



# SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

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"The View from the Mountaintop" - Worship the King Series

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**T**his weekend, Christians all around the world are celebrating Christ the King Sunday. And today we start a series of sermons leading up to Christmas where we're going to be exploring how our lives are transformed as we worship this King. This invitation to worship the King, is really an invitation to take what we've learned about prayer over the last ten months and live it out.

Every time we worship this King, it's like climbing to the top of a mountain where we can meet with God. It's in worship, whether that's here on Sunday morning or in private worship during the week, it's in worship that we can begin to see God more clearly. And by seeing God more clearly and fully for who he actually is, we are then able to see ourselves and the people in our lives with greater clarity. Worship has to do with seeing. Worship is about having our vision corrected.

My friend Mark Labberton, who is the President of Fuller Theological Seminary, writes in his book, "The Dangerous Act of Loving Our Neighbor": "This radical, clarifying, centering vision of God is the heart of Christian worship...Worship gives us the chance to be taken up the mountain to see differently, more accurately, than we can otherwise do."

At the heart of worship is seeing God more clearly for who He is.

I love the view from the top of a mountain. The mountains put the valleys in their proper perspective. If we spend all our time in the valleys and never climb to the top of the mountains that tower above them, we will never really understand the lives we live in the valley. We will not have the perspective we need to see ourselves, our circumstances, and others as we could.

What's so surprising about the birth of Jesus is that this King we worship is a King who meets us in the valley and leads us to the mountaintop. In the birth of Jesus we discover some very important things about this King's heart and character. And as we begin to understand who this King is, we will begin to see ourselves and others as the King intends. Here's part of the story of the birth of Jesus the King from Matthew 1:18-25.

*Matt. 1:18 - Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. **19** Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public*

*disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly.*

***20** But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. **21** She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."*

***22** All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: **23** "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us."*

***24** When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, **25** but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.*

Today, I want to talk to you about the amazing story I just read from the opening chapter of the Gospel According to Matthew. Bobette Buster is a renowned consultant to screenwriters all over the country. I heard her speak for the first time at a conference put on by Fuller Theological Seminary. That conference was called, "Preaching in a Visual Age".

The conference was held in Los Angeles, on Hollywood Blvd., in fact. She's an Adjunct Professor of Film at Pastor Dan's alma mater, the University of Southern California. And she is a sought-after consultant to many studios, including Sony Pictures and Pixar.

She said this in a book she wrote about how to tell a story well. "Stories are the fire we carry to each other." She was inspired to say that after reading the novel, "No Country for Old Men". In that book, Sheriff Bell talks about how his cowboy father would carry the embers from the fire of one camp to the next camp. He'd carry the embers in the horn of an animal. He learned how to do that from Native Americans.

In his novel, the act of carry fire from one camp to another meant something very important. To carry the fire was to carry hope from one camp to the next. To carry the fire was an act of encouragement to people to continue their quest, especially when their life in the valley had collapsed in on them.

Bobette Buster suggests in her book that is exactly what stories can do and that's why we love both telling and hearing stories. She writes, "Stories possess a spark, a power: to comfort, connect, destroy, transform – and even to heal." She says, "Everyone has a story to tell. And everyone can appreciate a great story well told."

For most people, the story-telling medium has shifted from the written word to the screen, no matter how big or small that screen might be. Many people still love to read but many people don't read stories in books. They watch them on a big screen in a theater or a flat screen in their family room or on their tablet or smart phone. We live in a visual age.

Because that's true, let's see how much you know about the most financially successful films of 2017. Let's take a quiz this morning and maybe get to know some of the people sitting around us in the process. I'm going to give you a moment to think about this and then I want you to turn to someone sitting next you and tell them what you think is one of this year's top grossing films. No cheating. No smart phones or tablets allowed. Ready? What is one of the three films that have made the most money in 2017?

Let's see how you did. Here they are, starting with number 3. The third highest grossing film this year is "Guardians of the Galaxy, Part 2". Anybody get that one? Number 2 is "Wonder Woman". Anyone guess that one? Anyone have both of those movies? Are you ready? Here it is. The film that has made the most money in 2017 is..."Beauty and the Beast"!

Don't forget what Mrs. Pots says about the Beast when she's talking with Belle. Mrs. Pots is the talking Tea Kettle. She says, "The Master (meaning the Beast) is not as terrible as he appears." You're going to need that quote in a moment. The story of Beauty and the Beast is a story about the way we see one another.

In the United States, Beauty and the Beast has grossed 504 million dollars and worldwide this one film has raked in over 1.2 billion dollars. It's probably going to continue to be the top grossing film, at least for the next few weeks until these guys show up in theaters around the world...Star Wars, the Last Jedi, comes out on December 15.

At that conference put on by Fuller Seminary about preaching in a visual age, Bobette Buster said

something that knocked my off my feet. See if you agree with her or not. She said there are lots of stories being written and proposed to movie studios all that time. Thousands of screenplays are being written every year. Very few of them are ever picked up and made into a motion picture that you and I will see.

Here's what she said that caught my attention. She made the observation that the stories we love, the stories we want to see are either stories of redemption, stories of transformation where we watch a person confront what must be faced in their life. We want to see stories where we watch people courageously work their way through a great challenge and as a result grow into a more whole and complete person. Stories like that inspire us. They give us hope.

