



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

December 20, 2015

"A New And Glorious Morn" - Luke 2:1-14

The Rev. Steve Peich

How's the last surge toward Christmas going?

Christmas is arguably the best holiday of the year for a lot of different reasons. Not only because the kids get gifts, or because there is a flood of great food, or the fun family gatherings...but because Christmas takes us into a way of thinking that few other days do.

Christmas seems to remind us that there is more to this life than what we often experience the other days of the year. It seems to reawaken in us the desire to raise the bar on how to live with each other.

After all, we become more generous than normal, don't we? It's a time where people talk in more hopeful tones, and when many folks reflect more seriously on spiritual things.

The title of my sermon is taken from the lyrics of my favorite Christmas hymn, *O Holy Night*. Here is one of the stanzas of that great hymn:

"Long lay the world in sin and error pining; 'Til He appeared and

the soul felt its worth. A thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices, for yonder breaks a new and glorious morn!"

These lyrics capture well the world into which Jesus was born. A world where people needed hope for their weary lives, and needed to feel a sense of worth for their weary souls. Perhaps it is in some ways similar to our world today; perhaps it is similar to *your* world.

This morning I want to us to reflect on the Hope that Christmas brings, and on what was actually "new" and "glorious" about that Christmas morning. A careful reading of the gospels will show us there was a great deal that was "new" with the coming of Christ. Let me show you what I mean.

A few moments ago we read from the Gospel of Luke chapter two. It is a passage I only heard as a kid when I watched the Peanuts cartoon Christmas Special. If you remember that cartoon, it was Linus who read this passage to save the Peanuts gang from the commercialism of Christmas.

But as great as that show was for children, the passage deserves a deeper look. I want to take this important passage out of the cartoon version and help us grasp the true significance of Christmas. In order to do that, we need to plunge into a few cultural and historical details.

Luke is very intentional about what and how he writes his gospel. He is not just laying down a bunch of random trivial facts around the birth of Jesus. He wants us to frame Jesus' arrival in a very specific historical context. And a big part of that context is the rule of Caesar Augustus.

The passage starts with mentioning that Caesar Augustus ordered a new census across his empire, which was bad news not good news, because it would mean more taxes imposed on people like Joseph and Mary.

Let's consider a few things to help us understand why Luke brings him up. Augustus was an adopted son of Julius Caesar. His original name was Octavian. It was later changed to Augustus, meaning "Revered One".

He was also seen as the one who possessed divine characteristics. He reasserted his father, Julius Caesar, to be a god; thus making Augustus a son of a god.

Furthermore, he was praised for having inaugurated a worldwide peace; known historically as, the *Pax Romana*. His birthday was called the beginning of the Good News, or Gospel, for the world. It was particularly in celebration of his birthday that the emperor was hailed "Savior" and "Lord". Moreover, earthly choirs were used in the worship and praise of the emperor.

Putting all this together, we have an Augustus who is considered divine, who was revered, and was seen as the lord, a son of a god, and savior of the world. He is the focus of good news and the bringer of world peace.

In light of what we just read in Luke chapter two and what the angels declared, does this ring a bell?

My point is, contextually speaking, what you see here in Luke chapter two in the announcements of the angels about Jesus is the language of revolution. It was an effort to tell another story of the contemporary world in which Luke lived; to announce another Savior, another King and another Kingdom. It was to proclaim another kind of Good News and Peace for all people.

Bottom line, what Luke is sharing here isn't some quaint religious story about some rosy cheeked child surrounded by little lambs, but this a direct challenge to all of Roman claims to social, spiritual, and political order, power and peace.

We have to remember that as we read the Gospels and the Christmas story, they are not written from a suburban home in a free and democratic society. Rather, they are written from and for marginal communities under an oppressive and unjust dictatorship.

The people around the Christmas story like Mary, Joseph, and the shepherds weren't exactly living the typical suburban life. They were over-taxed, oppressed, marginalized, and powerless. Their lives resembled more of the life I've seen in refugee camps, than life in Kailua.

Bottom line, the words of Luke are no mere words of "holiday cheer." What we find here is something a little more subversive, a little more upsetting and unsettling, but much more powerful and world changing.

