

KAILUA CHRISTIAN CHURCH
SUNDAY, MARCH 2, 2025
SERMON “AWAKE IN THE SPIRIT”
SCRIPTURE: LUKE 9:28-36; GALATIANS 5:22-23
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Luke 9:28-26

28 About eight days after Jesus said this, he took Peter, John and James with him and went up onto a mountain to pray. **29** As he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning. **30** Two men, Moses and Elijah, appeared in glorious splendor, talking with Jesus. **31** They spoke about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem. **32** Peter and his companions were very sleepy, but when they became fully awake, they saw his glory and the two men standing with him. **33** As the men were leaving Jesus, Peter said to him, “Master, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.” (He did not know what he was saying.)

34 While he was speaking, a cloud appeared and covered them, and they were afraid as they entered the cloud. **35** A voice came from the cloud, saying, “This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him.” **36** When the voice had spoken, they found that Jesus was alone. The disciples kept this to themselves and did not tell anyone at that time what they had seen.

Sermon: The Testimony of KCC

Last Sunday, I shared the testimony of my own life and how I found Jesus and why I became a pastor in the wake of that experience. Testimonies are one of the most powerful things we can do as a church, because it helps us remember who we are in God’s story and where He is leading us. This Sunday – Transfiguration Sunday, which is the testimony of God revealing His Son, Jesus – I share the testimony of this church.

Kailua Christian Church was born at the really typical time of church planting in the 1950s. At that time, post-war America was united under a common sense of community purpose and thousands of churches erupted to fill the growing sense of motivated togetherness that came in those years. You’ll find that most of the church buildings on Oahu were either built during the missionary years of the late 19th to early 20th century, or like ours, in the post-World War II years of this community centered atmosphere.

Yet, many of those churches that were planted in the 50s reflect exactly that: churches planted in the 1950s sometimes became “Sunday Social Clubs” where the Gospel became secondary to community spirit. The concept that churches are places where friends gather to perhaps enjoy a potluck, maybe donate a little money to a good cause, and sing a couple of songs together before going back home feels honestly like a disingenuous slap in the face to the very transformational experiences I had with encountering Jesus as a young adult and other testimonies like mine that take the Gospel very seriously.

This complacent sense of community routine and tradition first, Spiritual thirst for God second didn't just happen in the 20th century, it happened in Jesus' time, too. He repeatedly decries the religious elite for their complacency often, and the Gospel story also has several incidents of people sleeping through transformative moments. Here during Jesus' Transfiguration, which is a pivotal moment in the story when God declares Jesus as His Son, and again at the Garden of Gethsemane as Jesus was being taken away for crucifixion by Roman authorities, the disciples are depicted as “falling asleep.” Also in several of Jesus' parables or healings, people are seen as “asleep” in odd circumstances. During the storm on Galilee, Jesus is asleep while the disciples panic. The common exegetical* analysis of these incidents of “sleepiness” is meant to indicate spiritual sleepiness or lack of readiness when the pivotal moments arrive.

I believe this “spiritual sleepiness,” akin to the experience of the disciples during the Transfiguration, was a large (but not the only) aspect of the downfall of the Church. A data study done by religious research monolith Barna found that young adults overwhelmingly left church not because of some religious trauma or overwhelmingly negative experience, but actually simply [because they felt the church was more connected to maintaining its social order than to God.](#)* Many church plants in the 1950's unfortunately fell into this “spiritual sleepiness”, and we find that *all* of the Christian denominations founded during this time period – ours included (The UCC, founded 1957, which has lost 2/3 of its membership in the last 70 years) – have been in rapid decline since their very inception as a result.

In contrast and despite the atmosphere of churches built as community clubs in the 1950s, Kailua Christian Church has a unique testimonial story. It wasn't borne out of simply a need for more community centers for a bygone culture that craved them. It wasn't borne out of an upsetting “split” from its mother church, as many other churches planted in the same period were. Instead, Kailua Christian Church was deliberately borne from a Gospel experience of transformative joy in Christ.

For those of you who aren't familiar with the story, Kailua was a sleepy little town in the 1950s that was mostly populated by Japanese farm immigrants and transient military

residents. Cut off by the dangerous Old Pali Road to Honolulu, Kailua wasn't the attractive and highly rated Trip Advisor destination that we have now – it was an isolated community surrounded by coconut trees and full of modest people trying to make a fresh start after a terrible war that directly and dually affected the Japanese immigrant and young marine population living here at that time.

The elders of this church who remember this period have shared with me that their families weren't subject to the Japanese Internment Camps that insidiously existed in American life during that time; Nancy Arakaki shared that their family was too poor and uneducated to be a "threat" to the Americans. Yet, she and others like her here in Kailua watched her teachers, friends, and others disappear to those camps, only to return forever changed by the trauma. Other founding members of this church, Like John Sakamoto, served in the all-Japanese 442nd, an all-Japanese Battalion of World War II that overcame incredible odds of racism and discrimination to become the most decorated Battalion in U.S. military history. Among this historical backdrop, the tension between the large Japanese immigrant community and the marine population of Kailua that had recently fought the Japanese in the Pacific theatre was high in the 1950s.

