



# SERMON OF THE WEEK

## First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

### December 23 & 24, 2018

#### "He Is With Us"

#### Pastor Dan Chun

**C**hristmas is an incredible holy time. There's a special feeling, an aura. But why? Is it the special lights or decorations around town or in the home, or how the malls appear more sparkly, dazzling, and colorful?

It's certainly NOT that special feeling of being with so many people during Black Friday as they sharply elbow you out of the way to get that deal or that special toy you wanted is stolen out of your hand. Or when you are at Costco and want that sample of food and someone else grabs it just before your fingers can get to it.

I was at Costco last week patiently watching a demonstration of a Vitamix juicer machine, waiting to get a sample of this nutritious drink, and then when the demonstration was done and I moved forward to get the delicious high-vitamin beverage, but a crowd of people cut in line in front of me to take the first cups! I hate it when people cut in line before me. There will be a special place in the universe for line-cutters. Bah humbug! Merry Christmas!

But get this. Part of the true story of Christmas is the crowds, maybe even irritating crowds. Thousands of people jamming into a city for a census, as the Bible tells this prelude to the Christmas story in the Gospel of Luke:

**Luke 2:1-14** *At that time the Roman emperor, Augustus, decreed that a census should be taken throughout the Roman Empire. (This was the first census taken when Quirinius was governor of Syria.)*

*All returned to their own ancestral towns to register for this census. And because Joseph was a descendant of King David, he had to go to Bethlehem in Judea, David's ancient home. He traveled there from the village of Nazareth in Galilee. He took with him Mary, his fiancée, who was now obviously pregnant. And while they were there, the time came for her baby to be born. She gave birth to her first child, a son. She wrapped him snugly in strips of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no lodging available for them.*

*That night there were shepherds staying in the fields nearby, guarding their flocks of sheep. Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared among them, and the radiance of the Lord's glory surrounded them. They were terrified, but the angel reassured them. "Don't be afraid!" he said. "I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David! And you will recognize Him by this sign: You will find a baby wrapped snugly in strips of cloth, lying in a manger."*

*Suddenly, the angel was joined by a vast host of others—the armies of heaven—praising God and saying, "Glory to God in highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased."*

This is what makes Christmas so wonderful, that God came to this earth in the form of a baby named Jesus. But notice His arrival comes with great discomfort.

Joseph and Mary, who is probably nine months pregnant, have to walk or maybe ride a wagon or animal from Nazareth to Bethlehem out in the open, vulnerable to the elements. It is not necessarily comfortable being 9-months pregnant riding in a nice air-conditioned car let alone traveling out in the open. Poor Mary.

From Nazareth to Bethlehem is 80 miles, if you walk a straight line. But most Nazarenes took a longer route because they wanted to bypass the territory of Samaria, which lay in-between, for there was much bad feeling between the Samaritans and the Jews. Plus there was the risk of attack by bandits along the way. Some scholars say the journey would have taken at least a week to get to Bethlehem. Poor Mary.

They get to Bethlehem and the crowds are bigger than any mall or Costco.

Tired, weary they find no room in any inn and perhaps then Mary says those fateful words to Joseph, "Hey honey, I think my water broke." Kids, ask your relatives later what that means, but basically she is about to have a baby.

Mary is about to deliver her first child. There is no Queens West Hospital, or Queens East or Southwest, or Kaiser, Kapiolani or Straub, or any Pali Momi for a holy mommy with a painful tummy. They end up in an unsterile stable, and baby Jesus is born in humble, dirty beginnings. And all the germaphobes are thinking, "Oh no, where's the Purell?"

**L**ife was difficult from the very beginning of Jesus' birth. It was incredibly emotionally hard even before the journey some 9 months prior when Joseph learned his betrothed was pregnant.

