



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

December 21, 2014

"How To See Christmas" - Revelation 1:8-18

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Today we're talking about how to really see Christmas. I love the vision of children. They see with eyes of faith and that means sometimes, just sometimes they can see more than those of us who are adults can see. (*link to video of children from Solana Beach Presbyterian Church telling Christmas story in their own words—used with permission: <http://vimeo.com/56043885>*)

At Christmas time the streets of downtown Honolulu are ablaze with light. I had the chance to see those lights the other night. It's so much fun! The music of Advent fills our church on Sunday morning and it will fill this space on Christmas Eve. The fragrances of the season permeate many of our homes. Cookies, pies, honey-baked hams on some tables, kalua pig and poke on others. What an amazing season this is! Our five senses are on overload! And they should be on overload.

The coming of God to the earth in Jesus Christ is what we celebrate every December. That is the most astounding event in human history. God came down to earth. The King of the universe was born in an obscure village in

the Middle East. On that first Christmas night, the One who fashioned the galaxies fell asleep in a feeding trough in a town called Bethlehem under the watchful care of a poor couple. Isn't that amazing?!

Think of that. The One who flung our solar system into existence and set the galaxy in which it spins in motion, THAT One was sleeping in the arms of a poor peasant teenager on that first Christmas night. God came to us as a vulnerable baby entrusted into the protective, nurturing care of a poor couple. As you think about that scene, what do you see?

If you and I can only imagine that scene with our mind's eye. If we can see with the eyes of faith what is happening in the birth of Jesus Christ, then you and I can live with the hope that anything is possible.

If your family is experiencing some stress this Christmas, your family can experience restoration and healing. Forgiveness and reconciliation is possible.

If you've lost your job, or don't know what you should

study, or if you're simply confused or uncertain about what your life is all about, clarity and fresh vision can come.

If you're facing the end of your life here on earth, you can have hope that everlasting life in the presence of loved ones and a God who loves you with a love that is beyond measuring is what awaits you.

The coming of God to the earth in Jesus, that event, in and of itself, is a message of hope. If we can see with the eyes of faith what is happening in the birth of Jesus Christ, then you and I can live with the hope that anything is possible. The message of Christmas is a message of hope for those who have given up hoping. Christmas tells us that there is no place too difficult, too broken, too filled with shame, too humble that God will not go to reach us. Can we see that?

This Christmas we've been talking about how we hear Christmas, how we taste and feel Christmas. Today we're going to talk about how we see Christmas—not just with our physical eyes, but with the eyes of faith.

How are we going to make sense of the coming of Jesus Christ for us in this season that fills our senses with lights, melodies and aromas that hold out the promise of meals shared with friends and family, in this season that invites us to start again, to hope again?

Listen to my good friend, Laura Harbert, the Dean of the Chapel and Spirituality at Fuller Seminary, "We yearn for new beginnings that stir up the hope that growth and change are possible—that we get another chance to do it differently this time. To do it better."

That kind of hope is available to you and me today. It is available to those we love and it is available to our broken world.

Jesus Christ did not enter an idyllic world like the one pictured on a Christmas card. He came to mud and manure, to oppression and poverty. Jesus was born a child in a world, like ours, that was filled with both pain and promise. A star led wise men to something they couldn't fully understand at first. They followed a star to a place that was unfamiliar and it was there they met the One who would be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God and Prince of Peace.

Maybe some of you this morning feel drawn here but don't really understand why. As we once again explore the wonders of this season—as we hear and touch, taste and see

the goodness of our God—the invitation is to hope again even if there seems to be no reason for hope.

I have good news for us today. Things are not as they seem. Or to say it more precisely, things are not ONLY as they seem.

In 1976, Father John Powell, a priest-psychologist, wrote a book entitled, "Fully Human, Fully Alive". He subtitled the book, "A New Life through a New Vision". Father Powell made this observation: "It has been generally agreed upon that true and full living is based on three components like the legs of a tripod: intrapersonal dynamics (that is, what goes on inside of us because the influences that have shaped who we are), interpersonal relationships, and a frame of reference."

By "frame of reference" Powell means what others call "worldview," or "vision of reality." Father Powell went on to argue that your frame of reference and mind controls the quality of our living. He writes: "Through the eyes of our minds you and I look out at reality (ourselves, other people, life, the world, God)...The main point is that it is the dimensions and clarity of this vision that determines the dimensions of our world and the quality of our lives. To the extent that we are blind or have distorted reality, our lives and our happiness have

been diminished. Consequently, if we are to change—to grow—there must first be a change in this basic vision, or perception of reality."

Christmas should change the way we perceive reality. One of the messages of Christmas is quite startling: Things are not as they seem. Or to say it with great precision, things are not ONLY as they seem.

At the end of the video we showed from Solana Beach, the kids read from the Gospel According to John. "In Him (in Jesus) was life and that life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has NOT overcome it." John 1:4-5.

The person who made that amazing statement is the apostle John and he's the same guy who wrote the last book of the Bible, the Book of Revelation.

John had the eyes of faith I'm talking about today. He had eyes that could see a reality that framed and defined every other reality in his life. From personal experience, John knew that the light of Christ shines in darkest places and there is no darkness strong enough to extinguish the light of Christ.

Towards the end of his life the Apostle John was arrested by the Roman authorities. He was exiled to an island in the Mediterranean called Patmos. Patmos was no Hawaiian island.

John was incarcerated there because he would not pledge his ultimate allegiance to the government of Rome. Every Roman citizen was required by the government to go into one of the state sponsored Temples, take a pinch of incense and throw it on the fire and say, "Kaiser kurios", which means "Caesar is Lord".

