



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau
December 7, 2014

**"The Taste and Smell of Christmas" (A Sense of Christmas Series)
The Rev. Dr. Dan Chun**

For this Advent season, we're on a Christmas sermon series called *A Sense of Christmas*, where we walk through the five senses of hearing, seeing, smelling, tasting, feeling and how they might apply to Christmas. Pastor Sim kicked off the sermon series last week with a talk on how to HEAR Christmas. Today I will talk on the TASTE and SMELL of Christmas.

For many American Christians, Christmas is a time of great nostalgia. There are tastes and smells that remind us of Christmas. For many it would be the smell of a Douglas fir tree, decorated with lights and ornaments in the home. For some it's the smell of a pie or a special dessert that mom used to make. For others, it is eating a juicy, tasty turkey on Christmas. For me, it was my mother's sugar cookies, freshly baked, pulled out of the oven, and then placed on paper on our dining table for decorating with red and green sugar.

Those are American things associated with Christmas. People in other parts of the world celebrate Christmas in different ways. In Asia, for instance, the most populated continent in the world, celebrations can have feasts that offer a wide array of food that appeal to all the senses, as shown at the beginning of the movie *Eat, Drink, Man, Woman*. Look at this clip from the beginning of the movie. But I warn you, it might make you

hungry. (A clip from the movie was shown.)

That scene goes on, but I'm afraid that if I show more of it, people might bolt out of the service and into Ko'olau Kitchen in search of Chinese food. That clip reminds us that the tastes and smells that are unique to us might not be universal. Different strokes for different folks.

Tastes and smells have long-range effects on us. They are packed with memories. I shared with you previously that after my dad died, I didn't want to give away his handkerchiefs because they still had his scent.

During this season we can idealize how a Christmas should be – with happy family feelings and big tasty dinners. Yet, we can feel we are missing out if we don't have a happy family to be with nor a big feast or celebration to participate in.

And we also know that Christmas is a time when it can get stressful and really busy. The tradition of shopping or sending our Christmas cards can be an added stress. In fact, the Chun family is so busy and so scattered that none of you are going to get our Christmas card this December. We break tradition and refuse to succumb to this added stress of Christmas! We're still doing a family card, but it will be delayed. My kids are flying in for Christmas and then we will take a picture and then our card will go out in January or

February, in time for Chinese New Years or Ground Hog Day. So I don't want our members to feel bummed that they didn't get a card from me this year. No, you were not dropped from the list; all were dropped from the list, but only for a little while.

In fact, once our community hit 2,000 people earlier this year, I had to stop handwriting birthday cards to First Prez members, like I had been for the past 20 years of my senior pastorate. So don't think only you got dropped from getting a birthday card this year. Every member did not get a birthday card. I'm sorry that I couldn't keep it going.

Alas, and now back to Christmas. If we are dealing with the true meaning of Christmas, we must realize that when it comes to Jesus there are tastes and smells that will remind us of Him, but they are often bitter and sorrowful. If you are going through a hard time this season, know that Jesus understands and that actually Christmas was never easy or picturesque like a Normal Rockwell or a Thomas Kincaid painting. In Luke chapter 2 we can hear the real Christmas story.

Luke 2:1 In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered.

Luke 2:2 This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria.

Luke 2:3 All went to their own towns to be registered.

Luke 2:4 Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David.

Luke 2:5 He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child.

Luke 2:6 While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child.

Luke 2:7 And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

In just those 7 verses, which is much of the core of the Christmas story, we see hardship, pain, and suffering—and it only gets worse later.

It's tax season, and a census is called. The Emperor wants to know whom he can tax. The Romans want to know who you are and where you live. The real Christmas season is a prelude to tax season. Oh joy!

Joseph and Mary, who is 9-months pregnant, need to travel 80 miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem for the census. Maybe using a wagon, I doubt walking all the way, and there is no record in the Bible of a donkey with Mary and Joseph as they traveled. The trip would take at least four days, if not longer, since Mary is pregnant. Many historians think the trip took seven days.

I'm sure all the mothers here are saying if you are about to give birth – and have a long ride in a wagon with no shock absorbers or on an animal, out in the open road for four to seven days, that would be FAR from the taste of joy. The feeling of the original Christmas on a bumpy road for Mary would be ooh, ouch!

Oh, cramps (the Braxton-Hicks type). There may have been the feelings of fear and anxiety as bandits were known to frequent that road. Who knows where they had to stay on the journey staying at least 4 different places every night? Joseph and Mary arrive in Bethlehem, but there is no room at the inn.

By the way the Greek word for "inn" is *kataluma*, which was often translated as a large upper room in a big house. Back then the residents lived in the upper room, while the bottom part of the house was used for storage or for animals.

It's possible that Jesus was born in a large house that belonged to Joseph's relatives since Joseph was from Bethlehem. But not in the upper room of the house but in the *kataluma*, the bottom floor of the relatives' house. But wherever Jesus was born, it was a far cry from giving birth at Queens or Kaiser Hospitals in Honolulu. Not as clean or antiseptic.

