



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu

*“Jesus, Van Gogh and Starry Night”
(The Artwork of God Series)*

January 9, 2005

Rev. Dr. Dan Chun

Matt. 16:15 He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?”

Matt. 16:16 Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

Matt. 16:17 And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.

Matt. 16:18 And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.

Matt. 16:19 I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”

Matt. 16:20 Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

Today is my first sermon for 2005. Normally, I use the first sermon to be our state of the union address. And this Sunday will not be different. But we are also continuing our series on “The Artwork of God,” so it will all come together.

Today we look at Vincent Van Gogh, or to say it in Dutch, “Van Gogh.”

His work is depicted on the postcard you got with the worship bulletin today. Van Gogh's painting is called, “Starry Night.” Here's a famous song about Vincent Van Gogh and one of his most famous works. (Soloist sings, “Vincent's Song” by Don McLean)

All of us are artists, all made in the image of God the Creator, who has given

us the unique ability to likewise create and imagine. We see this in the pictures we create. Some are cheery and joyful, while others are sad and depressing. And if the pictures we create are depressing, we can easily change them with new paint.

Let's look at our artist for today, one who lived a challenging and troubled life. He actually lived for only 37 years.

Born in 1853 to a Dutch pastor and his wife, Vincent Wilhelm Van Gogh created 750 paintings mostly in the last five years of his life. He also did 1,600 drawings mainly in the last ten years of his life. That's a huge volume of work in a relatively short period of time.

By the time he reached 27, Van Gogh had been in turn a salesman in an art gallery, a French tutor, a theological student, and an evangelist among miners in Belgium.

But it was at 27 that he got caught up in the impressionist art movement and became one of the most famous post-impressionist artists of all time. For most of his life, he received no critical acclaim although we love his work today. In fact one of his paintings just sold for \$70 million. And I assure you it wasn't sold at Wal-Mart.

Strangely, Van Gogh is almost as famous for his mental depression as for his beautiful paintings. He had frequent bouts of depression and anxiety. They plagued him most of his life.

Unfortunately, mental health issues and psychiatric care back then was primitive. In one asylum, he was treated with hydrotherapy, dunked into the water in the belief that submersion would cure his depression. But it only made it worse.

In a famous but bizarre 1888 incident he slashed off his left earlobe with a razor. He reportedly then went to a brothel to present it to fellow artist Paul Gauguin, who may have been the target of his anger and the reason he cut off his ear.

Many people know Van Gogh's paintings of wheat fields, sunflowers and his self-portraits, one with his full ear and one with a bandaged head without the ear lobe. In fact, our own Honolulu Academy of the Arts has a Van Gogh piece entitled *Wheatfield*.

But many are not familiar with Van Gogh's faith context and paintings such as *Christ Asleep During the Tempest*, *Raising of Lazarus*, *The Good Samaritan*, *Still Life with Open Bible*, and *The Pieta*, which is a picture of the crucified Jesus with His mother, Mary.

One of his most famous paintings is *Starry Night* which you hopefully have a copy of in front of you.

But before we analyze it artistically and give it a biblical context, let me share with you what was happening in Europe in the late 19th century at the time Van Gogh did this painting.

There was tremendous change going on. Europe was experiencing a scientific, technological revolution. Theologically, though, the church was not changing.

For many, the European church was archaic, bound by tradition, and irrelevant. A cultural and ritualistic Christianity prevailed that had little bearing on real life.

Van Gogh disliked the church. He felt suffocated by it. When he worked with the miners he wanted to dress and be like them.

He gave away much of his money like St. Francis of Assisi, and Christian leaders condemned him for that. He once gave away his “almost new” velvet suit to a beggar (*Stokvis, Omtrent Vincent van Gogh in Brahant, p. 18*)

His perception of the church is perhaps reflected in a painting entitled *The Church in Auvers*. The church seems squashed. The sun brightly lights the foreground but the church does not reflect any light nor is any light emanating from within. Furthermore, the church has no doors, and he depicts a woman walking around it trying to find a door. How's that for symbolism?

Van Gogh struggled with his faith. He left it, came back to it, and then found it not enough to keep his life going.

