



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau
November 30, 2014

"How to Hear Christmas" (A Sense of Christmas Series)
The Rev. Dr. Sim Fulcher

You may have heard the story of the woman who grew so weary with so many aches and pains that she made a huge effort to get an appointment with a leading specialist. She got the appointment. After a thorough examination the doctor told her her timing was indeed fortunate, that a new medication just on the market would relieve her of most, if not all, of her symptoms. He gave her the prescription, told her to take a pill a day, and he wanted to see her in two weeks.

When she returned two weeks later the doctor asked how she felt. She said she felt better, that she had lost most of the pain she had been experiencing but she had developed some new pains. The doctor thought for a moment then said, "I think I know what will work." He said, "Keep the same prescription but take a pill, skip a day, take a pill, skip a day, and so on for two weeks."

In two weeks when she returned the doctor said, "You look awful! What happened? Didn't the pills work?" She said "Doc, the pills worked great. I have no more aches and pains, but the skipping is totally wearing me out."

That story is no doubt fictional, but here's a true one. Nearly every director of Christian music or church choir director will have at

least heard of the name John Peterson. John Peterson, who just recently died, wrote over 1,000 songs and 35 cantatas — many of them very popular, at least in the last half of the last century.

One of those well-known songs is a paraphrase of the 23rd Psalm. The chorus begins with the very words of the last verse of that Psalm: "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life." In fact, the title of the song is "Surely Goodness and Mercy."

Peterson and his songwriting partner tell the story that the inspiration for the song and its title came from a little kid named Philip. It seems a wonderful school teacher whom all the children loved — a Miss Murphy — taught her class (before any of them could read or write) to memorize the 23rd Psalm.

When it came time for little Philip to recite and he got to the last verse he spoke out boldly, "Surely good Miss Murphy shall follow me all the days of my life."

The moral of both of those stories is the same. And that is: Hearing is in the ears of the beholder.

You know, hearing is so important to our faith. In the new Testament in the Book of Romans we are told "Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God."

I want to talk today about "How to Hear Christmas." During these Advent Sundays the sermons will be about how to approach Christmas with our senses — hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling, seeing — approaching Christmas with our whole biological being. It should be an interesting series.

So today — "How to Hear Christmas." Certainly music comes to mind and this worship service today is full of beautiful Christmas music, and so beautifully done. I'm really looking forward to more of it right here this afternoon at our choir's Christmas concert. Christopher Parkening, a renowned musician, says it so simply and yet profoundly: "The birth of Jesus has inspired the creation of more beautiful music than any other event in human history."

But hold on. While music is that which we hear — **can even feel** with a big sub-woofer or with Beebe at the organ — I want to go a little deeper. I want to go directly to Mary there in that cow stall by that little baby in a blanket. I think Mary can teach us something.

If you have a house Bible please turn to page 58 in the second half of the Bible and find the Gospel of Luke, Chapter 2. The story of the birth of Jesus as told in verses 8 - 20 of Luke 2 is probably the most recognized and familiar Christmas passage in the Bible.

I am going to start at verse 16, but let me first review with you what happened before we get to verse 16. It was an ordinary quiet night on the outskirts of Bethlehem. But an extraordinary thing happened. Angels appeared to a group of Shepherds.

It was amazing. Think of it — these shepherds camping out in the open country. It's in the middle of the night and they're probably sitting around a little camp fire to keep warm, conversing occasionally with one another, routinely keeping an eye on the sheep. Out of the blue comes this being in the sky and at the same time shepherds are instantly surrounded by a blazing glow of lights. They are terrified.

The being turns out to be an angel. They've never seen an angel, but this has to be an angel. The angel says, "Guys, don't be afraid but a big thing happened tonight. It'll affect everybody everywhere and it's good news. It's joyful news for everybody. It's a baby! He's a boy. He was born for your sakes. He is Christ the Lord! Go see him! You'll find him at the Bethlehem Bed and Breakfast, but when you get there go around back because they didn't have a bed for him. He's in the barn. When you find the baby lying in a manger wrapped in a blanket you'll know that's him."

Then suddenly a great choir — out in the middle of the field, mind you, in the middle of the night — shouts out: GLORY TO GOD AND PEACE ON EARTH!

