



# SERMON OF THE WEEK

## First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

### September 23, 2018

### Transfiguration (Hope Restored Series)

### Pastor Dan Chun

In a moment we will be standing and hearing the Scripture read by David Suchet, the actor who plays the Belgian detective Hercule Poirot in *Agatha Christie Mysteries* on Netflix.

You may be asking, “Dan, why don’t we have the live Scripture readers like before?” It’s because I am still trying to slowly ramp us all up on joining a *Just Show Up* group that listens to the Bible for the next year or so. I am trying to give you different versions of hearing the Scripture, so that you might be acquainted with one you might like and use in your readings with your group.

So today it’s a version that’s very easy to find on your phone or laptop or iPad – it’s the NIV UK version read by David Suchet, and you can find it on *YouVersion* and on [biblegateway.com](http://biblegateway.com). It’s Mark 9:2-10. Please stand and let us hear the Gospel reading for today:

*Mark 9:2 After six days Jesus took Peter, James and John with Him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone. There He was transfigured before them.*

*Mark 9:3 His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them.*

*Mark 9:4 And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus.*

*Mark 9:5 Peter said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three*

*shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.”*

*Mark 9:6 (He did not know what to say, they were so frightened.)*

*Mark 9:7 Then a cloud appeared and covered them, and a voice came from the cloud: “This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!”*

*Mark 9:8 Suddenly, when they looked around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus.*

*Mark 9:9 As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus gave them orders not to tell anyone what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead.*

*Mark 9:10 They kept the matter to themselves, discussing what “rising from the dead” meant.*

There is a great *I Am a Bright Kid Foundation* production of the musical *The Wiz* at Paliku Theater in Kaneohe until Oct 7.

Our own Mary Hicks is directing it, and many of our members and friends are part of the cast. Kudos to the sponsoring Bright Family who’s part of our church ohana too. I highly recommend seeing *The Wiz*. Great for all ages. Friday and Saturday have some seats open. *The Wiz* is a takeoff on the famous *The Wizard of Oz* story by Frank L. Baum.

As I usually do when I watch movies and musicals, I was thinking about Jesus (because I am so spiritual—haha) and pondering about how at one time or

another we are all like frail scarecrows who wish we could be wise enough to figure out life better; or like cowardly lions that lack courage; or like frozen tin men that have no hearts.

I was thinking of how the Church should be a place where scarecrows can find wisdom, and cowardly lions can find courage, tin men could find true compassion for others, and Dorothys who could find loving homes. In that sense The Church should be a good and healthy Emerald City, a light on the hill, where people find wisdom, courage, a heart for others, and a real home that feels like family. The Emerald City, whether in *The Wiz* or *Wizard of Oz* or in the musical *Wicked*, is a stunning, spectacle of light and brightness.

Spoiler alert! The man who is the Wizard of Oz actually does NOT have supernatural powers. But what if, what if, there were a good, kind leader of a Kingdom who actually is more powerful and more transforming and glorious than a mere so-called wizard?

In today’s passage, we see Jesus, the real King of the Kingdom demonstrating, unveiling, and revealing His awesome and heavenly self in an almost pyrotechnic explosion of light and glory. We see the *shekinah* of God. “Shekinah” is the biblical term for when the presence of God descends and falls upon the people, normally with tremendous light that’s brighter than Emerald City.

I mentioned in my sermon that it is not enough to just believe that Jesus existed.

**W**e need to experience Him. Otherwise, it is just head knowledge. Jesus knew that. Today's passage emphasizes that point. It is an incredible story as again this is one of the few passages that all of the first three gospels report.

Imagine this. Jesus and His innermost circle, Peter, James, and John, go up to a mountain, and then it happens. Like the beginning of a *Star Trek* movie, the passage goes boom! And then it takes off with an explosive narrative. Jesus and His three disciples are on top of a mountain when suddenly Jesus starts to turn bright white, and the disciples are thinking, "Oh, man, He is going to beam up!"

But no. He stays there on the ground and gets brighter and brighter and brighter and brighter. Then suddenly He is transfigured into a brilliant, dazzling, luminous, radiant, and beautiful supernatural state!