Let's back up way before Bethlehem and read from the first chapter of the Gospel of Matthew:

**Matthew 1:18-25** *The birth of Jesus took place like this. His mother, Mary, was engaged to be married to Joseph. Before they came to the marriage bed, Joseph discovered she was pregnant. (It was by the Holy Spirit, but he didn't know that.) Joseph, chagrined but noble, determined to take care of things quietly so Mary would not be disgraced.*

*While he was trying to figure a way out, he had a dream. God's angel spoke in the dream: "Joseph, son of David, don't hesitate to get married. Mary's pregnancy is Spirit-conceived. God's Holy Spirit has made her pregnant. She will bring a son to birth, and when she does, you, Joseph, will name Him Jesus—'God saves'—because He will save His people from their sins." This would bring [an Old Testament] prophecy to full term: "Watch for this—a virgin will get pregnant and bear a son; they will name Him Emmanuel (Hebrew for 'God is with us')."*

*Then Joseph woke up. He did exactly what God's angel commanded in the dream: He married Mary. But he did not consummate the marriage until she had the baby. He named the baby Jesus.*

Poor Joseph. When Joseph's fiancée Mary first got pregnant, Joseph knew he didn't have any relations with her, so it must mean she was unfaithful and had been intimate with another man. His whole world was shattered. He thought he knew Mary. How could she be so unfaithful? How could she break a vow of engagement, which, back then, was as sacred as a marriage vow?

The way he planned his life—his career, his hopes, his plans were all jumbled about. All *hamajang!*

But he decided that he would be honorable in dealing with her. He would secretly break their engagement and not disgrace her. That is when, in a dream, an angel of the Lord came to him and told him that Mary was going to give birth to Jesus.

And so, the theme of what it means to follow Jesus began. The true meaning of Christmas is that God can bring joy in the midst of dashed dreams and shattered hopes because God can be involved in our life even when it's a mess, if we so choose. He's always there. He's actually helping us a lot more than we think, but often we are just unaware.

The great thing about Christ in this world is that when bad things happen, they may not necessarily be bad. For the Lord always has one more move.

Being Chinese, I remember this proverbial story. A farmer and his son owned a stallion that helped the family earn a living. One day, the horse ran away and their neighbors exclaimed, "Your horse ran away. What terrible luck!" The farmer replied, "Maybe so, maybe not. We'll see."

Days later, the horse returned home, and to the surprise of all, the horse was leading a few wild mares back to the farm as well. The neighbors shouted out, "Your horse has returned and brought several horses home with him. What great luck!" The farmer replied, "Maybe so, maybe not. We'll see."

Later that week, the farmer's son was riding one of the mares, trying to train her and suddenly she threw him up into the air and down to the ground he fell breaking his leg. The villagers cried, "Your son broke his leg. What terrible luck!" The farmer replied, "Maybe so, maybe not. We'll see."

A few weeks later, soldiers from the national army marched through town, recruiting all the able-bodied boys for the army. They did not take the farmer's

son, still recovering from his injury. Friends later said, "Your boy is spared. What tremendous luck!" To which the farmer replied, "Maybe so, maybe not. We'll see."

The moral of this story, is that no ONE event can be judged as purely good or bad, nor lucky or unlucky, for only time will tell. But more than time, it is good to have a loving God guiding us who blesses us and uses so-called bad events for good. For we can read in the Bible this amazing verse:

**Romans 8:28** *We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to His purpose.*

It didn't say some things or a few things or one thing, but ALL THINGS will work together for good for those who love God and follow His purpose. We all need help when things go wrong. We can get stressed and we need faith that somehow it will turn out for the good.

Following Jesus is one of the greatest stress-relievers because, if you have faith in a loving God, whatever happens—good or bad—you know that Jesus can make good out of the really bad so that all things—yes, ALL THINGS—can work together for good.

Once upon a time, my wife Pam and I took a church group on a tour of Greece and Turkey to walk in the footsteps of the Apostle Paul. It was one of the best tours I have ever been on—great food, great historical places, great art.

