending His signals out to you. We are to help each other find our destiny in life.

Second, when God calls us, He wants us to tell others about Him too.

Notice that after Jesus touched Paul's life, Paul was always trying to share the gospel. That was his essence. That is what happens when the Holy Spirit enters a person's life. And it should be our essence too. When we fully realize that God loves us, died for us, and forgives us even when we were persecuting His people and church, then we will want to tell others about Him.

You know some people rarely talk to their non-Christian friends about Jesus. And that's a shame. But stop and think about it logically. Really think about what it means if you don't take the time now to talk to your friends and loved ones about Jesus. If you haven't led your non-Christian friends to Christ, then when you get to Heaven, it will be really different for you because none of your friends will be there. How is that for a wake-up call?! Think about that? Hey, it's much more

fun to be with your friends for eternity.

I have 35 cousins but one of my favorites was Paul from New York, whom I preached about in one of my Christmas Eve sermons (but I had referred to him as "Frankie" back then). Paul seemed so connected that I almost wondered if he was part of the mafia. He said he was just a lowly city worker but he knew politicians, he ate with royalty and Hollywood stars, generals, majors, and prominent business people. He could get theater tickets when he wanted and had original Rembrandt sketches in his apartment! He once told me that if anyone bothered me, he would send thugs to Honolulu to beat them up!

Paul was a mystery to me, but he was also far away from God and the church. His former church treated him badly and his wife had died from cancer at a young age. But last year, I kept talking to him about Jesus, and finally he went to church with me to Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan where Tim Keller preaches. And he loved it! He renewed his faith, and he loved it so much he joined the church just last year after not being part of a congregation for decades. He really loved life and he was loved by so many.

But this past January, while on the subway going to work, he had a heart attack. The paramedics couldn't get to him in time, and he died a few days later. I was so distressed by that. I grieved greatly.

Paul was really looking out for my son Quinn who was starting at Hunter College in Manhattan, and now Paul was gone. I was depressed. But the main comforting thought was that

at least he is now in heaven. He responded to Jesus' call before he died.

I was reminded that our church friend Robert Schuller (who inspired us to move to our Ko'olau campus) was on a plane when the most interesting incident happened to him. A man came up to him, a cigarette in one hand and a drink in the other. He said, "Dr. Schuller, I want to shake your hand."

And he put the cigarette in his mouth, shifted his drink to the left hand, and gave me a friendly handshake. He took hold of his cigarette again and explained, "I never miss you on television. You've done a lot of good for me."

Then Dr. Schuller invited him to sit with him. Then he introduced himself, "I don't know if you know me, but my name is Bear Bryant. I'm a coach."

Dr. Schuller asked, "THE Bear Bryant?"

He nodded. Dr. Schuller responded, "Well Coach, it's always great to meet another Christian."

But Bear Bryant stammered, "Well, I wouldn't say, I mean, I don't think that I'm a Christian."

Dr. Schuller responded, "What makes you say that?" Then he gave his reasons for not embracing Christianity.

He said, "Well, first off, Christians should have the feeling. And I don't. I talked with Oral Roberts and I didn't get the feeling. I talked with Billy Graham and I didn't get the feeling.

I am talking to Robert Schuller NOW, and I'm not getting the feeling.

When there's the part in the Bible where it says that these boys were teasing a prophet and the prophet called on God and God sent bears to eat the boys. I don't like that. And I know that if you're a Christian, you don't do anything bad. You don't sin. Look at me. I'm smoking and drinking."

Dr. Schuller responded, "Okay, Coach, those are three good reasons. Are there any more?" Bryant looked surprised as he replied, "No. Isn't that enough?"

Dr. Schuller said, "No. That's not enough. Number one, being a Christian is a matter of faith, not feeling. We're not driven by emotion; using our heads drives us. Feelings are important, and usually do come. But it all begins with faith.

"Number two the old evangelists used to say, We're saved by the blood, not by the Book. You don't have to understand and accept everything in the Bible before God can save you. In other words, you're saved by [by the blood of] Jesus, [his giving His life for you] and His grace and faith in Him.

"Reason number three, Christians aren't supposed to be perfect. We're not sinless. It says in the Bible, "We are saved, by grace, through faith, that not of our-selves, it is a gift of God." (Eph. 2:8)

Then Dr. Schuller surprised him by saying, "So, I think you're ready to become a Christian, Coach." Bryant was

silent. He put his cigarette out. He looked at him.

Dr. Schuller continued, "You know, I don't know what's coming up after this life, nobody does. But I know one thing, Jesus is ahead of me. And I'll tell you something else, the Bible says, "Any one who comes to me, I will not cast out." (John 6:37) Coach, I can give you a ticket to Heaven right now."

Bear Bryant was curious. He questioned, "You can?"

Dr. Schuller said, "Yep. Do you have a piece of paper?" He handed him his boarding pass. After taking the boarding pass, Dr. Schuller took a few minutes to write, then he put down my pen, looked up at the coach, and handed him the piece of paper. Coach Bryant was cautious, but inquisitive. He took the paper, and glanced down. This is what he read: MY TICKET TO HEAVEN. Any one who comes to Me, I will not cast out." Jesus Christ. Jesus said it. He is there. I trust Him. I accept Him. Followed by a line where a person is to sign, just like in a contract.