In *Star Wars* at the end of *The Return of the Jedi*, Anakin, Yoda, and Obi Wan Kenobi appear like this on the screen. (Picture of *Star Wars: Return of the Jedi* was shown.) However, Jesus' transfiguration is far better and definitely not fictitious! There begins to appear supernatural Moses and the prophet Elijah joining the very bright and shining Jesus, as depicted in this painting by the 16<sup>th</sup> century artist Titian, the Venetian.

The Gospel says that Peter, who was probably frightened and didn't know what to say, says, "Why don't we build something to honor the three of them? How about a booth or shelter?"

Last week we learned that Peter put his foot in his mouth by rebuking Jesus for saying something that Peter thought was wrong, and so Jesus rebuked him back for his audacity. Now Peter is a bit smarter. He stalls for a bit because he didn't know what to say, but then he comes up with this plan of "why don't we build three shelters or tabernacles for the three of you guys?" Jesus gets whiter and brighter and whiter and brighter. As the Gospels

try to explain it, and I quote, "whiter than any bleach you have ever seen."

What does this all mean? It seems like an incredulous episode. But it's not finished! Ah, but it all so important and full of meaning. First of all, the prophet Elijah was known for having supernatural powers through the Holy Spirit. He could pray and a widow's son would come back from the dead. He could call down rain, or fire from heaven, or he could pray and the Jordan River would part.

Moses, as you may recall, could throw a staff down that turns into a snake. He could also hold his staff up and the Red Sea would part and then bring the sea back again to save them from an enemy army. He could bring a million people out of Egypt into the safer lands of the Promised Land. God also used him to bring manna come down from the sky to feed the Jewish people, as well as inflict ten plagues on the Egyptians.

Moses and Elijah were the big guns of the faith. Moses was given the Law (the Ten Commandments), and Elijah was full of the Spirit. The Word and the Spirit. God used them mightily, miraculously, and supernaturally. This Transfiguration of Jesus had one main message for Peter, James and John. And it was: if you guys thought Moses and Elijah were great, Jesus is far, far greater! He is the epitome of Word and Spirit! But like the commercial says—wait there's more! Suddenly a voice comes out from the sky, bigger than a Bose speaker, more jubilant than JBL's. The Bible says:

Mark 9:7 Then a cloud appeared and covered them, and a voice came from the cloud: "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to Him!"

It says that Peter, James, and John were frightened. Who wouldn't be? All of this glory, all of this shekinah of the presence of God falling down on that mountain top, and the big voice of God Himself sounding like James Earl Jones!

This crescendo of the glory, the shekinah, and then suddenly....poof! Elijah and Moses are gone! All that's left is Jesus. The disciples' hearts are racing and pounding, and then perhaps in an anti-climactic way Jesus says to them, "Oh, by the way, don't tell anyone what you just saw." And they might almost want to swear by saying, "Jesus Christ, that was amazing!" And Jesus says, "Yes, I am Jesus Christ and I am amazing."

"What? Are you kidding, Jesus? Man, we want to tell everyone! We saw the light! We saw Elijah and Moses! We heard God the Heavenly Father speak out! What do you mean don't tell anyone?"

And then Jesus in essence says, "Until My resurrection, no one will believe you. But when I am resurrected, then use what you saw today as proof. Write it up and tell others." And they may have said, "Huh? Okay." So what is this all about? This seemingly crazy episode in the Bible?

First of all, like last week, this is another episode that says Jesus of Nazareth is not just an ordinary man. He is the main man. He is the Christ. He is the Messiah. Come to terms with this. Who do you say I am? I am the Lord of the Universe who chose to come down to earth to save you and lead you.

Peter made a blunder, in my opinion. He wanted to build three booths or little tabernacles out of tree branches that the Jewish people would traditionally use to worship God. The book of Leviticus talks about the Feast of the Booths when the Jewish people would build temporary shelters of thatched roofs of palm fronds and other plants to thank God for the preceding year's provision of agricultural goods and also for a good rainy season.

But the point of this story is that we should not worship any other thing or person than Jesus! Some people like to worship Jesus but still build altars to other people or things in life and think we can worship them AND Jesus.

**B**oth - and! We can't in our hearts make worship altars to Hawaiian gods or Buddha or Confucius or Reiki as well as Jesus. No. It should only be Jesus!