But the tour didn't start off so well. It was because I, the tour leader, slept through the boarding time to get on the plane to leave Honolulu to go to Greece! Pam and I missed the flight, and we were the tour guides! *Mama mia!*

When setting my alarm on my iPhone, I was spinning the dial to set the wake up for the flight. I accidentally spun it to 3:00 PM instead of 3:00 AM to wake up.

**W**hen I realized my mistake, I exclaimed, “Gosh! Darn!” like what many of you would have said. Since then, I always set up two alarms to check myself.

Picture this: The whole tour was at the airport and I was still in bed when my wife Pam woke me up. We dashed down to the ticket counter and literally the plane door closed minutes before we got there. I felt horrible!

I told the ticket agent that I have to get on that flight. I am THE tour leader. Didn't work. I threw every reason I could think of at her – “They need me! There are 30 of them on the tour. They are lolo and won't know where to go-go!”

“There is someone who is disabled on the flight. I AM DISABLED—at least time-wise.” The look the agent gave me was a look like “It's a bummer to be you.”

My tour group, made up mostly of church members, thought I was the biggest dunce in the world. Actually, they still do, or at least the sleepest one in town.

After they boarded the plane, some even thought that I was rude because I must be sitting in first class and that's why they didn't see me! While they were back in economy seats, they thought I was sitting in the holy of holies, in first-class, drinking champagne and eating turbinado sea salt almonds. On the contrary, I wasn't in first class; I had NO CLASS. I had missed the flight.

But then we remember, how does it work when God says ALL THINGS will work together for good, if you give it enough time to work it out with Him?

Well for one, when the tour company realized in Athens that I had missed the flight, they gave the tour group an extra benefit of a museum visit that was not on their itinerary, plus extra meals. And when I arrived a day later we still got to see the planned sites of the Acropolis and holy places like Mars Hill. They were blessed even though I was a bumpkin.

But prior to our arrival, while they were in Greece, I was feeling so guilty and stupid for having missed the flight. Wallowing in my guilt and feeling depressed that I was still in Honolulu, I took my dog, Max, my Yorkshire Terrier Poodle, for a walk.

But then I noticed something. Max was trying to pee but he couldn't. My Yorkie Poo could not Yorkie pee. I got scared. We took him to our vet, and, lo and behold, Max had a blockage. Had we gotten on that flight and no one noticed this problem, Max could have died! But because we had that whole extra day in Honolulu, Max got helped by my vet and cleared up, and Max is today healthy and calm and alive having fun with Pam.

God works in ways that we don't always see. For some it's just a coincidence, but if you can possibly see that there is an intelligent design in the universe, and if you possibly believe the true Christmas story in the Bible that God has come to earth in the form of Jesus, then you know He wants to be involved in our lives and He is actually with us.

To be clear it doesn't mean our pain and suffering end quickly after a few prayers, but I believe someday—someday—good will come even if it is after months or years. And you can say, it's coincidence or maybe there is an intelligent design.

I believe God is always trying to help us whether we have faith or not. He will send a star to Bethlehem to lead astrological wise men to Him or even give dreams, like He did to Joseph.

Did you know—God still speaks to us in dreams. My son Dylan recently had a dream. He saw himself and his close friend, whom I shall call Kyle, standing on top of a tall building facing a beautiful skyline. Kyle had been trying to find a job for years. He had a medical disability that delayed his search. Some days his pain was like a 7 out of 10. Being out of the job market for a few years made it harder to get back in.

Over the years he had applied for more than 100 positions, phone interviewed 30+ times, and had 8 onsite interviews, but nothing proved fruitful. He was always turned down. Maybe you've been there, so you know what he was going through.

But in this dream of my son Dylan, Kyle looked at the building they were standing on and said to Dylan, “I am going to work here.”

Dylan recognized the company logo on the building in the dream, and so after he woke up, he contacted Kyle and said, “You have got to apply to this company I dreamed of,” and sent him the website link. Kyle looked at the website, but unfortunately there were no openings for him. But over the next months he kept checking and eventually something did appear and he did apply. In the end Kyle got the job, in the EXACT city in the dream.