"Okay, Coach, there's the contract. Sign it."

But Bryant said, "I don't know if I can."

Dr. Schuller continued to challenge him, "I'm not sure if this plane is going to land either."

Bryant grabbed the pen and said, "I'll sign it!" And he did. Suddenly, an amazing thing happened. Bear Bryant got a tear in his eye and said, "Oh, I like that. Can I keep it?" Dr. Schuller said, "You bet. It's your ticket. I've got my own."

Coach Bryant folded it, then folded it again. He reached in his pocket and drew out his billfold. It was thick with papers and pictures. He stuck that folded Ticket To Heaven in, and pressed it in with the other mementos and important papers. It was his secret; his precious secret.

But the story doesn't end there. Six months later, Dr. Schuller told the story from this church pulpit. It was going to be aired on TV across the nation, the following week. But he was concerned. He thought, "Oh, my goodness, I have to call Bear Bryant and see if he would like us to edit it out of the televised program."

He called him, and do you know what Coach Bryant said? He said, "I'm proud of that, Dr. Schuller. Don't edit it out. I still have that ticket. And I'd be proud to have you tell that story to the whole country." So Dr. Schuller's Church, the Chrystal Cathedral, did.

The following morning, Coach Bryant dropped dead from a heart attack.

Friends, time is short. We all need to make the decision for that ticket to heaven. And if you have, then you should all have an evangelistic passion to tell our friends because we never know when our loved ones go. We should all be thinking of how do we bring a friend to Jesus through Alpha or through a worship service or some event or just a conversation or over coffee. We may be the only Bible some people read, so let's not wait. And we face a terrible spiritual enemy who doesn't want our loved ones to know Jesus.

In our passage in verse 17, Jesus says to Paul: “I will rescue you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.” (Acts 26:17-18)

That’s our calling. To help people turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God.

Friends, there is so much pain out there. And you are either on the side of helping people to turn from darkness to light, from Satan to God, or we are not on the side of helping people and we can fall into apathy, laziness or busyness.

When you meet Jesus in Heaven, you don’t want to say, yes I know there were people in darkness and were under the power of Satan but I wanted to see the latest Netflix series *House of Cards*, reruns of *Breaking Bad*, the new series of “24,” *American Idol*, or my Korean soap operas. I was busy visiting with my friends or exercising, but I didn’t want to ever talk about Jesus with them. Really?

The battle is here and sometimes it feels like we are losing. But we are not to give up. The point is, and Paul knew it, he would give his life so that others might know that through Jesus we would make it to heaven to the glorious shores of the other side. And hence, then, we could be courageous in fighting the good fight and keeping the faith to lead others to God.

Which leads to the last point: When God calls us, He gives us courage.

When we really hear the call of God, we are given courage to join the battle against the dark side and we are willing to give our life for it, just as Paul was willing to give his life for God’s cause. Paul was willing to risk his life for a message that was offensive to the Jews and unbelievable to the Greeks. Jesus got the same reaction from the Jews and the Greeks when He told them the Gospel.

But when we really hear the call of God, we will have the courage to talk to anyone about our faith story. If you were to share your life’s faith story, what would be your story? Maybe write it out this week.

Or more specifically, who are the Festuses and King Agrippas in your life with whom it is time to share your faith? Maybe there are some key people in your life you need to speak about your faith. Maybe it’s a neighbor in your apartment or neighborhood. What’s holding you back?

Some people work for years in an office and never look for an opportunity to talk about Christ. Actions of love are important, but the goal is how to share one’s faith, invite them to a church service, a social church event, or Alpha. Anything less than that would make us merely a selfish, social club called church that lives for ourselves and not for others.

And perhaps, for some of you, today is a call to invite Christ into your heart right now and start the journey. Maybe YOU ARE Agrippa or Festus. Agrippa was the great grandson of Herod the

Great. He was only 17 years old when his father died, but he didn’t succeed him for six years. Then he was made king of the region of Jerusalem.

Paul’s words cut to the quick in Agrippa’s heart because it meant giving up his lifestyle, losing face among his peers, angering the community, and offending the Romans.

Festus was not an evil person. But he refused to accept the idea of a dead person, like Jesus, coming back to life. So he called Paul crazy, insane. No sensible person would listen to this story of Jesus.

Both Agrippa and Festus saw themselves as educated, cultured, and sophisticated. For us today the temptation may be to think, “Oh Jesus is not for people like us. We are self-reliant, self-sustaining, educated, cultured and sophisticated. We got skills. We don’t need Jesus. Jesus is for other people who are not like us.”

Really? What about you? Are you really that strong, or deep down do you have a need, a yearning for something more, just like my cousin Paul or Bear Bryant did?

Do you need Jesus? Maybe today Jesus is calling you to give your life over to Him. He has been seeking you all the days of your life. It’s time to sign that ticket to heaven and then lead others to do the same.

Let’s pray.