Singer Katy Perry has 107 million Twitter followers, and Justin Bieber 104 million—that's more than double of President Trump's Twitter followers. It's staggering in how much fans idolize them and want to know what they are doing.

We cannot worship celebrities, sex or power or popularity AND Jesus. We cannot worship video games, which take up a lot more of the time of many people than Bible reading and prayer.

But let me put this on me. I love watching UH football, USC football, and 49er football. But I noticed something about myself. When my team loses I can actually feel down for hours. Kinda depressed! Yes, I went to UH and USC, and I lived in San Francisco, but watching football is really mainly entertainment. Why should my emotions or happiness go up and down for a football game? Silly!

What is the real foundation of our lives that should sustain us in what really counts? The religion of football? Yes, for many football is a religion, complete with its own liturgical calendar. Instead of Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost, it's preseason, regular season, play-offs, the crucifixion of sudden death, and then the high holy day of Super Bowl. And then months later, Draft Day—the choosing of “the new disciples.”

Games are complete with the bells and smells of worship and hotdogs and nachos and acolyte priestesses called cheerleaders waving not incense but pompoms, while people in the stand eat ice cream bonbons.

One of the first things I do when I go home on Sunday is to watch condensed versions of my favorite NFL games that have been extracted of all the commercials, the huddles, the penalties, and the half-time shows. I got an app that

allows me to watch a condensed game in 45 minutes! Boom, boom, boom! Talk about time management. Actually I am so exhausted on the Sundays after I preach that I fall asleep watching a three-hour game after church, so the condensed version is perfect for me.

But I need to be careful during football season because the games can really take up a lot of my time. And then after football season ends, there's basketball. I follow the NCAA Sweet 16 games and the Golden State Warriors games. And pretty soon, it'll be football again with NFL draft day, when the roll is called up yonder and the saints come marching in!

The point is—what should really be the center of our lives? It should be Jesus! Be careful if something else is crowding Him out of our time, talents, and treasure. Jesus asked in the last chapter, “Who do you say I am?” He is the Messiah – fully God while fully human. And THEN we must move from head knowledge to heart knowledge.

The transfiguration is a story of EXPERIENCING Jesus. We can experience Him in worship or in a conversation or in prayer or a walk in nature, but we need to experience Him. Experiencing Him is critical to our faith. The transfiguration is EXPERIENCING Jesus in one of the highest forms.

Jesus shows Peter, James, and John all of His glory. But experiencing Jesus doesn't have to happen in glorious and majestic ways. He can make His presence known in a whisper, in the quiet, in the storm.

As I think of the times I have felt God in a supernatural way, they have been varied. It has happened in a beautiful setting in nature when I just want to fall on my knees and say, “God, what you have created is so beautiful. I feel Your amazing presence near the ocean, near lakes, at sunset, on a mountain, in the forest.”

Or once I felt the Holy Spirit while sitting by myself in a Catholic Cathedral. Once it

was in a worship service with many others, but I felt like just one person before God. Once it was when I was really hurting and a stranger came up to me, and knelt down and put a hand on me and just started praying. I felt God's tender presence there.

Some can experience His kindness and presence in a hospital room, in a divorce court, or on a school campus. It doesn't have to be as explosive as the transfiguration.

For Moses it was when He was in the cleft of a rock. When God came to him, Moses' face glowed with light. For Elijah, God came to him quietly as recorded in a Bible book called 1 Kings:

1Kings 19:11 The LORD said, “Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by.” Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake.

1Kings 19:12 After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper.

God came to Elijah in a whisper.

When I became a Christian there was no earthquake or anything. It actually came as I just said a simple prayer: “If you are who you say you are, Jesus, then come into my life.” Not the best prayer of faith but it worked! I didn't feel any explosion or a transfiguration experience, but I did feel a strong sense of His peace. And that grew!

As we get to know Jesus more and more, we experience Him, and experience is important, it can go from a mountain top experience to a deep valley. But even after we have amazing experiences with Jesus, I want to be honest and say we can still have doubts or crash and be depressed, including Moses and Elijah.

