



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

December 9, 2012

"The Joy of Christmas" - Luke 2:1-12 (Gospel of Luke Series)

David Free

I have to admit that I have no qualifications to stand here before you today and speak. I have never attended seminary. I have never worked in television broadcasting. Nor have I ever attended a school of cinematography. Those are all elements of Pastor Dan's background that make him the powerhouse that he is.

No, I have none of the experience that Dan possesses...but my wardrobe is more colorful than his, which he admits, earns me the right to speak if only in defense of the outlandish shirts I wear!

And that's exactly what I want to talk about this morning. No, not my shirts, but what bright colors can do for us, what the sound of a Christmas carol does for our spirits, what the sight of brightly wrapped gifts under the tree spark in us. There are a million things that bring us joy and that's what I want to talk about this morning: the gift of joy and more specifically, the Joy of Christmas.

Christmas can be a stressful time with all of the extra things that get piled into our already busy schedules. So perhaps this means we need to put forward a little effort in finding the real Joy of Christmas, to fight our way through the madness of the season.

We must be strong and make certain that we are not like the

innkeeper who posted a sign that read, "No room!" No room in our schedules...no room in our homes... no room in our hearts and minds... no room in our lives for Jesus.

We can participate in the festivities of the Christmas season but until we truly receive the gift of Jesus we will never truly experience Christmas. To have a joy-filled Christmas, we must not only recognize Him as the center of the season, but as the center of our lives.

Now let us turn to this morning's scripture reading. The meaning of Christmas is related to us in the book of Luke, chapter 2, versus 1 through 12. This chapter is considered the bases for today's 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.

Luke 2:8 In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night.

Luke 2:9 Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.

Luke 2:10 But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people:

Luke 2:11 to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.

Luke 2:12 This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger."

Those few lines are all we have to cling to as an explanation of how the leader of over two billion Christians today arrived on our planet.

So let's take some literary privilege here and try to imagine what might have happened on that journey 2,000 years ago. Let's search for the Joy of Christmas. Follow me with this scenario.

Joseph is in shock when he hears the news. Disbelieving, he asks a friend if it is true. Yes, his friend tells him, a census is being taken. Joseph thinks to himself, "Surely not now, with Mary expecting a baby in only a matter of days." However, as members of the tribe of Judah, Joseph and Mary must register for the census in Bethlehem. The Romans are strict.

The shortest route to Jerusalem must be chosen, not the easier route through the plains of the Mediterranean, but the 3,000 year old trading route that winds for 70 miles through the rocky highlands. Joseph secures a place in a caravan passing through from Mesopotamia, which will provide protection from bandits, bears, and mountain lions. The trip is arduous, Mary is growing weaker and time is running out.

Now folks, we have to remember that I'm telling a story that takes place 2,000 years ago. We're not talking about Mary heading to Kapiolani, Queens or Kaiser for delivery. This woman is riding on the back of a donkey, sometimes walking, forget an ambulance rushing her to a birthing destination.

As the caravan arrives at Jerusalem, Mary and Joseph find their way to the home of Mary's first cousin, Elizabeth, and her husband Zacharias. Elizabeth is holding their son John, the six-month-old baby that will one day become known as John the Baptist. The two couples meet in awe. Eyes

filling with tears, hearts overflowing with joy, they are the only people in the world who know the world's most tremendous news.

The next morning they are on the trail again and by midday Mary is beginning to experience labor pains as they move closer to Bethlehem five miles ahead. As darkness settles in, the weary couple finally pass through the walls of Bethlehem, a center for sheep and cattle farming.

Imagine this, Joseph is alarmed that Mary's birthing pains have increased and she tells Joseph the time is only within a matter of hours. Frantically, Joseph seeks lodging, however, the town is swarming with other members of David's tribe and Joseph fears no lodging will be available. He runs to an inn reported to have an opening for travelers. The innkeeper opens the door and says, "I'm sorry. No room."

Joseph says, "But my wife is near her time to bear a child, don't you have something?" The innkeeper looks at Mary, and realizes her time of birth is near. "All I have is a stable out back. It isn't clean, and there are sheep and cattle in it, but at least you'll be out of the weather."

