



# SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

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"The True Light" - Worship the King Sermon Series

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**G**ood morning, my name is Jenny Sung, and I'm one of the lay pastors here on staff.

English philologist and Oxford professor J.R.R. Tolkien is the author of an epic high fantasy trilogy called, "The Lord of the Rings". For those of you who are fans of the books or movies, you may remember a very dark cave in book two, "The Two Towers". This dark cave is Shelob's lair, home to an evil spider. Let me read to you the description from the book when Sam and Frodo had to travel through this cave:

*"In a few steps they were in utter and impenetrable dark. Not since the lightless passages of Moria had Frodo or Sam known such darkness, and if possible here it was deeper and denser. There, there were airs moving, and echoes, and a sense of space. Here the air was still, stagnant, heavy, and sound fell dead. They walked as it were in a black vapor wrought of veritable darkness itself that, as it was breathed, brought blindness not only to the eyes but to the mind, so that even the memory of colors and of forms and of any light faded out of thought. Night always had been, and always would be, and night was all."*

What a dreadful place of darkness Tolkien described, and Sam and Frodo went through tremendous struggle and pain in their quest to save Middle-Earth.

Now let me tell you one more story about a dark time, though this one is not fantasy. It's an article from the LA Times describing a different journey a long, long time ago.

*A newly betrothed couple is forced to register for a census in a town far away. The woman is nine months pregnant. When they finally reach their destination after an arduous journey, there is no place to stay. The woman gives birth in a stable.*

*The world of Mary and Joseph was a difficult and dangerous place, one whose harsh conditions were not fully chronicled in the Gospel accounts of their travails. They had to travel several days, 90 miles to the city of Joseph's ancestors: south along the flatlands of the Jordan River, then west over the hills surrounding Jerusalem, and on into Bethlehem.*

*And the trip through the Judean desert would have taken place during the winter, when "it's in the 30s during the day [and] rains like heck," said Strange. It's nasty, miserable. And at night it would be freezing. And the unpaved, hilly trails and harsh weather were not the only hazards Joseph and Mary would have faced on their journey south.*

*One of the most terrifying dangers in ancient Palestine was the heavily forested valley of the Jordan River, Strange said. Lions and bears*

*lived in the woods, and travelers had to fend off wild boars. Archeologists have unearthed documents warning travelers of the forest's dangers.*

*"And bandits, pirates of the desert and robbers were also common hazards along the major trade routes like the one Joseph and Mary would have traveled," said the Rev. Peter Vasko, a Catholic priest and director of the Holy Land Foundation, an organization that works to retain a Christian presence in Israel and promotes the restoration of sacred Christian sites there.*

Mary and Joseph endured tremendous hardship, going through the dark of night and what must have been a physical and emotional ordeal. And Jesus, the King of kings, at the end of that hard journey, was not born in a palace, or received like royalty, but in a dirty feeding trough, unattractive and ordinary.

When we look at the Christmas story, it is the greatest quest of all time: Not a quest to save middle earth, but humankind. It is about God Himself going into the dark and struggle of humanity, going to great lengths to adopt those who have been separated from Him.

Christmas is the revelation of God's perfect love in Jesus Christ, our King coming into a very broken world—a world of spiritual darkness, literal darkness, and a world in need of the one true light. Let us pray as we prepare our hearts to receive.

**D**ear Lord, we contemplate your love as one who came down into the midst of our humanity, our brokenness and frailty. We thank You and pray that we may know you in a greater way. Show us your truth during the message, and may we worship You as the one true light in all circumstances. In Christ's name, Amen.

When I was a child, my sisters would play a game and this game somehow involved rolling me up in a carpet and shoving me in the closet. Yes, I was the youngest of three children. It was pitch dark in that closet, and what was probably only a few minutes felt much longer. My initial giggles turned into silence as fear of the dark crept in. With the carpet around me there was not a bit of light coming in, and like many kids who fear the dark, I wished for a night light, for light to stream in and illuminate that space I was in.

Now don't worry, I was fine, my siblings did find me, eventually, and unroll me, but now you know why I need a night light as a fully grown adult (just kidding).

Yes, the darkness can be scary. It's hard to see or find your way without the light. The phrase, "Keeping someone in the dark" means you hide information from someone; they have no clue what's going on. When we talk about "dark times" in our lives, we feel hopeless and alone, like we're in a dark pit.

It is like the psalmist described in Psalm 88: *I am overwhelmed with troubles and my life draws near to death. I am counted among those who go down to the pit; I am like one without strength. You have put me in the lowest pit, in the darkest depths.*

When times are so hard, you can feel like you're in the darkest pit.

Hearing the advent testimony from Jim and Carole today, we can imagine the darkness they must have felt when overwhelmed and without strength. But they had faith in the Lord, the One who says, "I am the Light of the world," and they found strength in that light, in prayer and in the church.