And that's part of what Christmas is really about: the new and glorious re-creation of life through Jesus Christ; the re-creation of human worth; the re-creation of human relationships and justice; the re-creation of a new world. And that mission of re-creation will ipso facto call into question every

other version of life, politics, power, and salvation. In fact, one of the many things the angels seem to call into question is Caesar's peace by praising the peace that is coming through Christ.

The *Pax Romana*, or Roman Peace, is a Latin term referring to the Roman Empire in its glorified prime. It began with the accession of Augustus in 27 BC, and lasted until AD 180 and the death of Marcus Aurelius.

The thing I want to point out about this Pax Romana, is that for many people, especially in the region of Israel, it was not a time of bliss and putting flowers in your hair. The thing about Roman Peace is that is no *Pax Romana* without *Power Romana* or *Oppression Romana* or *Intimidation Romana*. After all, it was these guys who perfected crucifixion.

As one historian put it, "Romans regarded peace not as an absence of war, but the rare situation that existed when all opponents had been beaten down and lost the ability to resist." (Arnaldo Momigliano).

What a definition of Peace! The *beat down* of opponents.

I wonder if sometimes, perhaps such as in times like today, times of mass shootings, and terror and polarized politics, we too get so fed up that we wouldn't mind settling for this version of peace.

In fact, don't we hear a bit of the "beat down" verbiage expressed by pundits and politicians alike? The liberals need to "beat down" the conservatives, and the conservatives need to "beat down" the liberals; the extremists want to "beat down" the "infidels", and the West needs to beat down the extremists...and on it goes.

A weary world indeed!! But the Peace of Christ – the *Pax Christi* – that the angels sang about has other goals in mind besides a beat down.

If I understand the gospels correctly, if I understand the Christmas "Revolution" correctly, I think it was focused more on *winning over* rather than *wiping out*.

After all, Christ did not come into the Roman world to destroy Rome, but to save it. John 3.16-17: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send his Son into the world (God did not make Christmas happen) to condemn the world, but to save the world through him."

"The world" in the gospel of John is not simply a reference to our little green and blue planet. Rather, it was a metaphor for those who would not follow God's will. The world is all that is in rebellion toward God and dismissive of God. And that included the Roman world.

And it was into that messed up, rebellious, dismissive world that Jesus came with a whole new game plan for peace than the one that Caesar had established.

I know that when we live in a world that seems so messed up like ours, it's hard to believe Christ's peace can ever emerge through anything else but beat downs and wipe outs. But allow me to share a real story that may help us begin to see things a little more hopefully. It is both sublime and kind of crazy.

It takes places in Flanders, Belgium in 1914 during the first Christmas of WW I. In that war a new kind of military tactic was used called, "trench warfare". The enemy and allied trenches were sometimes less than 30 yards from each other.

By December of 1914 much of the European countryside was outlined with trenches dug by soldiers of the different nations at war. Not only were the trenches a nightmare of the constant threat of death by sharp shooter or mortar fire, but they were also a nightmare of smells, cold, and dampness.

Soldiers in the trenches had to often walk through shin high cold water. They also had to battle literally millions of rats, infestations of lice, as well as Trench foot—which is basically the rotting of your feet.

They also endured the putrid smells of latrine water that would overflow into the trenches after rains. And of course there were the dead bodies that littered the area above the trenches called "No Man's land".

As hellish as all that was, on Christmas Eve of 1914 something astonishing happened. Surprisingly, even in this crazy war zone, Christmas packages were being delivered to troops in various ways. Soldiers on both sides received food, clothes, smoking pipes, cigars, candies, and even cakes from family supporters.

Well, on Christmas Eve a few Germans had managed to slip a chocolate cake into British trenches with a request. The Germans asked for a ceasefire later that evening so they could celebrate the festive season and their Captain's birthday. The British accepted the invitation and offered some tobacco as a return present.

That evening, German heads suddenly popped up and started to sing. Each song ended with a round of applause from both sides. Some even competed with each other on who sang a hymn better. Suddenly, on more parts of the front line some Germans started to prop up miniature Christmas trees with candles on them. In some areas they got enough courage to meet one another in that place of death called No-man's Land.

