



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

December 15, 2013

"The Word of Christmas" (Christmas Presence Advent Series)

The Rev. Dr. Dan Chun

Social worker and researcher Brene Brown—who happens to be one of my favorite authors and speakers and my wife Pam's as well—talks about scarcity living.

Scarcity living? What's that? When you get up in the morning so exhausted from lack of sleep, and then you go to bed that night feeling you didn't get to do what you want done, THAT is scarcity living. It's the worst of both worlds: not having enough sleep, and yet not getting to do what you want done while awake. Living day after day and finding very little joy, rest, peace, and meaning. Ugh!

Great writers of the past would say that is just what life is about; it has no meaning. Philosophers Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Leo Tolstoy wrote that if you want freedom and meaning in life, you first have to see that life is utterly meaningless.

In Albert Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus says that people want and believe in absolute freedom. We can do what we want. No one should tell us what to do. But to believe in absolute freedom, secular, modern

people must either believe in no God or a God they can't really know.

If there were a God, then there would be rules and guidelines, and then we would not be really free. But if we want absolute freedom, then it is better to believe there is no God or a god whom we cannot really know because if there is a God who we can know, then it might get in the way of our freedom. That god might tell us what to do. Camus is pretty heavy. Indeed, this is pretty heavy stuff.

So if I am truly free, then there is no heaven or hell and no eternal being because if those were reality, that would cramp my style; there would be consequences for my actions.

But get this, Camus says in the end that once you realize you're truly free, then you have to come to the conclusion that nothing you do makes any difference. Life is meaningless for there are no absolute standards.

And if you think your good deeds live on, well, the impersonal universe is going to end some day and not recognize any good you do, so in the end nothing you do makes any difference. As Tim

Keller says, "If the Titanic is going down and everybody aboard is about to die, does it really matter whether you go down hugging or mugging?" – Tim Keller [from his sermon "A Reason for Living," Feb. 27, 1994)

Throw in people like Bertrand Russell, Tolstoy, Sartre, and Camus and you end up saying, "Thanks, Pastor Dan, for one of the most depressing Christmas/Advent sermons I have ever heard."

But I don't live by Tolstoy, Sartre, or Camus. I, and many of us in this room, live on the hope God gave us when on Christmas Day the Savior of the world, His Son, was born as a human baby. This gives life meaning.

Our God is the God whom we CAN know. If He gives us any rules, they are fences for freedom, guidelines not meant to constrain us but to help us live in the most optimum fashion. God's rules are like the rules in a car manual, telling us how to operate our car in the most optimum fashion. Being told what kind of gasoline is best, what tire pressure to have or oil to use is not cramping our style. It's allowing us to use the care more fully.

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We sing the Christmas carol, "Away in the manger no crib for a bed, the little Lord Jesus lay down His sweet head. The stars in the bright sky looked down where He lay. The Little Lord Jesus asleep on the hay."

So who is this baby Jesus? Who is in the manger? Let's look at our Bible reading for today where John refers to Jesus as The Word as he tries to explain how Jesus is God, how He's related to God the Father, but He's also God in the flesh:

John 1:1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

John 1:2 He was in the beginning with God.

John 1:3 All things came into being through Him, and without Him not one thing came into being. What has come into being

John 1:4 in Him was life, and the life was the light of all people.

John 1:5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

John 1:6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John.

John 1:7 He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him.

John 1:8 He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

John 1:9 The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

John 1:10 He was in the world, and the world came into being through Him; yet the world did not know Him.

John 1:11 He came to what was His own, and His own people did not accept Him.

John 1:12 But to all who received Him, who believed in His name, He gave power to become children of God,
John 1:13 who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

John 1:14 And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen His glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

John 1:15 (John testified to Him and cried out, "This was He of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'")

John 1:16 From His fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.

John 1:17 The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

John 1:18 No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made Him known.

This is the word of God!

Get that? No one has ever seen God. No eye has seen. God is invisible, but God was made visible through Jesus Christ.

Nicky Gumbel, the vicar of Holy Trinity Brompton in London and head of the Alpha Course International Movement, has spoken at our church and is excited about what is happening at First Prez through the Alpha Course. He was saying last week that he goes to a squash club. And while there, one of the guys who played with him asked

him, "How many people go to your church?"

Nicky said, "Last Sunday we had 5,000."

And his friend said "Jesus!"

And Nicky said, "That's right, that is why they come."

The friend said, "So sorry, I shouldn't have used that word."

"No," said Nick, "That's okay that's what it's all about – Jesus. And actually, there is one church that has 10,000 people attending."

And another friend who had tattoos all over him, a big burly guy, said, "You mean Hillsong? I go to that church."

And the first guy says, "Jesus!"

And Nicky replied, "Yes, they go there too because of Jesus. It's all about Jesus." (Sermon: *The Message of Christmas 2*, Dec. 8, 2013)

What is Christmas about? Jesus. What is God like? He's like Jesus the Word become flesh. Jesus was God and was with God. He is the only human who was fully divine and fully human. No other leader of a major religion has ever claimed that. Jesus is different. He is unique! If you want to know what God is like, find out about Jesus and study His life. But why did the apostle John, in writing the Gospel of John, refer to Jesus as The Word, which, in Greek, is *logos*?

John could have picked another description for Jesus, like – Jesus was The Man, or Jesus was The Her, or maybe something inanimate like Jesus was The Rock, or The Hulk. But John picked Jesus was The Word!

John's friends may have asked, "What? The Word? Why not The Avenger, or the Miracle Man? Or The Caped Crusader or The Sword of God?" Or at least Super Word! Faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive, able to leap tall buildings in a single bound. But just the Word? The Word? That is just so wimpy or literate. It sounds weak and unexciting. Here I am to save the day, Mighty Word is here to stay (to the tune of Mighty Mouse).