Nearly a year after he cut off his ear, Van Gogh went to a field to paint. He often had a gun to shoot into the air to scare away birds. But for some reason he used the gun on himself on day. He shot himself in the stomach area, not his chest or head. Maybe he didn't mean to kill himself. He somehow staggered back to his room where he died two days later with his dear brother Theo at his side.

If he had lived in the 21st century, he would have survived with the aid of paramedics. Interestingly, it is alleged that his last painting was of a wheat field with all of these crows descending on the viewer.

Within these contexts let us turn to the painting *Starry Night*, painted 13 months prior to his death. It's a picture of a village view from a hillside. There is a cypress tree on the left. It is night time but the skies are brightly lit by swirling clouds and bright stars, which pretty much dominate the painting.

Van Gogh painted *Starry Night* when he was reportedly on the upswing in his faith. Some scholars say the vibrant blue-sky points to a divine presence. Notice that the stars are bright as if they have angelic halos around them.

The clouds are moving, active, and dynamic, almost as if God's grace from the heavens is striving, desiring, and wanting to reach down to a troubled humanity. See the cypress tree on the left shooting up to point to this God who can bring life and grace and hope.

The painting reflects what Van Gogh wrote in a letter: “When all sounds cease, God's voice is heard under the stars.” (*L100, June 5, 1877, Letters 1:124*).

Though the Church had failed Van Gogh, he still put it in the center of the painting with a vertical accent in the village scene. Notice how the village houses have lights on and how the church does not. It's either Van Gogh's indictment or a question about the relevance of the Church.

But it was nature that brought him back to God. It revealed to him the personal nature of God amid a cold, scientific and technological age.

The year he painted *Starry Night* he wrote in a letter about how Christ alone “has affirmed eternal life as the most important certainty, the infinity of time, the futility of death, the necessity and purpose of serenity and devotion.”

He said, Christ “lived serenely as an artist greater than all other artists, scorning marble and clay and paint working in the living flesh” (Letter to Emile Bernard, June 1888, as reported in *A Journey into Christian Art* by Helen De Borchgrave, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1999, p. 180).

By the way, if you want to further explore the relationship and connections between our faith and

art, check out a new Sunday School class that we started today at 8 am in Hale Laulima Makai with Peter and Ann Millard. Their class is called “Connections,” and for the next months they will look at the faith with connections to Rembrandt and Van Gogh and other aspects of life.

So go to their class at 8 am and learn about art from the experts, and then come to worship at 9:30 am and see where I am wrong. Ann and Peter both taught at Punahou, at the Pacific Rim Bible College and Youth With A Mission. Ann also has a masters in art history.

Okay, that's enough about art history for today. How then do we connect this theologically? Let's look at Matthew 16:15 out Bible passage for today.

The key question in the Bible from Jesus to each of us throughout history is this: Who do you say I am?

Matt. 16:15 He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?”

Matt. 16:16 Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

I love Vincent Van Gogh. I feel for him. He was a follower of God who struggled in life. He was depressed. He was intense and angry. He despaired. He was lonely. And he felt all of those things as a Christian.

Friends, this is true life. YES, even as a Christian, there are mountains and valleys in life. There are victories and disappointments, maybe even suicidal thoughts. Part of today's message is “Don't do harm to yourself.” You and I, like Van Gogh, have so many more pictures to paint.

But when we, like the apostle Peter can answer Jesus' question, “Who do you say that I am?” with, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God,” we can survive and navigate the highs and the lows.

Christ is with us through all of it and we can know His strength. Christ doesn't prevent us from experiencing disappointment, pain and loneliness. But He can redeem us from them and help us walk out of the valleys. But it's best done in community.

Christ doesn't prevent us from experiencing disappointment, pain and loneliness. But He can redeem us from them and help us walk out of the valleys.

Theologian Henri Nouwen says, “Loneliness is one of the most universal human experiences.” (*Henri Nouwen, Reach Out, Doubleday, London, 1975, p. 14*) And Nouwen says that as one of the most spiritual people who walked on earth,

but one who also suffered from depression.

In our times of pain and loneliness we don't have to give up. We can clasp the hand of a loving God and say, “Help! Help me even in my depression and unbelief.”