So no room at the inn meant, no room upstairs at the *kataluma*, or upper room. Maybe that's why an innkeeper was never mentioned in the Bible accounts of the story.

Being placed in a manger where animals are around means that the original Christmas smells might have been a little "crappy," so to speak. The smells were far from sweet.

For many of us today, if life is crappy right now for you, then you are living in the smells of the original Christmas! Christmas doesn't stop our pain or suffering or depression. Sometimes Christmas even heightens it because we have the false notion that Christmas is a time when we should be living a Hallmark-card life where there should just be love and family unity. Joseph might have had difficulty with his family when he had to say the Mary's pregnant but that

he didn't do it.

And yet, we must realize that for many people who have lost loved ones, Christmas is a difficult time.

At the beginning of my sermon I used a clip from a Taiwanese movie to remind us that our notion of Christmas should not just be American. But I also want to remind you that though we are blessed in this country with a freedom to express our faith most of the time, there are many Christians in other parts of the world who don't have that freedom. That may be difficult for us to understand, but it is happening. Christians in other countries ARE being persecuted for their faith. It's a bitter life for them, and so Christmas may be more of pain than happiness.

Historian Philip Jenkins recently wrote about the persecution of Christians in the Middle East in a Christianity Today cover story entitled "The Edge of Extinction," with the banner "Is this the end of Christianity in the Middle East?" Jenkins wrote: "It is obscene to complain about a 'war on Christmas' in the United States when there are Syrian cities without Christians to commemorate their holy days at all for the first time in some 1,900 years. THAT's an authentic war on Christmas." (Philip Jenkins, "On the Edge of Extinction," *Christianity Today*, November 2014. p. 39).

Since 2001, the Christian population in Baghdad has been reduced by 90 percent! (Ibid., p. 38). While in America we use the phrase that "churches are dying" because of how congregations age, or how pastors behaved scandalously, or how church programs are proven irrelevant. But in the Middle East right now, churches are disappearing because they are deliberately, literally being killed by a determined foe, whether it's ISIS or the Taliban or other Muslim Extremists.

Christians in the Middle East are being murdered, raped, and enslaved into prostitution by the thousands. If we don't know that we are choosing not to read the news. I have this confirmed by a friend of mine who has visited the refugee camps in the Middle East and has seen the horror and heard their stories.

Jenkins writes that "some [Middle Eastern] believers hoped that powerful Western churches would send aid..." (Ibid., p. 40) He added, "In the longer term, Western churches undoubtedly have their role to play in assisting fellow believers, whether in their homelands or in their new diasporas." (Ibid., p. 42)

We know for a fact, that many of our Christian brothers and sisters in the Middle East are being killed for being a Christian, for refusing to convert to the Muslim faith. We know for a fact, that men, women and children are being tortured and killed, many of them beheaded, including the children.

Muslim extremists, who are doing all the killings, call the Christians *Nasrani*, which stands for "Nazarene" in reference to Jesus of Nazareth. The Muslim extremists are putting the first Arabic letter for the Arabic word *Nasrani* on the Christians' houses and bodies to mark them. It's like the star of David that the Nazis used to put on the Jews. Houses with the *Nasrani* symbol are burned or taken, and the people in those houses persecuted.

Here are some pictures of the *Nasrani* symbol on houses, and pictures of people holding the symbol, which again stands for Nazarene, meaning Christian. I know the hand-written symbol looks like a happy face, but it's actually the Arabic first letter for *Nasrani*.

Christmas is a time when we tend to focus only on our own circles of family and friends. We go to the malls and we think of all of the presents we want to buy for them to make them happy. But what about the people outside those circles? What about the others who are having troubles besides us?

Our church, First Prez, tries to think of others especially during Christmas and especially for those in other countries who are in far worse shape than we. You know about GIFTS OF LOVE here at church. This year is the 12th anniversary of the Gifts of Love program, through which you can make donations toward missions in the name of friends and family. So instead of giving loved ones tangible gifts, you can give toward our mission partners and you receive a card that you can give to loved ones that say a donation was made in their name for their Christmas gift from you.

Check out the Gifts of Love table in the Fellowship Hall today or the church website. We normally raise \$20,000+ for these mission projects. If you want to give money to Christian refugees in the Middle East, choose Global Hope Network in the Gifts of Love catalog.

Today I want to also give you another gift-giving option that could help our brothers and sisters in the Middle East. How about a t-shirt for your friends and family that has the Arabic letter for *Nasrani* on it, the abbreviation for the Arabic word for Christian? In fact, we are making them available in the Main Lobby by the indoor waterfall and the Front Desk on the other side of the building.

Whether you buy one or not, let's commit to first pray for our persecuted brothers and sisters in the Middle East even though they are thousands of miles away. And second, let's stand in solidarity with them.

But know that if you do buy a t-shirt, 20% of each purchase will go to Samaritan's Purse, a non-profit that will use the funds directly to support the refugees and persecuted Christians, our *Nasrani* friends, in the Middle East. Hence, wearing a T-shirt means prayer, financial support and a concrete way to show our solidarity.

