



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

December 23 and 24, 2012

"And His Name Shall Be Called" (Christmas Eve Sermon)

The Rev. Dr. Dan Chun

In a fantasy world, as in the song we just heard, everything is always fair and just, and everyone lives in peace and honesty. But we know from the Matt and Heather Weavers' stories and from our own, that our world is not always like that. It can be full of pain and strife.

Hence, to make it in this world, we need all the help we can get. We need good friends. Christmas reminds us that God offers us not only salvation through His Son, but also His friendship. And that is why He came to this earth—yes to be our Lord and Savior—but also, in His own words, in John 15:15, to be our friend.

On Christmas day, God took on human form to communicate to us what friendship with Him would be like. For some of us, that friendship can be difficult to imagine, and that is why, I think, God gave us pets, like dogs, to help us better understand what friendship with God is like.

Seeing that we have more children at this worship service than any other, let me show the *keiki* and us adults a video that can help us all understand a little better our friendship with God. (The video *GoD and DoG* by Wendy Francisco is shown.)

We thank Wendy Francisco for giving us permission to use that wonderful video.

We all want a friend we can trust and depend on; someone we can confide in and get unconditional love from no matter what. Someone who can be a model for us on how to live.

Last week, we heard Jerry and Susan Coffee share with us what happened to them while at the Dallas Fort Worth Texas airport last month and how God helped them through it.

Jerry Coffee, by the way, is a real hero. He's a humble man. A great model for a friend. He was a POW during the Vietnam War. He flew the reconnaissance plane that took photos that alerted the United States and the world in the 1960s that the Russians had put missiles in Cuba with a range that could hit American cities.

Jerry is a great man who, as well as Jim Hickerson in our church, suffered greatly as a POW. Both men were tortured and beaten by the Viet Cong, but are grateful today to God for their survival.

Last month Jerry and Susan's flight at the Dallas airport got delayed by an hour, and, like most of us would be, they were perturbed and disappointed. While at an airport restaurant, Jerry started to feel sick. So they went to the airline courtesy lounge where Jerry then slid to the ground and later on realized that he was having a heart attack.

The good news is that he recovered from that, and he and Susan shared their story of gratitude in our worship service last week. But get this: had they not had their flight delayed an hour, had Jerry had his heart attack during the flight, he probably would have died. The irritating delay was actually a blessing.

From then on, when things go wrong in my life, I have actually said to myself, "Jerry Coffee." It would mean: "Be thankful in spite of any discomfort, any disappointment." Look what happened to Jerry! A delayed flight was actually a blessing in disguise. And think about what he went through in Vietnam! Who am I to ever complain?

Traffic jam and late to an appointment? Since last month, my response to myself is, "Jerry Coffee." Couldn't get a restaurant reservation? Jerry Coffee. Stuck in the wrong, long line at Costco? Jerry Coffee!

This new mantra of mine actually began last month when I had flown all day and night through two cities and layovers to Houston, Texas. I was on my way to El Salvador for a mission trip to help children in poverty.

I finally got to a Houston hotel at 10:30 pm. I wearily walked up to the counter at the front desk, and found out that they gave away the last room.

You've got to be kidding! I showed them my confirmation number and they said, sorry, no room at the inn. Unbelievable!

Did I swear and curse? No, I said to myself, "Jerry Coffee." I still tried to convince them, but to no avail. They told me that they would shuttle me to another hotel that's 15 minutes away. I was really exhausted, but I just said to myself as I got on the shuttle, "Jerry Coffee."

When I got to that hotel and walked into its huge, luxurious, spacious lobby, I then realized that I got upgraded from a two-star hotel to a four-star hotel. Jerry Coffee!

It was now 11:15 pm. Strangely, when I asked the front desk if there were room service since I hadn't had dinner yet, they said no room service after 11 pm. You've got to be kidding. I just missed it by 15 minutes! But what did I say? "Jerry Coffee!" I would still be grateful in the midst of bad news.

So I went up to my room and, lo and behold, I had been upgraded to a suite all to myself with my own living room and bedroom. There was even an unopened bottle of wine and a fresh fruit plate that I didn't order. Jerry Coffee!

Does a pastor taste and drink wine? Um, Jesus did, and we are Presbyterians!