It was startling for sure but it would take a stadium of people to reproduce that song by that choir. Because it really wasn't a choir. The original Greek word that translates "heavenly hosts" is the

Greek word for "army." And the Greek word for multitude is literally spelled M-E-G-A — mega. So we don't have a multitude of heavenly hosts. We have a mega-army singing for a handful of shepherds.

Then this great army of angels left and the shepherds looked at one another and said "Let's go!" We are told they went with haste. That word haste is also interesting. The original Greek word has within it the word S-P-E-E-D — speed. In other words the shepherds probably ran. You wonder if they didn't just leave the sheep and take off.

I'll start reading at Chapter two, verse 16: So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in a manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child. *And all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.* The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them."

I've always been intrigued by this passage, and maybe you have been too, at the contrast of responses to all that was going on that night. Everyone was caught up in the excitement, and there was plenty of it.

The shepherds told everybody they saw, just like you and I do if we've just shot a-hole-in-one, or caught a 15-pound bass, or won the national championship, or just had our first baby. And everybody the shepherds told got excited — caught up in the amazing story of an army of singing angels up in the sky, one of 'em telling the shepherds in detail about a baby.

And every detail turning out to be exactly as the angels said it would be.

And this wasn't just one shepherd who could be written off as being a little bit loony. All the shepherds in that field saw it. They all heard it, and they all saw the baby in the manger. This was a true story. This really happened.

So everyone was caught up in the excitement except for one person — Mary. In the midst of all the buzz we are told "But Mary." "But Mary took in every word and pondered it in her heart." As someone has put it who has studied this passage extensively, Luke is careful to show that there's a great contrast between the momentary and superficial wonder of all the people and the profound thoughts and feelings of Mary.

Now I'm not slighting the shepherds or anyone else who got caught up in the outward wonder of the moment. They all no doubt eventually thought through what it all meant and hopefully went beyond the superficial to the inner wonder of it all and became true believers. But I know this, it's not automatic. How easy it is to miss the inner wonder of it all.

I sure missed it. I went through 17 Christmases celebrating the birth of Christ — the music, the pageantry, the beautiful story that a little baby was the Creator of the universe in human flesh. I believed all of it. I loved Christmas. BUT I DIDN'T GET IT! I had no idea of what was really going on with that little baby in a manger.

I was always amazed when I heard the details of the Christmas story, and I heard that story over and over again. But I failed to listen with my heart like Mary did.

What does it mean to listen with your heart? The Bible uses the word "ponder." Mary "pondered" all these things in her heart. Please don't get the impression I'm a Greek scholar. I sure am not, but I can't resist sharing my research on this word "ponder".

The word is used only once in the New Testament and that is here in this passage. The original Greek word is "sumballo." *Sum* means "together." *Ballo* means "to throw" (It's where we get our word "ball"). The meaning is "throw together." So the word *ponder* means putting one thing together with another — or in today's language it's simply means "connecting the dots."

It wasn't until I was a senior in high school high school that I began to ponder like Mary, that I began to connect the dots. I was fortunate. I know of people — good people — who are the age I am now who have still put off connecting those dots.

I remember clearly when I began to ponder. Of all places it was on a drill field at Richmond Academy — my high school. It was an ROTC high school. I was a squad leader and my platoon was in the middle of the drill field. I began to think of my relationship with God about the same time the platoon leader gave the command, "About face!" I missed that command.

My fierce pondering drowned out the platoon leader's voice. Everyone else was now facing one way. I was facing another. I was busy putting the dots together. I was thinking, "What is missing in my life? I believe in God. I believe in Jesus. I pray. I've been baptized. I attend church. But I have no

peace with God. "God", I said, "What do you want me to do?"

I missed the next command also: "Forward, march!" So the platoon at my back began to march away leaving me in the middle of the field by myself. I was facing the other way so I didn't see them march off. I was still trying to connect the dots. I thought to myself. "I've tried hard to live a good life, but it must not be good enough. However, my life is as good as my friend Billy's life. How come he has peace with God and I don't. Why does God make it so hard. Maybe this whole thing is a bunch of baloney."