Or we want to watch anti-redemption stories where we see someone fail to do what they need to do and their story becomes a cautionary tale. These stories become a warning to us about what could happen if we don't face what we need to deal with in our own lives. Redemption stories and anti-redemptions stories. Those are the kinds of stories we will pay to watch.

You can certainly have both themes in one movie. You can have a character whose life is redeemed, transformed, set free, healed and restored because they made the courageous decision to honestly address what's happening in their lives, their relationships, their world.

And you can also have an anti-redemption story woven into the same movie. Another character's story, in the same film, can become a cautionary tale.

**T**he next time you watch a movie, ask yourself, is this a story of redemption or is it a warning...or is it both?

Okay. I'm going to ruin the end of another movie for you. But you don't have any excuses on this movie, since the animated version of Beauty and the Beast has been out for about a bazillion years. And it's a screenplay based on a fairy tale that has been circulating in Europe since 1740, at least. So, I'm going to tell you what happens and I'm going to do so without any guilt at all.

Beauty and the Beast is both a redemption story and a cautionary tale. It has both story lines. In fact, it's more than a redemption story. It's actually a resurrection story because the curse that turned people into talking tea pots, cups, candlesticks, clocks and turns a man into a beast is not broken in time. The last rose petal falls and it looks like Mrs. Potts and all the singing flatware are on their way to being sold at a Pottery Barn outlet store. But that is not the end of the story.

An amazing thing happens. The beast learns to love. He takes a chance and opens his heart and lets another person in. The risk he takes is to let Belle go to help her father when what he needed, what would have been best for him, would be for her to stay and break the spell. He learns to love. And his experience of letting his heart love another person complicates his once protected, safe life.

The story of the Beast was on its way to being a cautionary tale but it becomes a story of redemption.

The very familiar passage from the gospel of Matthew that I read at the beginning of this sermon is

where the New Testament picks up the greatest redemption story ever told. This is the story we are getting ready to celebrate on Christmas Day. This story of redemption is a story that will become a resurrection story. The birth, life and death of Jesus Christ interrupts the great cautionary tale that is the human story. The birth of Jesus changes everything.

Now, because of Jesus, where there is rejection, people are embraced. Where there is hurt and pain, there is healing. Where there are lives filled with bad choices, there is forgiveness and new beginnings. Where there is despair, hope is born. This is the greatest redemption story ever told.

And there's a castle set high on a hill in this story, too. That castle was called the Herodium. King Herod, the regional, Roman political leader built it so he might enjoy the afternoon breezes coming off the Mediterranean Sea as he looked down on the people he terrorized. And there was a town not far from the Herodium where another King was born and that town was called Bethlehem. Jesus, the One who changes everything, was born under the shadow of the Herodium.

Christmas is all about two ways of seeing the world that are on a collision course. On top of one mountain lived King Herod, who was so consumed by his fears and insecurities that he ruled over his people with brutality. From the top of that mountain he saw the world as a place filled with people who existed to serve him.

But near the base of that mountain another King was born. And this King came down into the valley where we live our lives, not to be served but to serve us and give his life so that we might have

life to the full. Those are two radically different ways of seeing the world.

Here's the big heads up. Here's what's going to determine if our story becomes a story of redemption or a cautionary tale. Who we worship, what we admire, will shape the way we see who we are and the way we see other people.

Bobette Buster said, "Everyone has a story to tell." We all have a story to tell because all of us are in the process of writing the story that is our lives. Will our story primarily be a redemption story, a story of transformation? Or will it end up being a cautionary tale? King Herod thought he was on top of his world but his life became an anti-redemption story. He misused the power he was given. He saw it as a means to his own ends.

Jesus' story is the quint-essential story of redemption because Jesus saw that He was given power, not to coercively control others but to empower them to become everything God wants them to be. If we admire King Herod and people like him we will begin to see the world the way he did and ultimately we will discover that our lives, our plans, will end as his did, in destruction. The Herodium and everything else he built, is now in ruins and his kingdom is gone.

But if King Jesus is the one we worship and admire, we will become more and more like Him. We will begin to see ourselves, and others, as infinitely valuable to God. That is what is being proclaimed when we see the God of the universe in that manger as a helpless child born into a poor family in a forgotten part of the Roman Empire.

If King Jesus is the one we worship and admire, we will begin to see people not as means to our own ends but people loved by God that we are called to encourage, build up, and serve.

As we worship the King of Kings, we will begin to see Him more clearly and that will begin to change the way we see everything else. Worshiping this King will allow us to see King Herod's world for what it truly is: empty, meaningless, filled with fear, manipulative and consumed with selfishness.

And as we worship King Jesus, we will grow in our capacity to love, to have hope even when everything seems to be collapsing around us and maybe even inside us. Because this story that we celebrate at Christmas is a story of redemption. And it's not just a story of transformation, it is a story of resurrection. Even when all seems lost, there is still hope that God can do the impossible.

This Christmas, as we worship this King, let's open ourselves up to being transformed, to being changed as we begin to see King Jesus more clearly than we ever have before.

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*Note: Sunday sermon texts are also available at [fpchawaii.org](http://fpchawaii.org) and the audio version can be downloaded from iTunes. You may also request the audio version by emailing: [fpchkoolau@gmail.com](mailto:fpchkoolau@gmail.com)*