Now out of the trenches the soldiers continued to sing with each other and even began to exchange gifts. One group of Brits received two barrels of French beer from the Germans!! In some places soldiers who had been barbers in civilian times gave free haircuts.

When the generals caught wind of all the fraternizing they ordered the soldiers to stop and go back to the trenches. But despite their superior officer's wishes to go back to the place of weary souls and wipe outs and beat downs, the men kept living into their Christmas Peace.

As one report put it, No-man's Land became something of a playground.

One soldier recorded in his diary: "The English brought a soccer ball from the trenches, and pretty soon a lively game ensued. How marvelously wonderful, yet how strange it was...Christmas, the celebration of Love, managed to bring *mortal enemies together as friends* for a time."

Eventually the threatening orders from the generals put an end to the un-warlike activity and they got back in the trenches.

One medical officer wrote about it this way: "At 8.30 I fired three shots in the air and put up a flag with "Merry Christmas" on it, and I climbed on the parapet. He [the German officer] put up a sheet with "Thank you" on it (*think about that – Merry Christmas and*

thank you from enemies!!), and the German Captain appeared on the parapet. We both bowed and saluted and got down into our respective trenches, and he fired two shots in the air, and the War was on again."

Have you ever heard a sadder statement? How suddenly strange and bizarre does that all sound?

For a moment of time in the most fearsome and dangerous and stressful of places men decided to live from another plane. They decided to live from a place beyond the Caesarian way of establishing peace; beyond "beat downs" and bullets, beyond their fears and hatred of each other, beyond their politics and labels for each other, and live into the Peace of Christ.

As I reflected on this amazing story I realized that trenches are a good metaphor for how more than a few of us live. Trenches are a place of fear and suffering, of always being combat focused. It is a place where peace only comes by defeating, or beating down, or wiping out the other trench.

Again, when I pick up a newspaper, or listen to the news and talk shows, or even when I just listen to some married couples there seems to be so many folks living "in the trenches".

It's amazing how entrenched we all can be as friends or

co-workers or married couples when it comes to handling conflict. (Anyone know what I mean?). People who get stuck in a routine of seeing and treating the other from the 'trench view.'

I try in various ways to invite folks out of the trenches and help them see that they are both on the same side—God's side!! There really can be a "new and glorious morn" for their marriage or office or home if they get out of their trenches. But sometimes the hurt is so deep, the anger so great, that they'd rather stay in the trenches because to come out toward peace feels risky, feels vulnerable. What if I get hurt again? What if I lose?

Some of you might be experiencing trenches in your life right now—at your workplace or with your spouse or kids or with your friends. Trenches are everywhere aren't they?

But here's my point, I never saw conflict resolved or peace increase or relationships deepened in a marriage or church or work place or family, when people *stay in the trenches*.

And if you think about it, going into trenches as Christians, as people who know and believe in the Peace of Christ and not the peace of Caesar—to go back into trenches to deal with each other from there is just as crazy as those soldiers going back into their trenches to start shooting at each other.

Whether the arena is your marriage or the marketplace, your political positions or your theological preferences, the trenches are always a step down into Caesar's world—a step down into fear and into suffering, into beat downs and wipe outs, into weary souls and shattered relationships.

Some of us may hear this story and think "Steve, this is nice, even inspiring, but it's just not practical, realistic, or reasonable in our world. It's not practical in my home, in my office, or in our war zones today. It's a nice story but, in the real world, those generals were right we need to get back in the trenches and deal with our world in the same old hostile, fearful, and Caesarian way."

My friends, I'm not saying such an approach is easy. It might create a lot of sacrifice for our lives to get out of the trench. But we can't stop because things are difficult. As G.K. Chesterton once said. "Christianity has not been tried and left wanting. It has been found difficult and left untried." Have you really tried the peace of Christ in how you deal with people on every level?

The trenches are escapable. They are not as predestined as we might think. In fact, a number of people live out this truth all the time in the midst of chaos and pretty rotten folks.

I spoke with a couple of doctors this week and they both told me that when a violent

criminal comes to a hospital, doctors cannot choose to refuse help. Why? Because their vow to save is not predicated on how good or bad or lovable a person is. It's simply predicated on the fact that this is a person. It's predicated on the deep commitment to heal *anyone* whatever 'trench' they came out of.