The dream led to ending a drought of years of unemployment. It also turned out that this company worked in a highly specialized domain in which Kyle was an expert. It was a perfect fit after years of searching and he probably would never have applied for it had it not been for a dream, and I would say a supernatural intervention of a dream—a dream like what Joseph had in our Christmas story. God still speaks today!

And in fact, our church is here because of a supernatural dream. After having considered hundreds of places to move to due to the growth of our church, someone had a dream, back in 2004, of me preaching here at a golf club. We thought, “That is a super weird dream.” But here we are as the owners of a place that was never in our sights until someone had a dream. God was right.

And next year, we will be starting an additional new satellite campus in Kaka'ako, on Halekauwila Street just off Punchbowl, where we can offer more services in the downtown area.

**B**ut focusing on today—the sufferings and challenges that many of us here may have, are far greater than missing a plane flight, or waiting years for a job, though that is extremely painful.

Some of you are facing a terminal illness or a disease that is most scary. Some of you are having financial challenges or relationship issues or worse, you've lost a pet, a friend, a loved one through death.

Some of you, students, may have gotten some tough news—you didn't get into the school you wanted, you didn't get on the team, you didn't get the scholarship or the award you wanted.

Some people here may have an issue of addiction, or a very strained relationship, or a medical issue or maybe an injustice in or outside our court system that you have been fighting for years. And for all of these there seems to be no light at the end of the tunnel.

The real reason we celebrate Christmas is because, if it is true that God came to earth in Jesus, then it means God wants to get involved in our personal lives and give us hope. It means not to give up hope. He loves us.

It doesn't mean He will take away our pain with a snap of our fingers; it may take years to resolve, but it does mean He will walk with us, help us and, if the timing is right, heal us.

I like what Pope Francis once said, and I have a card of his quote on my desk that says: "There is no cross, big or small in our life which the Lord does not share with us."

Any pain we have—big or small—Jesus came to help bear the burden. He wants to be in your life story. What does that mean, "God wants to be in your story?"

The Christian British author of *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, C.S. Lewis, explained it this way. In Shakespeare's plays, characters like Hamlet or Lady Macbeth or Romeo and Juliet might want

to meet Shakespeare in their scenes—like, walk into an attic and there he is! But they never will. They are unable to meet him because Shakespeare is the author of the play. He is not IN their play. They will never meet him unless... Shakespeare writes himself into their story.

God is the author of life on earth who on Christmas Day writes Himself into the story of our lives as Jesus so that we might finally meet and know Him.

God is not some distant Author or Creator. He desires to be our everyday Friend, Lord, and Savior in the person of Jesus Christ. Most importantly, God loves us.

In the true story of Dylan and his friend Kyle, Kyle is not a follower of Jesus, and he is actually not sure how to process this whole situation in terms of faith. And that's okay. It doesn't matter to Jesus in wanting to bring people like Kyle, whom He loves, closer to God.

Dylan has great faith and believes God wrote Himself into Kyle's story and Dylan has been praying for Kyle for years as many of you have been praying for your friends or children or grandchildren.

Whether it's three wisemen who are not believers who follow a star, or someone like Kyle, God is always trying to reach out to us whether through stars, dreams, events or friends.

You today, here in this room, might not have much faith. Maybe you are like Kyle. That's great. So glad you are here. Maybe your light of faith was never there or has been snuffed out or maybe today your faith is as small as a pilot light. BUT here on this Christmas Eve—God is saying to you this day lean on Me, trust Me, bring with you whatever the light you have, big or small.

When bad things happen we may realize that we have tried everything else, and so why not surrender and fully fall into the arms of Jesus?

As George and Ryan come up on stage, I want you to really concentrate on the words they will be singing. Maybe George's words are yours. They describe how you feel today. And perhaps Ryan's words are the words of Jesus who just wants us to rest in Him, trust Him, lean on Him, fall on Him.