And God will always help, but maybe not according to our time schedule. Though God may seem slow, He is never late.

When God says, “I love you,” we can choose to listen or not to listen. We can cut off our ear, like Vincent Van Gogh, so we don't hear Him or the friends He chooses to speak to us. We can turn our ears away so we do not hear words of hope or encouragement or even a, “Hang in there.”

Or we can turn toward Him and hear words of love, comfort, and healing and seek His help from His community called the church. It might be in a fellowship group, a small group or a Bible study.

There may be some among us who, like Van Gogh, have felt abused by a church. Maybe church has not been a good experience for you but you are here today to give it one more chance.

Here's what scholar Kathleen Powers Erickson wrote in her book about the spiritual vision of Vincent Van Gogh: "While Van Gogh acknowledged the many different forms of religious expression outside of worship within the institution of the Church, he still believed the function of religion was to be healing and consolation."

She continues, "After Van Gogh left the Church, he began consciously to distinguish between a "true" and "false" religion which ... he represented, respectively by a white and a black ray of Light: [he wrote in a letter] 'With an unutterable feeling, I see God, who is the White Ray of Light, who has the Last Word.'" (*Ibid.*, p. 79).

Does church seem to you to be something true or false? Do we believe that church ultimately should be a place of healing and consolation? I say yes, yes! This is what our church family at First Prez strives to be -- a place that can be a safe haven and a warm home for people.

Robert Frost wrote this line in his poem *Death of a Hired Man*: "Home is the place where when you have to go there, they have to take you in."

No matter how weird you and I may be, how weak, wilted, depressed, or despaired we may be, our church family and home here at First Prez will take us in. In fact, we are searching for a bigger church site so that we can continue to open our doors to everyone God sends.

Did you know that more than 3,400 came to our Christmas Eve service this year? We made room for all the people God told us to take in. No one was turned away.

Did you know that we are one of only ten churches in the Presbyterian Church in the USA denomination that has grown in each of the last ten years? That's because ours is a home that makes room for all that God wants us to

take in.

When we know Christ, when we follow and trust Him even when we may not feel great, the pictures and paintings of our lives are transformed.

As Van Gogh wrestled himself from his depression over the meaning of life, he painted *Starry Night* with a background of the darkest night, illuminated, however, and infused with hope by bright and lively stars, dynamic and energetic clouds and with the church in the center.

Van Gogh's church is dark and unlit because it is empty; no one's there. And yet, his church is still at the center of the landscape. He affirms that a relationship with God and the sustaining impact of our faith community is inescapably also at the center of our personal landscapes.

Van Gogh's church is dark, but my vow to you, the vow of the elders and deacons who have been ordained today and promised to serve you, is that this church, Christ's church, will always have His light of hope and love burning here. We are a light to one another and a light to others.

After that awful event of September 11, 2001 happened, then Mayor of Honolulu Jeremy Harris asked our church to lead and design a televised worship service that would give comfort, hope and direction for the Hawaii community.

No matter how weird you and I may be, how weak, wilted, depressed, or despaired we may be, our church family and home here at First Prez will take us in.

The City and County of Honolulu chose a church to help them at a time of darkness. Like Van Gogh, they had a sense that a church should be central in a city.

Last week, Mayor Mufi Hanneman asked our church to participate in an inaugural prayer service for him, his cabinet, and the city council, reportedly a first in Honolulu history. It was the first order of business for the three bodies. They met in a church with about 800 people praying for them.

May this church and our church family always be a light and always have open doors for any who walk in, especially for the Van Goghs of this world who seek a church to call home.

We all need a church with lights on.

We all need a church to be a light in the midst of darkness. We need a church that helps us all in the midst of our depression.

I understand depression. It can stem from a chemical imbalance. Or it can be situational when stressful circumstances spin us out of control. It can result from loss. Depression is always a natural response to loss. I understand this personally.

When I was preaching at our Christmas Eve service I did not tell you the full story of what was going on in my life.

Most of you know that my mother, who lived with my family, had just died. Many of you knew that the burial was on December 21 and the memorial service was on December 26. Having those 2 events made leading our church's two Christmas worship services at the Hawaii Convention Center on December 23rd even more challenging.