It is often in the darkest of times, when all other lights go out, that we cling to the brightest light, the light of Christ.

Four months ago, one of the warmest lights in my life went out. On August 8, between the dusk of evening and the dawn of the morning, my husband passed away in his sleep. My first and only love of 27 years was gone from this earth.

This life crisis brought on a boundary shift so sudden and large that I related to the apostle Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 1:8 when he was in the province of Asia. "We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death."

The apostle John used the word "darkness" eight times in his gospel. Darkness is described not only as the absence of light but also to mean a world of spiritual darkness.

When my husband passed away, the world became dim and I felt a part of me had died. I focused on the well-being of our children, and I never questioned God or my faith in Him, but everything in the future was in a dark fog. I questioned returning to work, returning to seminary and even my calling as a pastor. I was full of fear, confusion and struggled with the decisions before me. But in the weeks that followed, I came to the realization that all I could do was surrender, rely

on God, and allow Him to shape me in whatever way He wanted.

I remember one dark night, crying out to God, telling Him how much I missed Carl. I was face down, clinging to the sheets on the mattress, trying to position my body exactly where Carl used to lay, as if I could absorb a part of him somehow. The pain in my heart was so great that I felt like it was crumbling into pieces and dissolving into the bed.

I cried out, "God, I miss him so much, please help me." Like the song we sang earlier by Bebo Norman, I was feeling like half a person, and I asked the great light of the world to fill up my soul and impart the light of His grace.

I'll never forget what happened, because God took me in like a child and met me in a powerful way. It was like how Jim described in his testimony, when he was praying the Lord's Prayer, something washed over Him and he knew he could trust God.

As I was crying out to God, I felt a sudden weight, as though a blanket was put on me. It was warm, and I had the feeling I was being hugged. It was as if Jesus Himself was covering me and soothing me. I stopped mid-cry, grew calm and fell asleep. God's peace was so palpable. In a very dark moment, the true light of the world came in to be my prince of peace.

John 1:9 says, *The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world.*

This light is the brightest light, even when all other lights go out.

This light is eternal and gives peace to your soul.

This light heals and restores you, and fills you with all you need to navigate in any darkness.

**T**he true light is the gift of having Jesus in your life.

The next two verses says: <sup>10</sup> *He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him.* <sup>11</sup> *He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.*

Jesus, the Son of God, who existed with the Father from the beginning, in perfect union, love and harmony, would take on human flesh and come into the brokenness of our world. This gift came at great cost, as Jesus was rejected and betrayed. He was crucified and killed so He could conquer sin and redeem us as children of God.

The final verses in our passage today reveals this incredible truth: <sup>12</sup> *Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—<sup>13</sup> children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.*

The Christmas story is the love of God coming down, the revelation of receiving that love and being born again. Because of love, the God of the universe invites us to become His children, and “live and breathe and have our being in Him”.

Darryl Johnson, an associate professor of Pastoral Theology at Regent College, describes it like this, “The living God, as the Trinitarian God, is an infinitely content God. God is not isolated. God is not needy. God is not missing anything. Yet, because the love of the Lover and Beloved cannot be contained, God creates us to be co-lovers with him.”

**WOW! WE ARE CO-LOVERS WITH GOD!** But it doesn't end there. He doesn't call us to just be there with Him, in perfect love, and that's it. If it was just about ourselves, we wouldn't worship a relational God. Rather, God

loves us, and then sends us out into the world to love others as He loves them.

Darryl Johnson continues, “How can we stand or sit or be within the circle of God's knowing of Himself and not learn to love one another?”

Matthew 5:14-16 says this, <sup>14</sup> *“You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden.* <sup>15</sup> *Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house.*

<sup>16</sup> *In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.*

Indeed, we are blessed to bless to others. The light of Christ was one that was meant to shine (not put under a bowl) and be a light to others.

There's one last scene from the Lord of the Rings trilogy that I want to play for you. It's one of my favorite scenes, where Sam carries Frodo up the slopes of Mount Doom when Frodo can't go on.

Sometimes, we will be in places of such brokenness that we can't walk. Others are God's light to us, and we receive. As God fills us with His light and His power, we carry one another as co-lovers of God.

Know that we are all wounded healers. I know so many who have carried me, through their prayers, words and actions, offering support and encouragement. If you are in the darkest of times, know that you're not alone. Let the light of Christ go into the dark places of your heart, whether it's through His Holy Spirit touching you, or through His people. Be assured of His love and comforted with His peace.

Though we don't have time to share every story, I'd like to share one letter with you today, a letter mailed from Maryland from my seminary classmate.

In my last two years in Fuller seminary, I became very close with my cohort in the MAGL program (Masters of Global Leadership). The class was filled of missionaries, pastors, and para-church leaders from all over the world. The classes always drew us deeper into transparency with one another, dialoging about character, suffering and faith.