In the midst of this charged atmosphere, a young Japanese immigrant man murdered a marine at Kailua Beach Park in 1956. The charter members of this church stepped in to comfort the mother of the murderer and bring her into Christ's forgiveness. From this amazing story under significant cultural distress for the social location of the people involved, Kailua Christian Church was born. This church was born not out of cultural trend, church split, or a need for another social club – but because a population of second generation Japanese immigrants who had seen hell in the Japanese Internment Camps, World War II, and the marginalization of their people in Hawaii following Pearl Harbor – resisted the weights that threatened to hold them down and instead followed the Gospel into transforming lives.

This is the testimony of our church. As I began in this message, testimony is powerful and important because it helps us to remember how God has called us and sets the tone for who He continues to call us to be. Kailua Christian Church continued to remember this powerful beginning that threw off the cloak of the "Sunday Social Club" and led with conviction and purpose through much of its history, from the many Pastors KCC has nurtured through their callings, to the multifaceted youth and family programs that existed here, to the continued delivery of the Gospel to the poor and disinherited among us through the IHS transition house that existed on the back of this church for decades. These walls are saturated with the memories of transformative moments, of people finding their callings and following God into being more than what they ever could have dreamed.

This church was founded on radical grace. It was founded by a community of believers who chose to wrap the grieving mother of a murderer in forgiveness and empower her to follow Christ into a new beginning. This is the spirit that shaped Kailua Christian Church from the very start. This is the kind of faithfulness that has defined its transformational work through the years.

There is so much to honor and remember about this church. But here's the thing, and your "call to action" in this time and place: we cannot stand still in the memories of the past while Jesus stands before us now in dazzling white. We must be awake to what the Spirit is doing right now.

Peter, when he saw Jesus transfigured, responded by trying to preserve the past—he wanted to build shelters, an action rooted in tradition. He reached for what was familiar rather than responding to the living presence of God right in front of him. We, too, must be careful not to hold so tightly to the past that we miss what Jesus is doing in our church today.

Kailua Christian Church is not just a church of the past—it is a church alive right now, in ways that are exceptionally rare. We are an older church that refuses to stagnate. We lean into the Spirit, allowing God to renew and reshape us. That is rare.

We are a church that, despite financial burdens and maintenance challenges, remains committed to transforming lives and saving souls. That is rare.

We are a church that brings together all generations—elders and young people, stability and energy, wisdom and passion. In a time when churches often divide between young church plants and traditional congregations, we remain one unified body. That is rare.

But even as we celebrate this, we must be careful not to fall into the same spiritual sleepiness that has led so many churches into decline. Testimonies are not meant to be enshrined on a shelf, gathering dust. They are meant to encourage us into the future, to propel us forward into God's continuing work.

There is a temptation, after a long history of faithfulness, to stand still and bask in the past rather than stepping forward into the present. It is easy to look back on what has been accomplished and forget that God is not finished with us yet. The spirit of God did not transfigure Jesus so that the disciples could build memorials, as Peter attempted to do. The Transfiguration was a revelation meant to move them forward, to awaken them to the mission ahead.

Right now, we are at a pivotal moment in our church's journey. We have inherited a legacy of radical faithfulness, a church that has always chosen transformation over

complacency. But that faithfulness does not exempt us from the dangers of sleepiness. We cannot settle into nostalgia and allow the past to overshadow the present. We must listen to what God is doing now.

We are a church willing to lean into the Spirit and embrace transformation, even as financial concerns and maintenance weigh on us. We are a church that continues to radically change lives, to walk with the disinherited, and to build intergenerational community in a world that seeks to divide generations. That is worth celebrating—not just in memory, but in action.

It's so tempting to stay rooted in those memories! But my friends, I urge you to be present with the Holy Spirit and what it's doing here now. By staring at the shelf and its many awards of the Spirit, you're not watching what He is crafting right here in front of us. Don't sit staring at 1956 on a shelf; take it down, dust it off, and use it to propel and inspire you for what we are experiencing here right now in 2025. Let's not build memorials to past faithfulness while Jesus stands before us now, dazzling in glory. Let us take inspiration from the past without being trapped in it. Let us remain awake to what God is doing here, today, in our midst.

Amen.

*Exegetical refers to the process of interpreting and explaining a text, particularly scripture, in a way that draws out its original meaning. Exegesis involves careful analysis of the historical, cultural, and linguistic context of a passage to understand what the author intended and how it applies to faith and practice. In this sermon, the phrase "common exegetical analysis" means the widely accepted interpretation of the passages about sleepiness, suggesting that they symbolize spiritual complacency or a lack of awareness in key moments.

*<https://www.barna.com/research/six-reasons-young-christians-leave-church/>