Let's prayerfully listen to this song and may we fall into the arms of Jesus or may the Holy Spirit fall on us. Feel His presence, and bring whatever little faith or light you have to Him.

#### FALL ON ME

[George]

*I thought sooner or later  
The lights up above  
Will come down in circles and  
guide me to love  
But I don't know what's right for me  
I cannot see straight  
I've been here too long and  
I don't want to wait for it*

*Fly like a cannonball straight to my soul*

*Tear me to pieces and  
make me feel whole  
I'm willing to fight for it and  
carry this weight  
But with every step I keep questioning  
what is true*

*Fall on me with open arms  
Fall on me from where you are  
Fall on me with all your light  
With all your light  
With all your light*

[Ryan]

*Soon you will find  
what your heart wants to know  
Don't give up hope  
for I know you are close  
And all you have ever dreamed,  
wished you could ever be  
Is waiting to find you wherever you go  
Believe in yourself,  
every step that you take  
Know I am smiling with pride everyday  
My love will forever be,  
stronger than stone  
Don't be afraid, you are never alone*

[Both]

*Fall on me with open arms  
Fall on me from where you are  
Fall on me with all your light  
With all your light  
With all your light  
With all your light*

[Ryan]

*I close my eyes  
and I'm seeing you everywhere*

[George]

*I step outside  
It's like I'm breathing you in the air*

[Both]

*I can feel you're there*

[Both]

*Fall on me with open arms  
Fall on me from where you are  
Fall on me with all your light  
With all your light  
With all your light*

Will you give God a chance and surrender and fall into His arms? Our church has a tradition on Christmas Eve.

I am going to close with a prayer that you might actually feel the peace and presence of Jesus, or experience a physical or emotional healing today. In a moment, I am going to say a miracle prayer for you all to be healed or have a prayer answered in some way today. The answer may happen today or maybe it will happen tomorrow or much later. I cannot make guarantees because I'm not the one doing the healing. God is.

The first time we did this, almost a decade ago on Christmas Eve, a woman who came to the service with a cane, left the service with no need for a cane after the mass healing prayer.

And there have been many other miraculous healings since then—healings from disease, depression, injury. People have felt faith, hope and love.

Underneath the chairs at the end of your row, is a basket of red satin rosebuds. Reach for the basket now. It is under the aisle chair in your row that is closest to the center of the sanctuary, or the chair in the overflow room closest to the sanctuary.

I am asking you to pick up that basket right now and then each of you may take one rose, and then pass the basket down the aisle. There are enough roses for everyone in the row.

If you want more roses for your friends and relatives, then please feel free to take a few more roses from the basket, or later get more from the ushers.

When I pray, I want you to hold onto that rose. Clutch it. Then pray with me. When God answers your prayer in a way you understand, I want you, whether child or adult, to return the rose with a letter, to explain how God answered your prayer, how you saw, heard, felt God in your life with that request. And we will put your rose on our Christmas wreath for all to see next year.

In the last year, we have had roses sent back to us with letters that have described many kinds of answered prayers. I have read all of their letters this year telling me, to name a few, that now they are in remission of cancer, they had or a successful heart surgery, a great college acceptance, the birth of a healthy child, back pain removed, the acceptance of Christ into his life by a father. Many, many answered rose prayers!

Look at the wreath—all made up of hundreds of roses that were returned with letters explaining the miracle of a Christmas Eve prayer over the years.

Now I want to pray a simple, miraculous prayer for you. Please bow your heads as I ask for God's Holy Spirit to come upon us that we might feel the warmth of His love and His grace and His healing power.

As our heads are bowed and eyes closed, I ask those of you who have a physical ailment who desire healing to please put your hand on or near the area of concern and, for those of you who have an emotional issue that you desire prayer, please put your hand over your heart.

Let us pray.