One of the brothers I got to know is a Youth and Missions Pastor named Trevor Hughes. He is one of those guys who loves the Word, and though quite young, he had more honesty, wisdom and passion than many I've met. He wrote a letter to me a few weeks after Carl passed away, and it ministered to me so much in my healing, I asked him if I could share parts of it with you today.

*Jen, I wrote this letter in the silence of an old chapel at the foot of a cross. I would read this letter in a similar setting, if possible.*

*There are no words I can write or words I can use to express the prayers and attention me and my wife have for you and your little ones. Our hearts broke with yours and yet, our hearts burst with joy that your dear husband finished the race set before him.*

*This is the sum joy for which Paul spoke, “For the joy set before him he suffered the cross.” My dear sister, you now are suffering from bearing the cross of pain and heartache. Now more than ever, you must look toward the suffering Lord, who walks beside you. Follow Jesus, Jen. Follow Him as He bore under the cross of suffering.*

**L**earn to take one step at a time, following in the way of the cross. The Holy Spirit gives you enough strength to make the next steps.

*My dear sister, when we have nothing left, no strength, faith, resolve, endurance, grace, hope or joy, we fall, following Jesus in total surrender. We pray his last prayer on the cross, "Father into your hands I commit my Spirit." Jen, fall again and again on Jesus. Let yourself die again, losing yourself in Jesus. Let is all go, surrender. Follow Jesus. My prayer for you, Jen, is that you will see the risen Lord, and that He will meet you and give you joy. That in walking with Jesus, you will teach your sons how to walk with the crucified and risen Lord. Until we meet again on this earth or a new one, your brother, Trevor.*

I thank Trevor for sharing these words with me, and I hope his words encourage you when in dark places.

Allow God to do His deep processing work within you. Keep going to God, He delights to hear you; He doesn't get sick of you. Keep pressing in. Allow others to carry you as co-lovers of God. It's not through our own power that we do this, it's through the power of Christ as He fills us with His light.

Take steps to get help. Come forward for prayer. There's nothing like the power of intercessory prayer; allow others to pray with you.

If grief is overwhelming this season, consider signing up for GriefShare or DivorceCare. Or find the support that you need in a prayer group, a counselor or a small group. There are small and big ways that God will come through.

For some of you, maybe you never experienced Christ in your life. You may have never invited Him in, and asked Him to come into your

heart. If so, I'd like to invite you to receive Him right now.

With our heads bowed, and our eyes closed, I'm going to say a short prayer. And then I'll ask you to raise your hand if you want to receive Christ in your heart.

*God, we come before you, asking you to work in our hearts and minds, to help us surrender the things of this world and turn to you... Come Holy Spirit.*

If you would like to receive Christ, raise your hand as a sign to God. It's one step of faith. He knows where you are. And silently, in your heart, say this prayer with me:

*Lord Jesus, for too long I've kept You out of my life. I know that I am a sinner and that I cannot save myself. No longer will I close the door when I hear You knocking. By faith I gratefully receive Your gift of salvation. I am ready to trust You as my Lord and Savior. Thank You, Lord Jesus, for coming to earth. I believe You are the Son of God who died on the cross for my sins and rose from the dead on the third day. Thank You for bearing my sins and giving me the gift of eternal life. I believe Your words are true. Come into my heart, Lord Jesus, and be my Savior. Amen.*

Welcome into the family of God! After the service, if you would like to talk to someone about next steps, our staff and prayer team will be up front to meet with you. Please come up and let someone know that you received Jesus today.

We end the service with a declaration, as co-lovers of God, to shine His light into the world. There's a declaration in the essential tenets, or essential beliefs in our ECO denomination. It talks about the church. Let's read it together:

*We trust that when God's glory is so lifted up and when His nature is thus made manifest in the life of the body, the church will be a light that draws people from every tribe and tongue and nation to be reconciled to God.*

When it says, "The church will be a light," that's us! We are the church. Be the church to those around you. Be the church 365 days a year.

When you have the chance to share God's light, let it shine. Worship the King in every aspect of your life. Ask God to give you eyes to see as He does, the passion to feel what He feels. Can you see the image of God in every person? Where is the brokenness and disconnect in your neighborhood? In your workplace? Are you the light of Christ in those places?

We close with this final song. It's a new song, asking Jesus to use us and shine His light into the world. Let's reflect upon the words as we worship, and allow Him to transform us as co-lovers of Christ.

Now receive this Blessing: May the Lord bless you and keep you, may His face shine upon you and be gracious unto you. And may you always know the love of Christ deep within your hearts, as He is the true light of the world. In Christ's name, Amen.

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*Note: Sunday sermon texts are also available at [fpchawaii.org](http://fpchawaii.org) The audio version can be downloaded from iTunes. You may also request the audio version by visiting: [fpchkoolau@gmail.com](mailto:fpchkoolau@gmail.com)*