**M**oses got to see the Red Sea parted. He saw water come from a rock. He saw God in a burning bush. But He still went through such a tough time after all those amazing occasions with God. And after he experienced God on Mt. Sinai, where God gave him the Ten Commandments, he came down the mountain and saw how his people had built a golden calf to worship! Total rebellion and betrayal to him and the Lord! Moses had a high moment and then a real low moment.

If you look through all of Moses' story in Exodus, not once, not even once did the people thank him or praise him for all that he did as their leader. They always whined and asked, "What more could you do for us?" It was not until Moses died that the people wrote and sang The Song of Moses to show their appreciation for him. Great.

Elijah saw God perform many miracles, incredible miracles, but then he still went through a great depression.

Even John the Baptist, the cousin of Jesus who knew Jesus first hand, as opposed to Moses and Elijah who did not, even he went through depression. John the Baptist had to send friends to Jesus to ask, "Are you He who is to come or shall we look for another?" He asked that when he was in prison in the Fortress of Machaerus, wondering if Jesus was really the Messiah after he spent so long telling people that Jesus is the Lamb of God, the Savior God promised.

I guess I am saying that when we experience a mountaintop high, even with God, we could go crashing down soon after. I shared with you that I once was depressed, and it was after a great high. It was right after our congregational vote to leave our former denomination. It was the right decision. It was a decision of courage for our people. Almost a unanimous decision of nearly 900 votes. It was clearly our future. We would own our own land, and we would have more freedom to plan.

But I was so exhausted after all the work and planning and prayer leading up to the vote, that for two months I felt so out of it. A great high, and then a great low – just like Moses, Elijah, and John the Baptist.

So if the high and mighty like Moses, Elijah, and John the Baptist go through depression, surely we, who are pretty common folk, who are not spiritual giants, can go through that as well. And that's why we had the recent Mental Health Conference. Studies show that 48% of people will go through a mental health illness or challenge in their lives. It's normal!

Even after so many victories and miracles, Jesus, as He hung on the cross about to die, said, "My God, my God why have you forsaken me?" Feeling that your heavenly Father has abandoned you has got to be the epitome of depression. That is why I love Jesus. He really understands the pain and feelings of abandonment all of us have experienced. What a great Lord to have.

So, what keeps our mind on Jesus? What keeps us near Him that we might experience Him? One phrase: worship and the Word.

When we pray and sing our praises to Him, we have a chance to feel Him again. Yes, in our minds we can understand through the preaching. But in worship, the act of humbly putting ourselves before Him, we have a chance of experiencing Him again. Even if we walk in here with doubts and hurts, we know there is a God who suffered and had doubts also. He gets us.

As Tim Keller once said:

It's one thing to know God loves you. It's one thing to know the glorious creator God of the universe loves you, cares for you, and holds you; it's another thing to sense it. If you know it and you don't sense it, then the other things in your life will be the things you look to functionally and really for your glory, but

if Jesus really is someone you've sometimes seen, sometimes felt, sometimes through worship really experienced His ultimate reality, then, and only then, do these other things become things you can just enjoy and not build your entire life on.

It is worship that we really are trying to be in the presence of God. Worship is not performance or a production. It is praying and singing and desiring to be in His presence. We would love the *shekinah* to fall upon us.

The Transfiguration story is about experiencing Jesus in a new way. And then there is the Word – the Bible. It has the wisdom and secrets of life. When we know the Bible, we will have the mind of God.

The word "history" is really two words brought together – His Story. Whose story? God's story. His story. If we would just read the entire Bible by ourselves or in a Just Show Up group, we can finally understand the big picture of how God thinks, and His advice to us on how to flourish in life. He created us, so read the Creator's manual.

Or as Bruce Patterson reminds me the word BIBLE is an acronym for: Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth

Many of you are going through a hard time. You've lost a loved one. You're having medical issues or financial issues or relationship issues. You're at a crossroads where you can turn from God and become bitter or you can become better because you know that at the end of the road that leads to Jesus you will find one who really understands you and says, "Welcome, friend."

He is the one, like in *The Wiz*, where we want to ease on down the road for His heavenly city will be the true city that will give us courage, wisdom, and compassion, and in Whom we can truly find our true home. And unlike Dorothy, we don't even need to click our heels three times. Amen? Amen! Let's pray.