Mary is trembling and is deep in pain now. Joseph helps her down from the burrow and carries her into the stable, which may have simply been a cave. He makes a bed of hay for her to lie down upon. Perhaps he said to his wife, "Mary, what do I do? Let me go find help for you. Should I search for a midwife?" "No Joseph," says Mary, "Go outside and build a fire. I will be fine."

Some time later, everything became quiet. The sheep and cattle were silent. Then a light shone

down from the sky. Joseph looked up. It was a star so bright its light illuminated everything around him. In the stillness of that moment, can't you imagine Mary beckoning to Joseph. And as Joseph turns to walk to Mary, he sees that the stable is also illumined by a wonderful light. Mary then says, "Here is our child."

Later that night, shepherds who were tending sheep nearby appeared at the opening of the stable, telling a story about how an angel from heaven had appeared and telling them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people."

Much later, there would be a caravan from far away lands, carrying rich, wise men... men who followed the shining star, and the great men brought the child gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

It was 2,000 years ago, this struggle of an event, yet we can relate to a couple struggling along a treacherous path. It pretty much mirrors our journey in today's world—coping with a recession, grasping onto job security and yes, birthing children and raising them to adulthood. Isn't this why we so desperately need the Joy of Christmas, which is the promise of a Son who will walk with us, sharing our burdens?

There are different levels of joy—the joy of Christ and the Spirit is the greatest of all joy. There is Christ's gift of joy that sustains in the midst of sadness. There is durable, resilient joy, able to withstand the hardships of real life. But now, let's take a look at our personal joy.

When we are born, it's one of the accessories we are delivered with.

Right off the delivery room floor, we come fully equipped, automatic joy included! All of you have it. I see it every Sunday morning as I greet you out front. It is visible in your faces, in your smiles, in your hugs and kisses. It is genuine joy, joy of being with your church family, joy for a Sunday morning and the opportunity to praise the Lord, joy of being able to worship in this incredibly beautiful setting, joy of having your husband at your side, knowing that today he chose to visit the house of the Lord rather than the first tee! All this represents your personal joy!

Whether we realize it or not, the Joy of Christmas is actually within all of us. It spills out onto others, it is a magical potion that can turn one's day from cloudy to sunny, from despair to hope, from unbelieving to believing...all with that warm greeting of "Merry Christmas!"

One of the very first Sunday school lessons that I can remember when I was a little boy—yes, I was once little—was all about Joy. My teacher asked our class what joy was and we all answered with the usual "being happy," "smiling," and "laughing out loud." She then asked us if we knew what real joy was, which puzzled the class because we had just told her what we felt joy was.

Our teacher then put up the letters J-O-Y on her felt graphic board. Remember those? That was before felt pens. Real joy, she continued, happens when you put Jesus, for the J, first; Others for the O, second; and Yourself, for the Y, last. It was a simple lesson, a beautiful truth, and a life-long message I've never forgotten.

There was another teacher who taught on the subject of joy and that would be Jesus. When

Jesus was talking to His disciples about joy, He was referring to the joy of the Resurrection. His students didn't know it at the time, but they were about to become a part of a glorious event that would change their lives and the whole world forever. They would experience a short time of grief when Jesus died, but through the miracle of the Resurrection, their lives would be joyously transformed. They would know of a new joy that would be with them throughout their entire lives—a joy that would last for all of eternity.

Okay, now you might be thinking, "Wait a minute big fellow, what about the people who have nothing in their lives to be joyous about, especially at this Christmas time—the hungry, the sick, the oppressed?"

The answer isn't as difficult as you might think. That's exactly why God has put us in the big picture...we are our brother's keepers. It is our mission to share joy with those less fortunate and that's one reason we give our offerings every Sunday to help relieve suffering around the world. That is why we sponsor Compassion children living in poverty. That is why we donate to the Red Cross, to Toys for Tots and a host of other charitable organizations—all in the hope that we can make a difference in a life of suffering, to put a smile on a child's face, to ignite the flickering flame of joy where only darkness has lived.