Now, though Jerry and his wife shared their story during this Advent season, the season is not about them. It's about another person with the same initials as Jerry Coffee. That's right; J.C. also stands for Jesus Christ.

Being the only church in the USA that owns and runs an 18-hole golf course, I have to say that people say his name everyday on our golf course, all the time! But the way they say it is not something I would advise. The tone of how they say Jesus Christ does not sound like gratitude or seeking for His advice.

And why they would say often this other phrase that asks God to send their little white ball into damnation, I don't understand because that to me just makes their game lousier than it already is.

So what is the real essence of Christmas? Christmas is the birth of a man named Jesus Christ. Millennia ago, the prophets of old predicted that a Messiah would come and His name would be called Wonderful, Counselor, the Mighty God, the Prince of Peace. In the end they discovered his name to be Jesus Christ. The name means everything. Jesus, also called Emmanuel, means "God with us."

Christmas means that God chose to come down to earth in the form of a man, named Jesus, to tell us and show us in ways we would understand how we should live, and why faith in God is of utmost importance. Not just a logical, cognitive, distant, academic faith, but one through which we see that this God of the universe loves us so much that He wants a friendship with us.

He wants us to have an intimate relationship with Him, more than like having a pet, more than having a great heroic human model like Jerry Coffee, but a life where it's Jesus Christ Himself who is on our minds and souls when things go wrong and when we need direction.

Why is faith in Christ so important? Because Jesus is the real deal. He really is God. He really does love us. He will forgive us if we ask for forgiveness, and He can show us how to live a fulfilling life. He can supernaturally heal us physically and emotionally. He can help us and give us hope. He really is the source of love, peace, and justice.

At the beginning of this talk I talked about the pain we have in this world. It is indeed a fantasy to think we can have a world without pain and heartache.

And that is why Jesus Christ is the best friend and Lord we could ever want. He knows what pain is.

And that is why I would follow Jesus Christ because He, too, was tortured, even more so than Jerry was. Ultimately, Jesus gave up His life for you and for me.

Bible scholar and friend John Stott, who just died last year, gave this statement, which I love: "I could never myself believe in God if it were not for the Cross. In the real world of pain, how could one worship a God who was immune to it?"

Jesus, fully God, fully man chose not to be immune to pain. He knows what we are going through. What a great God! He came to this earth on a starry night in Bethlehem over 2,000 years ago. Right from the beginning He took the side of the poor, the oppressed, those in pain.

Jesus was born in a stable, His first bed. It was not a nice room in Queen's Medical Center, or a modern neo-natal ward, but a wooden manger filled with straw near smelly and unclean animals.

This was the God who chose to be born as a Jew, to be part of an oppressed people, who later on was ostracized by the Romans and religious leaders, and then ultimately beaten and tortured for our sake.

Do you see what this means? As author and pastor Tim Keller says, “We don’t know the reason God allows evil and suffering to continue, but we know what the reason isn’t, what it can’t be. It can’t be that He doesn’t love us! It can’t be that He doesn’t care.

“God so loved us and hates suffering that He was willing to come down [at Christmas] and get involved in it. And therefore [from the cradle to] the Cross is an incredibly empowering hint. Ok, it’s only a hint, but if you grasp it, it can transform you. It can give you strength.” *(9/11 Memorial Service Sermon Transcript Sept 10, 2006)*

What many people don’t understand is that you can have a friendship with God through Jesus. Friendship with God, that’s right. Jesus says in the Bible:

“I’m no longer calling you servants because servants don’t understand what their master is thinking and planning. No, I’ve named you friends because I’ve let you in on everything I’ve heard from the Father.” John 15:15 (The Message)

And that is the relationship most of us miss out on. A sturdy friendship. Having a faith in Jesus, and knowing and living with Him as friend is like having an anvil of faith. What I mean is that no matter how many hammers, of hundreds of different sizes and weight, hit the anvil, the anvil still stands no matter what.

With a strong faith and friendship with God, we can say, “Jesus Christ is my anvil of faith and my anchor of hope.”

Tonight, all beautiful music is celebrating basically one thing: that God was willing to come down to this earth—on Christmas Day—to live among us. He taught us. His words are recorded in the Bible for us to follow.