Just the other day I was talking to a military doctor. He shared how when he was in training he was asked to stitch up a drug addict strung out on heroin, who had decided to kill himself by cutting up his body with deep slashes.

The doctor told me it took some time to stitch him up, so as he stitched the man he also talked to him. When he finished the stitches he asked if he could pray for the man. The man said yes. And by the time the doctor finished praying, this "dirty violent drug addict" was filled with tears.

I asked the doctor what happened? How did you view him to act like this toward him? The doctor said. "Sometimes I even see myself in people like this. Scared, hurt, and broken. It can be very humbling." The doctor added, "I keep praying, this is a child of God every bit as valuable as I am."

I pressed further, "What if you were deployed and that man was an enemy combatant?" The doctor responded, "He would be *just as valuable - to God.*"

And brothers and sisters, as a result of that view of another—a view of people from above the trenches—a drug addicted, body slashing, suicidal soul felt it's worth.

And it is through that view of people, who normally scare us or threaten us, that a "new and glorious morn" breaks into a weary world.

Now please understand, I'm not saying we ignore criminal behavior. Christmas peace does not mean there are no consequences to our really bad behaviors. But my point is, how much greater than the Hippocratic oath of a physician to do no harm is *our* vow as Christians to do much so good? To see as Christ sees, to love as Christ loves, to serve as Christ serves.

Over the years as a Christian I have given spiritual guidance and soul care to drug addicts and sex addicts, alcoholics and adulterers, sex offenders, law breakers and liars. And it is not because I have "Reverend" in front of my name.

Just like it wasn't merely the Hippocratic oath that motivated that military doctor. It was simply because this is the message and meaning and mission of Christmas; that God so loved a messed up world and did not want to condemn that world, but save the world—so that *even the worst* of that world may have eternal life.

Why bring all this up? Why emphasize this aspect of Christmas? I bring it up because of what I hear and see in communities, in marriages, in workplaces and especially in political spaces. There is a lot of *trench talk*, and not enough *truce talk*.

I bring this up because the world is still full of hurting marginalized people who desperately need the church to step up and step into the message, meaning, and mission of Christmas—and to get out of those trenches no matter how tempting it is to slide back into them and fight like Caesar.

Which brings me to the last thing I would like to ask you to reflect on. The name of the first soldier who started the Christmas truce is never mentioned. This nameless guy by taking a risk for a greater good started something so much bigger than himself and God blessed it.

The same can happen for us if we get out of the “trench view” of the world. You may sit here today and see yourself in the Kingdom of God as some “common foot soldier”. But this common foot soldier caused something to happen that no amount of bombs or politicians or officers could—he brokered a peace right on the front lines of hell on earth.

And perhaps so can you. When you take time to truly listen to someone share their burden, pain, anger or sorrow, their doubts

about God—you create a space for peace where a soul can feel its worth.

When you offer prayer for another who seems so distressed, you create an opportunity for peace where a soul can feel its healing.

When you give to the ministries like the ones in our Gifts of Love brochure, you create a possibility of peace where a soul can feel the tangible love of God from Kailua to Cambodia and points beyond.

Just this past weekend our church ministered to 32 families in Waimanalo to help them experience a piece of Christmas peace.

Today some of you may be weary of life in the trenches. Or perhaps you are on the wrong end of a beat down at work or from a divorce or from a breakup.

Today we want to invite you to open your heart to the Prince of Peace, Jesus Christ, and allow His peace to penetrate your weary soul and heal your broken heart.

As Leon sings “O Holy Night” you will be awed by his voice. But what we pray is that you would reflect on your place in living into these lyrics. And we also hope that you reflect on the state of your own life right now. Do you *feel* the worth God intended for your life? Are you free of the chains that bind up your soul and

keep you from experiencing the joy of Christ?

I don’t care if we were dealing crack cocaine last night, Christ still loves you and invites you to come out of your trenches of fear and anger and pain and to come up into His Christmas Peace.

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Note: Sunday sermon texts are also available at fpchawaii.org. The audio version can be downloaded from iTunes. You may also request the audio version by visiting: fpchkoolau@gmail.com