



# SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

December 6, 2015

"The God Who Made Himself a Rookie" (The Friendship Series)

John 15:15 & Luke 1:26-38

The Rev. Tim Shaw

**T**his morning I want to talk about being a rookie in the context of our friendships. It's very interesting to me how retaining our capacity to be a rookie in the context of our friendships is essential if we hope to have the kind of foundation we really need for our lives, our work, our service in the church and the community, and in the most important relationships in our lives.

I want to talk about the importance of having friendships where it is safe for us to talk about all the areas of our lives where we are still rookies. We need friendships where we can be honest about how we're actually doing. We need a place where we can admit how we are still, in some areas of our lives, very much in the "rookie zone".

That is not the message we get from our culture. Our culture warns us that the world is unsafe and we'd better not let down our guard. We had better project competence and strength in every relationship. Well, the world can be a pretty unsafe place to be but there needs to be a place where I can still be the rookie that I really

am. The message of Christmas frees me to be a rookie throughout my life.

Two and a half years ago this native Californian moved to Hawaii. I've been in rookie mode ever since. Just learning how to talk about the route I take from home to work puts me in rookie mode. Aoloa Street to Kailua Road to Kalaniana'ole Highway to Kamehameha Highway to Kiona'ole Road. Our church used to be in town on Kee'aumoku Street but we're now on the windward side of the island here in Kane'ohe which is near the town of Ka'a'awa. That town's name has three "a's" IN A ROW! I now live in a state where the state fish is a small little fish with a huge name, the humuhumunu-kunukuapua'a! That's rookie mode.

When I started to learn how to fly airplanes I was stunned that my instructors were not deterred because I was a rookie. From the very beginning my flight instructors wanted me to actually taxi the airplane, take off, and fly around the practice area. They wanted me to be in control of the

airplane. From the first day of flight instruction I was flying the airplane. They let me do everything except land it—which is really smart since that is, by far, the most challenging thing for a rookie pilot to learn how to do.

You make a lot of rookie moves when learning how to fly. I remember the evening I was learning how to safely operate an airplane at night. The preflight check was done. I was holding short of the runway. My instructor and I were just waiting to be cleared for takeoff. I had a number of great flight instructors, including one amazing young woman who now flies for United Airlines. I always wanted to impress my instructors. Whether it was Jeff or Kim, I wanted them to show them that I was becoming a skilled aviator.

After we were cleared to take the runway, I started throttling up the engine and the plane didn't move. So I gave it a little more throttle and the plane just started shaking. I gave it a little more power and still nothing happened except more shaking.

**K**im tapped my arm and pointed at the parking break and said, “You might want to release that.” That’s a rookie move.

Rookie moves are the things we do when we’re learning how to do something new. Rookie moves demonstrate our lack of experience or the fact that you’re trying too hard to impress your attractive flight instructor. Rookie moves often result in some embarrassment. We don’t like making rookie moves because we don’t like being rookies. But what the message of Christmas actually encourages us to do is to live more of our lives in rookie mode. My goal for us is to encourage MORE rookie moves and not fewer. That means that we need to make a fresh commitment to living in learning mode.

Sometimes, God chooses learning mode FOR us. We find ourselves in a situation we did not anticipate. We’re at a new school with no friends. We receive a medical diagnosis that terrifies us. We have a child and we have no idea how to make them stop crying in the middle of the night. Sometimes WE need to choose learning mode in our work, our volunteer service, our relationships if we want to continue to thrive in life. We need to choose to make ourselves a rookie because we’re stuck in our lives, in our careers. We need to make a decision to place ourselves, once again, in a situation in which we are in over our heads.

Earlier this fall our staff had the chance to listen to Liz

Wiseman, at the Willow Creek Leadership Summit. She is a consultant to a number of successful corporations and is the author of the book, “Rookie Smarts: Why Learning Beats Knowing”. Her title captures something that I want to try and incorporate more fully into my life. Learning mode is a mode that is as important as knowing mode. In fact, learning mode can be more important than knowing mode at some points in our lives, particularly when we find ourselves stuck; when we’re trying to throttle things up in our lives but we’re not making any progress.

In her presentation, Liz Wiseman talked about the benefits of approaching leadership in the church, in business, in school, in any organization from the perspective of a rookie. That is a super interesting discussion and I want to reflect on that for a moment with you but as I thought about the benefits of approaching leadership from the perspective of a rookie I thought about the benefits of approaching our friendships, marriages, family relationships as a rookie.

One of the things Liz Wiseman pointed out was that there are upsides and downsides of experience. The upsides of bringing experience to a task; the upsides of bringing experience to a situation as a leader are obvious: you have knowledge, you can have confidence, credibility and wisdom.

But there are downsides to experience. When you’ve been at something for a while it’s easy to make assumptions, to fill in the gaps with what we assume should be there. But we end up seeing only what we expect to see or want to see.

There are also upsides and downsides of inexperience. Some of the downsides include, making a lot of “rookie moves”, like the ones I made while learning how to fly. When we lack experience we make mistakes. We sometimes don’t see unintended consequences of our decisions. When we’re rookies, sometimes there are lots of messes to clean up.

But there are also lots of upsides to actually being a rookie or choosing to live in rookie mode even if we have lots of experience. One of the best upsides of inexperience is that we go into situations with fewer assumptions to weigh us down. There’s a willingness to try something new and sometimes we do that because we don’t realize how hard it is going to be to do it. It’s when we are in over our heads that we have the opportunity to learn the most because we are more open to help, partnership and encouragement—at least potentially.