Here's some context. I like what Tim Keller says in one of his sermons: "Jesus is the *rationale* and the *authority* for life." (Sermon: Reason for Life, Sept. 23, 1990, Tim Keller).

Rationale: Jesus gives us the reason for living. Life can be fulfilling because of Him. We don't have to live a scarcity life.

Authority: Jesus gives us the guidelines for living because He knows what is best for us. He has super knowledge, He is the King of Kings, and He is God. Heavenly Father knows best.

But why is He the Word? Why did John choose that words *The Word*? Strange choice? Not really. Think about it. First:

Words can be powerful.

At the beginning of the Academy-Award winning film *All the President's Men* we see the extreme close-up of a piece of paper when suddenly the letter of an old typewriter key comes crashing into the frame and pounds in on the paper the letters of the title of the film in bold, black font.

The director said he did that to show the power of words, that the pen is mightier than the sword. It was appropriate for the film since it was about how the words of newspaper writers Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein brought down the presidency of Richard Nixon in their stories of political cover-up as reported in the Washington Post.

Why did John call Jesus The Word? Because words are powerful, even if written just on a t-shirt.

Twelve years ago in June 2001, my family was in New York City, where we had a family picture taken on top of the World Trade Center. My family on my mom's side is from New York City, so I have lots of aunties, and uncles, and cousins.

As you know, three months later Al Qaeda destroyed the World Trade Center after it sent planes crashing into the towers. When the building went down, my family was not sure if my cousin Duffy, who worked there, made it out. We didn't know where he was. Fortunately, he did, but another relative did not. To this day, Duffy will not talk

about his traumatic experience.

It was a hard week for the entire nation and my family. But then something happened. A week after 9-11, I went to a staff lunch at church and was surprised that everyone was wearing "I love New York" t-shirts, with "love" being a red heart. These were the same shirts I had given the entire staff as my *omiyagi* gift three months earlier after I got back from the New York trip. But now it was the staff's way of saying they were with me in solidarity during a difficult time.

But just to see those words "I Love New York," those simple words on those inexpensive shirts, brought tears to my eyes. I had a huge lump in my throat. I wanted to cry. Words are powerful. They can bring comfort and tears.

Words can be inspirational.

They can take us to great heights – like in literature – for example Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* with Romeo saying:

"But, soft! What light through yonder window breaks? It is the east, and Juliet is the sun. Arise, fair sun, and kill the envious moon, who is already sick and pale with grief, That thou her maid art far more fair than she." (Act 2, Scene 2, Romeo and Juliet).

Or for inspiration, not for love but in war, the words of William Wallace as seen in the movie *Braveheart*, where Wallace, played by Mel Gibson, says these words to

his army that is scared and frightened before fighting the British at the Battle of Stirling:

"Fight and you may die. Run and you will live at least awhile. And dying in your bed many years from now, would you be willing to trade all the days from this day to that for one chance, just one chance, to come back here as young men and tell our enemies that they may take our lives but they will never take our freedom!"

The Word can be memorable.

We remember the word of God—Bible verses that help us muster up courage, bring us comfort, endurance, and wisdom. Verses like Isaiah 41:10: *Do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand.*"

These are words that can give us comfort when we have lost a loved one or are facing medical issues or financial challenges or strained relationships.

And now it all comes together. Who is this baby in the manger? He is Jesus, the son of God, fully human, fully divine. And more so, He is the Living Word! Yes, the Word was God, The Word was with God. He is the Word – powerful, comforting, inspirational, memorable. But more than that He is the Living Word.

Being the living word means He can live in our hearts. We can experience Him. Get this: He writes on our hearts His word, His will. And when we know Jesus and His

words then we might say as it says in Job 23:12: *"I have treasured His words more than daily food!"* (NLT)

We desire a personal relationship with Him. We want to hear His words resounding in our hearts and minds and thoughts. We can experience Him in worship in healing, in ministry, in His forgiveness. Jesus, the Word, gives us words to show His protective nature, like his saying in Luke 22:31-32: *"Simon, Simon, listen! Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers."*

Did you know that Jesus prays for us? That is just what He said in verse 32: "But I have prayed for you."

If you are going through a tough time, I believe that Jesus Himself is praying for you as He did for Peter so that your faith may not fail, and so that when you are strong again, you can strengthen others and not keep it to yourself. This is the Living Word saying He will pray for you so that you will be strong once again so strong that you will be able to help others.

This is the Living Word who came on Christmas Day who would later say, *"These things I have spoken unto you, that in me you might have peace. In the world you shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world."* John 16:33

Jesus is the RATIONALE for our living. In Him we have purpose. In Him we have a chance to receive the fruit of the Spirit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, generosity, and self-control.

He is the AUTHORITY by whom we all should live. Remember Jesus said in John 16:33, "For these things I have spoken unto you." He gave us His word. Why did Jesus the Word come to us on Christmas morn? So that we might have peace. It says "might" because we might choose not to follow Him. But if we choose to follow Jesus, we can have peace.

We don't have to live scarcity living of long hours and no sleep. Jesus the Word and His words can guide us to a better life of joy and peace and order and fulfillment. In the end, we have the rationale for living. In the end, if we follow God's authority good triumphs over evil. In the end, we can have joy and be of good cheer because Jesus Christ has overcome the world.

We may have heartaches, challenges, illnesses, but help is on the way for do we not sing on Christmas: "Joy to the World, the Lord is come, on earth, receive its King." Jesus Christ, the Word, who is God and was with God, is with us forever more. Amen!