I would come to appreciate (years later) the words of Martin Luther — leader of the great Reformation that brought Christianity out of the dark ages. Early on when he had struggled to have peace with God he said, "Although a faultless monk, I stood before God a sinner, troubled in conscience. I had no confidence that [all the good I did] would appease him. Therefore I murmured against God [as I] pondered day and night."

The next thing I remember was someone shouting from a great distance, "Fulcher, Fulcher, what in the world are you doing? Get your *okole* over here!" Only they didn't say *okole*.

Connecting the dots is so important. And where we do it is important, too. Make sure you're in a safe place. But it is something we need to do no matter what our spiritual status, because God is continually speaking to us through circumstances, through his Word, or through others.

Sometime way back a middle-aged woman came into our church office wanting to speak with a

pastor. My schedule was free so we talked. It became clear that she was a well-versed believer, and committed to Christ. And that was her problem. Why did she feel so distant from God, like God had forgotten her. She felt left out and very much down spiritually.

Out of curiosity more than anything else I asked her to tell me her story about when she became a true believer — about when she put her trust in Christ. She said she didn't know, that she didn't really have a story. She couldn't remember anything about it. I asked her how long ago it was. She didn't know. It was too long ago to remember.

I asked her if she could say roughly how long ago. As I recall she said something like, "About nine years ago." I asked if it was spring, winter, fall, summer? She said it was in the fall. I asked where she was. She said she was at a Christian conference. Was she in a small group at the conference at the time, I asked? She said she wasn't, but that she was in a large meeting where someone spoke. She didn't remember what was said, but she said when people were asked to make a commitment she gave her life to Jesus Christ.

Then she began to recall more. After that meeting she immediately went to a pay phone right outside the meeting hall and called her mom. She told her mother that she had just received Christ as her Lord and Savior and she knew her mother would want to know. Her mother was in tears and said, "Honey, you don't know this but ever since you were baptized as a baby I've been praying for this day."

After a few more words, this woman — a tear in her eye and a smile on her face — got up, thanked me, gave me hug, and left. It was like a miraculous cure, only I hadn't done anything. All I had done was ask her to connect the dots.

If you've never done it before, this Christmas would be a great time to write out your story. In a quiet moment after all the public celebration and with some beautiful Christmas music in the background take a cue from Mary and ponder. Connect your dots. You'll be amazed to see how God has had his hand upon you. You'll realize all over again that you matter to God.

Some of you, as you do that, may to find you are like I was on the drill field. You've never really closed the deal with Christ. You love Christmas and the outer wonder of it all. You love God and you have had your ears open to God, but your heart has been closed. You have not listened with your heart.

I once read a very penetrating sentence from a well-known pastor from Norway. The words still haunt me: "Love is not so much a matter of being willing to listen as of wanting to hear."

I remember how that kind of thing played out with our children. I was always willing to listen, often with one ear. After all, most of what was important to them didn't shake the world — maybe their world, but not mine. I was listening, but I really wasn't wanting to hear.

Then came junior high school (or middle school). There was a change. It turned out that what was even unimportant with them

began to shake my world. Boy, was I now wanting to hear.

So I began to volunteer for a job I had grown to hate, and that was taking my kids and their friends to every imaginable place — skating, the movies, the shopping center, friends houses all over town, all times of day and night. And then picking them up again.

But I loved it. I never spoke. I just drove the car and listened. I discovered when I did this that I became invisible to the kids even — nonexistent. I learned more than I needed to know. That's because I was willing to listen and I was wanting to hear.

Here's how I remember my transformation with God along these lines. One night — well after my drill field experience and as a young adult — I knelt beside my bed. It was a small upstairs bedroom with two large windows — one was open to let in the cool night air. It was December in Georgia.

I said something like this: "Jesus, if you are real, and you are listening and wanting to hear, then here I am. The door of my life is open. Come in and take over. I'm tired of working at being a Christian on the outside. I want to be one on the inside."

Way down on the street below and one house over came the sound of a group of people singing Christmas carols. The sound wafted up through my open bedroom window and for the first time in my life — I heard Christmas.

Let's pray: Lord, give us all grace to hear Christmas as you want us to hear it. We pray in Jesus name who is our Lord, our Savior, our

Friend. Amen.