That was not a problem for most Roman citizens because they were polytheistic. They believed in many gods so it didn't make a difference to most Romans if Caesar thought he was a god and demanded worship from the people. They just added him to the list of gods they worshipped.

But not John. For John there was only one person who deserved the title Lord and that was Jesus Christ. So when he was a man in his 80s, he was banished to the Island of Patmos where he would bake on the rocks. While he was there he had a vision. He discovered that things are not only as they seem. Listen to John talk about what he saw on one Sunday. He's writing to his fellow Christians who are facing a lot of persecution because they believed the same thing John did and because they believed that only Jesus is Lord they were a threat to the status quo.

Revelation 1:9 I, John, your brother who share with you in Jesus the persecution and the kingdom and the patient endurance, was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of

*Jesus. 10 I was in the spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet 11 saying, "Write in a book **what you see** and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus, to Smyrna, to Pergamum, to Thyatira, to Sardis, to Philadelphia, and to Laodicea."*

*Rev. 1:12 Then I turned to **see** whose voice it was that spoke to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, 13 and in the midst of the lampstands **I saw** one like the Son of Man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash across his chest. (In John's day a conquering emperor wore a sash across his chest to announce that his work was done. He had defeated his enemy. He was victorious)*

Verse 14 His head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; his eyes were like a flame of fire, 15 his feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters. 16 In his right hand he held seven stars, and from his mouth came a sharp, two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining with full force. (This is the image of someone who is clearly in control. Someone with enormous power and abilities.)

Rev. 1:17 When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he placed his right hand on me, saying, "Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, 18 and the living one. I was dead, and

see (that's the word, 'behold'), I am alive forever and ever; and I have the keys of Death and of Hades."

When you come across the word, "behold" in the New Testament a better translation is, "Look!" Look! Look! Jesus says he has the keys of death and hell. He's defeated the thing that humanity fears the most, death itself. "I've got the keys to death, you don't need to be afraid." That's the vision that John sees of the risen, resurrected Jesus. At Christmas, we see Jesus in a feeding trough for animals, vulnerable and at risk. John's vision shows us something different. This is who Jesus Christ is right now, though hidden from our view. Can you see that?

The name of the last book of the Bible is the Revelation of Jesus Christ. The word "revelation" is the English translation of the Greek word "apocalypsis". It's the word from which we get the English word 'apocalypse'. If we know that an apocalyptic event is on the way, that is generally not good news...or is it? Movies like Independence Day, when Will Smith helps save the world from an alien invasion, is about an apocalyptic event. That's the way we tend to define that word.

But an "apocalypse", in the Bible, is an "unveiling". It literally means to pull back the curtain so we can see what is already present but hidden from our eyes.

In the first chapter of the Book of Revelation, the apostle John records what he sees in a vision. Jesus Christ pulled back the veil that graciously stood between John and the realities of the kingdom of God that he could not yet fully see. And what does John see? The first thing John describes is the real presence of Jesus Christ in the world. Though hidden from view, the living Christ is among us. The resurrected, glorious Son of God is walking with us. Can you see that?

Here at the beginning of the book of Revelation, John affirms something that can be truly life changing for every person that can accept it and can keep it in mind. The core conviction of the book of Revelation is that things are not only as they seem. John is convinced that there is more to what is real than what we can see and perceive with our five senses. As valuable as those senses are, and those senses are gifts from God, there is a seeing that enables us to perceive realities that are usually beyond our physical sight. There is a reality that is, in many ways, hidden from our eyes most of the time. There is a reality that graciously exists behind a veil but one day, that veil, that curtain will be fully removed.

In this season of Advent, during this season of waiting, let's stop for a moment and take another look. Look at what we can see, what we can touch and smell. Think about what we might have seen on the news last night or

read in the news this morning. What John is saying in the Book of Revelation is that things are not only as they seem. The challenges each of us face are real. The pain in the world is real. The joys we experience are real but there is more. Things are not ONLY as they seem.

In the birth of Jesus Christ, to a humble, poor family tells us that Christianity is not a fanciful escape from the way things are in our lives and in our world. In fact, the Christian faith is an invitation to courageously see the way things truly are in our world and in our lives and step towards those realities trusting that God is with us and is able to help us face whatever it is that is ahead. In some fundamental sense Christianity is an invitation to see, with eyes of faith, realities that are even more foundational than the realities we perceive with our unaided senses. There is more to this present moment than meets the eye.

Dallas Willard once wrote, "With this magnificent God positioned among us, Jesus brings us the assurance that our universe is a perfectly safe place to be." Life doesn't always feel like that. There are some days that our world does not feel like it is a perfectly safe place for me to be. Sometimes it doesn't seem like a safe place for others either. But John says in the Book of Revelation, things are not only how they seem.

In the birth of Jesus, God pulls back the curtain, just a little, and allows us to see right into his heart of love. "Veiled in flesh the Godhead see. Hail the incarnate Deity. Pleased as Man with us to dwell. Jesus, our Emmanuel."

In the birth of Jesus Christ on the first Christmas night, God veils Himself by taking on our humanity—but He veils Himself not to hide Himself from us but that we might actually begin to see who our God actually is. This is our God. The One who flung the universe into existence, the One who gave us the gift of this Earth, the One who blessed us with friends and families, the One who gave us every single gift that we have, this One willingly comes to us as a helpless baby to take upon himself responsibility for all our mistakes, all of our and sins. He comes to die in our place that we might live. Christ has come to save us all. Look! Look! Can we see with eyes of faith?

Things are not ONLY as they seem. That was true the night Jesus was born and that is true today. No matter what circumstances we, our loved ones, and our world face...there is hope. Look! Look! Look! Christ has come to save us all!

May each of us be given eyes of faith this Christmas so that we might see that things are not ONLY as they seem.