Let's take a look at someone we all know very well, someone who found himself in a situation which afforded him no occasion for joy...I'm referring to the apostle Paul.

He had lost everything he valued or that gave him joy. He was

isolated from his closest co-workers and most intimate friends, and perhaps most difficult of all, he had no idea what the future might hold. He was waiting for the Emperor to decide if he would live or die.

By the world's standards, he should have been miserable, but when you read his letter to his followers at Philippi, you see he was quite the opposite. This letter has been called "The Epistle of Joy" because the words "joy" and "rejoice" occur sixteen times throughout. It is probably the most affectionate and personal letter Paul wrote. It has very little censure, but is mostly devoted to the encouragement of his brethren and sisters in the Lord. And accentuating the point of joy, he comes to the closing stating, as recorded in Philippians 4:4 "Rejoice in the Lord always! Again I say, rejoice!"

Hey, can I be a little personal with you for a minute...this from the guy who hugs and kisses everybody at the front door every Sunday!

I'd like to share a personal story with you, a story I have never told before. It's a story about regaining lost joy.

In 1970 I was 35 years old, don't bother doing the math in your heads, it makes me 77 today. I was living in Huntington Beach, California. I was on top of the world. I had it all—my own business, a home on the water, a boat docked out front and a big, expensive car in the garage. I was in love, not with all my belongings, but with Kristie, a honey-blond, blue-eyed woman that made my heart laugh. Kristie was an airline stewardess and when not flying, we would sail the blue waters, laugh and hold each other, enjoying our world of excessiveness and bliss.

One of the things that brought us great joy was dancing. We danced up a storm, every chance we could— the waltz, rumba, tango, even some charleston—we cut a rug and then some! We were the forerunners to Dancing with the Stars! We had committed to being dancing partners for life and we would seal our love affair with vows for better, or for worse.

The night I received the phone call that Kristie was dead, that an accident had taken her, my life was instantly changed from joy to disaster. The deep, numbing pain, the heart-wrenching agony. All I could do was walk. I walked the beach. I walked the streets. I felt that if I stopped walking I felt my life would end and that maybe I should stop walking I thought and let the end come.

My life was not void of the Lord at this time. He was in my life. It was just that I had not dropped my fishnets to follow Him totally. I did not blame Him. I blamed the drunken driver that took Kristie from me. I pleaded with the Lord for direction and one morning while I was on my relentless walk on the beach, I pleaded most earnestly, "Lord please, please, dance with me."

My plea was for the Lord to bring some kind of joy back into my life to mask the pain. He answered that plea. He guided me to put the life I had known behind me. He gave me direction to a new life on some tiny islands in the middle of the Pacific—a place of beauty and serenity, a place to heal.

I sold my business, I sold my home, my boat, my expensive car. I went from having it all to having a few belongings and a ticket to Hawaii in my pocket.

The healing began when on the very first Sunday on this island, I went to the only church I was aware of, Kawaiahao in downtown Honolulu and there I found a new home, a new family and a new purpose. In gratitude I dedicated myself to His work and from that day to this, I have danced with the Lord!

Psalms 30:11 - You turned my wailing into dancing; you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy.

For me, my dance with the Lord meant letting go, letting Him hold me, letting Him lead!

Let us pray.

Father, we come to You with joyous hearts, we embrace You with loving souls. Our cup runneth over knowing the Joy of Christmas.

Jesus, You are our gift, our light, our partner in life. Come, dance with us. Lead us to the music of the angels, to the sounds of the cymbals and drums. Let us enjoy the rapture of Your love. And now in thanksgiving, we offer a resounding "Merry **CHRIST**mas!" Amen!

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Note: David Free has been a First Prez member for 14 years. He has served as a deacon, is a member of our Nominating Team, our Communications Team, and is also one of our wonderful greeters on Sunday mornings. We thank him and Angela Mathieu for the beautiful photos of the children you see on our Compassion Wall. We are so grateful for David and all he does to make First Prez a special place.