I definitely think there are big upsides to living in the rookie zone. Living there is not without downsides and dangers but I think the benefits outweigh the downsides.

In her talk at the Leadership Summit, Liz Wisemen spoke about the ability to pivot between experience and learning. Perfecting that pivot is something I want to do. Our capacity to bring to the table what we're really good at, what we know is not the only thing we need to work on. We need to cultivate the ability to acknowledge what we don't understand or don't know.

I want to be around people who can pivot from their experience to learning mode. I want to be around people who can admit what they don't know and can ask others for help. Let me be blunt: No one likes to be around a know-it-all. I know I don't want to be around a know-it-all. It's very difficult to build a friendship with a person who only leads with their experience, their knowledge, and their achievements.

I am so grateful for the friendships that God has given me where I can tell the truth about how I remain a rookie. I am so thankful for all the friends and family members who give me the freedom to pivot from experience to learning mode. I am so grateful that I have places where I can not only bring my gifts and experience but places where I can also bring my inexperience, where I can ask for help and be the rookie that I am. I hope that I am a person who can provide that kind of place for others as well.

Being a rookie is not simply a mode I put on. It's not a leadership technique I've

developed. It's part of the truth about who I am. I remain a rookie in so many ways. That's simply the truth about who I am. I remain a rookie. When I can admit that to myself and to others, I can become a life-long learner. And it's when we remain life-long learners that we have the hope of ending up as truly wise people and even sages who can bless others and be helpful in a rapidly changing world.

Pivoting from experience to learning as a leader is super important. Our capacity to be that kind of leader is honed, I think, in our friendships. If we have friendships where we can admit that we remain rookies, we will have a greater ability to pivot from experience to learning in other areas of our lives.

In John chapter 15, Jesus offers us the gift of friendship. Listen to what He says in *John 15:15*, "I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father."

What Jesus had heard from God, He is now ready to share with his disciples. Our capacity to hear what He has to share with us is a function of our ability to pivot to learning mode, so that we might learn what He has to tell us about God, about who we are, and what human life is really all about. To grow as followers of Christ, we need to retain the capacity to be a rookie.

In Luke chapter 1, Mary, the mother of Jesus, has an encounter with an angel that throws her into learning mode.

**Luke 1:26** - *In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, 27 - to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. 28 - And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." 29 - But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. (Mary is now in the rookie zone. She has questions. She doesn't understand what the angel is saying to her. She hasn't shared any of those questions out loud yet but she's begun to honestly ask them to herself. That's the rookie zone.)*

**30** - *The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. (Being in rookie mode can make us nervous, even afraid so the angel Gabriel addresses Mary's fears). 31 - And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. 32 - He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. 33 - He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." 34 - Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" (Rookie mode. Mary asks, "How can this be?*

I don't understand what you're saying to me. What you're saying is impossible. I'm not going to have sexual relations with my fiancé until after we're married. So what are you talking about?" In the rookie zone, we have the freedom to ask questions, seek input and ask for help.)

**35** - *The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. 36* - *And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. 37*- *For nothing will be impossible with God."* Now watch Mary pivot. **38** - *Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.*

Mary probably still doesn't understand what the angel is saying to her. How could she? Nevertheless, right there in rookie mode, she says, "Yes," to God's will for her life. Just like that fourth grader at the top of the 40-meter ski jump in our video this morning, Mary says, "Here, I go."

There are all sorts of pressures on us to avoid admitting how much we remain rookies in life in general and as followers of Christ in particular. Being in rookie mode is uncomfortable sometimes. But could it be that God might have some of his best gifts for us that He can only give to us when we can acknowledge

how much of a rookie we really are?

It's true that nobody wants a rookie airline pilot flying the 777 you're on from Honolulu to San Francisco. No one wants to be seen by a rookie cardiologist when you show up at the ER with chest pains. BUT at the same time, you also don't want an airline pilot who has stopped learning or can't hear the warnings the first officer sitting next to him in the co-pilot's seat is trying to get him to understand. You don't want a cardiologist who is so cocky that they are not continuing to develop their skills. You want the person who is in a position of great responsibility to be a person who can pivot from their experience to learning mode. That's the kind of friend we need as well.

Rev. Roger Owens from Pittsburg Theological Seminary said this about the birth of Jesus, "At Christmas we will be remembering that God came as a weak, vulnerable child into our world. And He came into this world, not a perfect world safe enough for a child God. He came into our world, a dangerous world. A world that knows how dark the darkness can be, how deep the pain can go, how gripping the fear can become, how endless the grief. This is the world He entered as a child. And we call this child the light, the light that shines in the darkness. And as hard as it is to believe sometimes, the darkness did not

overcome Him, and it has not, and it will not."

The amazing news of Christmas is that God deliberately made Himself a rookie. Thank God that He did because his willingness to enter our broken human story as a rookie has made our forgiveness, our healing, and everlasting life possible. God became a helpless child growing up in a poor family. He entered our world as a child who needed to learn how to eat solid food, to dress Himself, to learn to speak, to throw and catch a ball, to learn everything that you and I had to learn how to do. God deliberately made Himself a rookie. He fully entered our human experience. He chose learning mode and I think He did that for many reasons—but one of the reasons I'm convinced that He did it for was to set us free to be rookies as well.

Could it be that the greatest gift you and I could receive this Christmas is the freedom to admit to ourselves, and to other trusted people in our lives, just how much rookies we remain? The great God who created the universe, the One who has all knowledge chose to make Himself a rookie for our sake.

No matter what our age or life experience, whether we're younger or older, could it be that you and I will begin to find the healing and the hope we seek this Christmas when we embrace the truth that we are indeed still rookies?