What I did NOT tell you was that at the same time my father-in-law was in the brink of death. He was in intensive care, but is fine now and is at home. And if he follows doctor's orders he will be okay.

I was very sad that night of the Christmas service. I was down. It was a blur.

A few days later, I found out that a close friend, Rich Girerd, who named his ten-year old son after me, told me he was just diagnosed with colon cancer. The cancer had spread to both lungs and his liver, which is now the size of a volleyball. He was told he might have only days or weeks to live. What a shock to him, to his wife and two kids! They were given very little warning.

Then I had breakfast with a childhood friend who has a severe nasal cancer, and if not healed will leave a wife and four kids.

I also have a calabash aunty who just had a stroke, is now paralyzed on the right side of her body and is confined at St. Francis Hospital.

With all of this sadness and loss, I have been flying these past few weeks with little gas in my tank and on the fumes of faith.

But as I preached on the Christmas service about how all is well and how all can come out okay because Jesus Christ was born, I felt strengthened.

I too, could look at the wreath of answered rose prayers with hope.

When we feel depressed and overwhelmed by challenges, we must ask the question, "Who is the Messiah?" For Jesus asks us, "Who do you say I am?"

And if we say, "You are truly the Christ, the son of God who came to save us, help us and strengthen us; the one we must follow and dedicate our lives to," then you know what happens? The darkest, gloomiest, and most depressing night can transform into a starry, starry night.

The darkest night can be illumined by stars with halos to remind us of angelic hope and strength in Christ. The darkest night can be lifted by swirling, active movements of God who desires to push away our despair, and rain down His grace, mercy, love and help upon us.

While on vacation this past week, I have felt increasingly more committed than ever to make sure our church is a church with lights on. A church of people fully dedicated to help the needy and those in pain.

You know how our church has been growing. But the truth is that we have never sought to grow just for growth's sake. We are not into numbers for numbers sake. Go to an elders' or a staff meeting and you will never hear strategies to increase our numbers - only ways to meet increasing needs.

I will tell you what we are into: helping everyone experience the love of God through Jesus Christ. We are into helping people with the care, excellence and the unconditional love that God provides.

As a result more and more people have come. And as they join us they learn that being part of First Prez does not mean continually being served. They learn to pay it forward by being instruments of God to serve others.

We have experienced growth because of the many people we have helped and welcomed in to stay. I daresay that many of us here, my family among them, are here because we have received much and now want to return it to others.

I have said in the past that we are a hospital for hurting people and sinners. I want to change that today. Hospitals are places that people check out of; they are released and discharged from care once they are well.

Our church is not a place that people check out of. We don't see our people as temporary residents who just pass through.

No, as a church we are a home, a community, and a body of people that is committed to one another. We welcome one another in sickness and in health, in want and in plenty, and in sorrow and in joy.

The capital stewardship program, into which we will soon be entering, is not about money. It's not about bricks and mortar. It's about how we as a community care for ourselves and for others - all of the people that God wants us to take care of and welcome through our doors.

For we were once outsiders of the church, and now we must help other outsiders who do not know God. For upon this rock, called the church, nothing will prevail -- no tsunami, no earthquake.

There is no question that we must help those in need, those among us and those beyond. No question we must send money AND people to the countries hit by disasters, including victims of the tsunami disaster around the Indian Ocean.

With regard to the tsunami, First Prez is collecting money to help these victims. And we are carefully studying and researching which organization to give it through. But we are not just sending money. We are sending, as we speak, a Hawaii medical team that has at least two of our members, Dr. Don Fancher and surgical technician John Snyder, to Sri Lanka to give medical aid. A nurse, a paramedic and a fireman complete the team. Some of them may be there for three weeks.

We can be the church with lights on. Or more accurately, we can be like stars that shine in the night.

The night brings a blanket of darkness, but stars manage to pierce that darkness, which shows us that there is a light source pulsating with energy and power beyond it. That light source is God. It's not an energy force but a loving God who sent us His son, the Messiah, to give us light and hope. We are to be a light in darkness.

Amen!

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Sunday worship sermons can also be heard on "Strength for the Journey," First Prez's weekly radio show, Sunday mornings at 10 on KGU 706 AM