Decals are available too for your car or for your schoolbook. Maybe wearing the t-shirt in school or around town, or sticking the *Nasrani* stickers on school folders and cars is a way for us Christians to share our faith in a world where we are persecuted and killed for following Jesus.

By the way, these shirts were made by local pastor Bud Stonebraker and his family. The church is not making anything on them. I actually bought some for all of my kids.

It's hard to celebrate Christmas without realizing the pain of our brothers and sisters here in Honolulu as well as those abroad. The Bible says to give the gospel to those in our city and to the outer regions of the world.

Lastly, as this is Communion Sunday, I want to say this about the feel and taste of Christmas. It all culminates in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

After Jesus was born on Christmas Day, at the every end of his ministry, He gathered His disciples and best friends into—are you ready for this—a *kataluma*. Yes, the Greek word for an upper room in a large house. Jesus was born in a *kataluma*, and His last meal was in a *kataluma*. Two of the only times the word *kataluma* is used in the New Testament.

And being a faithful Jewish man, Jesus participated in a Passover meal, which is actually the context for all future communions we today celebrate as *Nasrani*, or Christians.

The Passover meal is not all tasty. It has a bitter element. In fact, as we are talking about senses today, all four tastes of sweet, sour, salty, and bitter are in the Passover meal. There's sweetness in a dish called Charoset, which is a mixture of apple, nuts, cinnamon, honey, and wine. Sour, in the wine and vinegar. Salty, in the salt water for dipping the vegetables. And bitter, in the herbs, specifically in horseradish.

Here is the sequence of the Passover meal that spread over hours of eating and ceremony. See how the birth of Christ spans over time to this Passover meal, which Jesus participated in His last meal and how it becomes our communion sacrament today.

From Christmas with the scents of frankincense and myrrh, which were gifts of the Magi to Jesus (frankincense and myrrh representing holiness and sacrifice), to Communion, and to actually Jesus' death, when myrrh was used to prepare His body for burial.

Here is how we view the Passover meal today using the Jewish tradition but see how the Christian Gospel can be embedded.

The Passover table is set with food and with drink. There will be FOUR cups of wine for all to drink. First, the Cup of Sanctification—to remind the Jews of God's promise that God would bring them out (just as Jesus today promises to bring us out into a new life, a new Promised Land)

The second cup is called the Cup of Plagues—a reminder of how the plagues came upon Egypt relating to God's second promise that He would free the Jews from being slaves, just as Jesus promises to free us from the bondage of sin.

The third cup is called the

Cup of Redemption, where God said to the Jews, "I will redeem you." And the fourth cup is called the Cup of Completion, which represents God saying to the Jews, "I will take you as my own people," just like how the New Testament says that God adopts us as His children, His heirs.

When these four cups of wine have been set, a blessing is said over them, and the first cup is consumed. The host washes his hands. He goes to one of the three matzahs—or unleavened bread—chooses the middle one, and breaks it into two. One of the broken halves is hidden until after the meal.

The Passover story is then told of how the Hebrews were freed from Egypt. The second cup of wine is then consumed. Everyone then washes their hands, which some scholars believe was the time that Jesus washed the feet of His disciples.

Then, the bitter herbs are eaten, for as it said in Exodus 12:8, the Jews were told to eat the lamb with the unleavened bread and with bitter herbs. In Hebrew, the bitter herbs are called *Maror* and are often grated horseradish to remind them of their bitter years in slavery.

Then the main meal is eaten which usually has the main course of roasted lamb. Then a blessing is said. Then the broken half of matzah, which had been hidden, is brought back to the table. It has to be found by a child. This reminds us of Jesus' words in Mark 10:15, "I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the Kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it."

The matzah is broken into pieces and distributed. For Christians, this is to remind the people that Jesus' body was broken for them. The Matzah bread we have in stores today have striped and burnt marks on them, and hopefully by them you are

reminded of how by Jesus' stripes and bruises we are healed. Then everyone eats of the bread (as we do today in communion).

The third cup of wine is consumed, which is the Cup of Redemption. It is believed that it was after this third cup that Jesus said, "This is the New Covenant, when you drink of this cup do this in remembrance of Me." True Redemption was to come in Jesus.

Then a child opens the door to see if Elijah the prophet is there. The Bible says that Elijah would come and precede the Messiah. We, of course, would say the Messiah Jesus is here! Then psalms are sung.

Then the fourth cup of wine is consumed. It is believed Jesus did not drink this fourth cup with them because He once said that He would drink it with His followers after He returns. He will gather them and they will feast in heaven.

The story of Jesus didn't begin and end with the Christmas story. No, it unfolded into a beautiful story from His birth, to His ministry and promise for us today, and then culminates in a communion sacrament that has been repeated over and over again by Christians all over the world. He loved us so much that He died for us.

May we remember that if we are "eating bitter herbs" today, meaning if we are going through painful times, if things are not going right for us, and depression hovers and lingers, may we still have hope in Jesus and the story of His arrival, His birth in Christmas to the sacrament which we celebrate today which reminds us of His goodness, His desire to bring us out of the bondage of our circumstances to redeem us and the hope that we will live lives with all of our senses for Christ.