He was willing to be beaten and tortured for our sake. He offered the Holy Spirit to live in us. We can ask him to be the core of our life as Lord and Savior and Friend. And when that happens His supernatural power and love manifested in the Holy Spirit comes to reside in us. And a friendship with God begins.

I know all of us are facing challenges and struggles today. When I sense the pain that people go through, it can be staggering. I hear it in counseling sessions, I hear it in our healing services. I hear it over coffee.

That is why, as a symbol of hope, we started this tradition displaying this wreath of satin roses that has been placed on the cross. This wreath reminds us that God fully experienced our pain, our challenges, and our sin.

Every rose in this wreath symbolizes an answered prayer. Through these roses, people have prayed, “I am facing an impossible situation, and I desperately need your help, Lord.”

Our tradition is that at every Christmas Eve service, we take a satin rose from a basket. (I’ll give you instructions later on when to pass down the basket. We’ll be

doing that later.) Then each of us say a prayer tonight, a prayer that’s one against all odds, a miraculous, long-shot prayer!

And when the Lord answers that prayer in a way you understand, send that rose back to me with a letter explaining what happened and how God worked or performed a miracle in your life.

God always, always answers our prayers in four basic ways. Sometimes He is saying:

- No, not yet.
- No, I love you too much.
- Yes, I thought you would never ask.
- Yes, And here’s even more.

I say, He will always answer our prayers but often in ways we don’t understand.

Let me close with an email, I recently received and I have this person’s permission, though I will make it anonymous. It’s a way of her saying “Jerry Coffee.” No, it’s actually more like “Jesus Christ.”

“Dear Dan, you asked us to e-mail you if we had an answer to a prayer with our Christmas Rose. The last two Christmases I have prayed for my hair to return (hair loss from a serious disease). I have been to many healing services and prayed for the same request as well as for others’ concerns.

“To date there is no significant change in hair growth on my head.

“As you were asking for input for answered prayers, it struck me that perhaps you should hear from someone who has not had their prayer answered in the way they may have chosen.

In having that be my story, I wanted to share with you the wonderful things that happened in my life in the midst of my prayer being “unanswered.”

“I have been the recipient of such an abundance of God’s love through Him and through others. I have had to see myself in a new light, and for a vain person that is not an easy commodity. But through God’s love, I have learned that not all prayers are answered in the way they are asked, but that they are answered in so many different ways that were never expected.

“I have been given a freedom that I never had before. God seems to have so many plans for me, and so far, none of them include my having hair.

“I admit that it has been a very fine line between acceptance and hope, but with God at the helm, I realize that in the midst of my acceptance, Hope is still alive and well. The timing, however, will always be His! Life is a treasure and God’s presence in our lives is simply a miracle to be accessed by every one of us in the good times and the bad. I thank Him everyday for his amazing blessings in my life.” End of letter.

I appreciate the honesty of that person. It’s an honesty that has faith as her anvil. No matter what kind of hammer hits the anvil of faith, the faith remains. And that is what I desire for us all—a faith and friendship with God. That’s what Christmas is about.

In a moment, you will have a chance to receive a red satin rose so that you can say a prayer and hopefully send back that rose some

day to me when God has answered your prayer.

But for now, I would like to say a mass healing prayer for you. It’s part of our tradition for me to pray a miracle Christmas Eve prayer. For many of you, incredible healings and blessings will happen tonight. Be they physical, emotional or spiritual healing, miraculous things happen on this special night every year. (Pastor Dan says a mass healing prayer.)

Listen to some of the answered prayers from last year’s Christmas Eve rose prayers:

- Remission from Graves disease
- Remission from cancer.
- Healing from pain in the knee and back.
- Healing from complex regional pain syndrome.
- A girl who sang in our Christmas Eve service last year in crutches because of a lingering and painful disease just ran a 5K run last month.
- There has been forgiveness given and forgiveness received.
- Recovery from alcoholism.
- Birth of a son after two miscarriages.
- Four new jobs after a very long wait!

Miracles do happen!

And now, in each section of seats, underneath the chair on the aisles closest to the center of the sanctuary or of the overflow room, you will find a basket of roses. Please take it from under your seat now and each of you can take one rose and then pass the basket down.

As we think of Jesus Christ, whose name is wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Prince of Peace, and loving Son of God. During this next song, pray your miraculous Christmas rose prayer.

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