

KAILUA CHRISTIAN CHURCH
SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 11, 2024
SERMON: GOD'S UNEXPECTED GIFTS
REV. IRENE WILLIS HASSAN

Scriptures:

2 Kings 2:1-12

2 Now when the LORD was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. 2 Elijah said to Elisha, "Stay here, for the LORD has sent me as far as Bethel." But Elisha said, "As the LORD lives and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So they went down to Bethel. 3 The company of prophets who were in Bethel came out to Elisha and said to him, "Do you know that today the LORD will take your master away from you?" And he said, "Yes, I know; keep silent."

4 Elijah said to him, "Elisha, stay here, for the LORD has sent me to Jericho." But he said, "As the LORD lives and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So they came to Jericho. 5 The company of prophets who were at Jericho drew near to Elisha and said to him, "Do you know that today the LORD will take your master away from you?" And he answered, "Yes, I know; keep silent."

6 Then Elijah said to him, "Stay here, for the LORD has sent me to the Jordan." But he said, "As the LORD lives and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So the two of them went on. 7 Fifty men of the company of prophets also went and stood at some distance from them, as they both were standing by the Jordan. 8 Then Elijah took his mantle and rolled it up and struck the water; the water was parted to the one side and to the other, and the two of them crossed on dry ground.

9 When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, "Tell me what I may do for you before I am taken from you." Elisha said, "Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit." 10 He responded, "You have asked a hard thing, yet if you see me as I am being taken from you, it will be granted you; if not, it will not." 11 As they continued walking and talking, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven. 12 Elisha kept watching and crying out, "Father, father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!" But when he could no longer see him, he grasped his own clothes and tore them in two pieces.

Mark 9:2-9

2 Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, 3 and his clothes became dazzling bright, such as no one[a] on earth could brighten them. 4 And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. 5 Then Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us set up three tents: one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." 6 He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. 7 Then a cloud overshadowed

them, and from the cloud there came a voice, “This is my Son, the Beloved;[b] listen to him!” **8**
Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.

9 As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

Sermon: God’s Unexpected Gifts

Have you ever had a really direct confirmation of God in your life? It seems that God is usually somewhat elusive and we walk with him, silently trusting that if we have faith then he will guide us down the right path.

Then sometimes there’s moments where the sky is opened and we see Jesus before us standing in a glowing robe. Well, maybe we haven’t had a moment quite as dramatic as the heavens opening and God speaking to us, but I’m sure we’ve all had experiences that were pivotal and scary and life changing. Perhaps we were unsure how to act in those moments. Don’t worry if you didn’t react to whatever unpredicted change that happened in your life with grace – the prophets and apostles of the Bible sure didn’t know how to react, either. In 2 Kings, Elisha reacts with fear, insisting that if they just stay quiet maybe God won’t see them and forget to enact His dramatic moment of opening the heavens and taking Elijah. In Mark 9, Peter responds to the confusion of seeing the transfiguration by trying to make the event very reasonable and human, offering to prepare tents, as he had been taught to do by his tradition. Both men witnessing these transformative moments respond by reverting to what felt safe and normal to them. Neither of them understood or wanted the imminent change to happen.

I personally have had several moments in my life like this: God called me into change, or doing something new, and I didn’t necessarily want to do what He wanted because it felt scary or unknown. Taking this church was one of those pivotal moments for me.

You see, refugees and homeless people are my comfort zone. I’ve always felt I have a gift in ministering to the “least of these” in our world: the vulnerable, the oppressed, and the brokenhearted. I’ve told you before that I am a Matthew 25 pastor at heart. But if we learn anything from the transfiguration of both Elijah and Jesus, God doesn’t like us to stay in our comfort zone.

God wants us to find comfort in Him, and be at peace with ourselves and the world. But the irony of finding peace in our faith is that same faith provides us the courage to evolve. Fear keeps us trapped in unhealthy cycles because it prohibits our courage to go where God calls us. Faith is the assurance of safety in God that mobilizes us to move forward, even when we’re scared.

I was good at teaching churches how to responsibly walk with vulnerable populations and all the visa, culture, and trauma care information they needed to support their ministries successfully. I was good at gauging my danger and impact levels in situations where I was

ministering to people with severe mental trauma and active addictions. I was effective at doing these things, so it surprised me when one day early last year God whispered in my ear that I was meant to be pastoring a local church. I remember clearly I was in a grants committee meeting and we were authorizing awards to various humanitarian ministries across the UCC. I looked at the spreadsheet of wonderful things that folks were doing all over the country, from responding to disasters to welcoming refugees into their communities, and I felt my heart strangely moved. I could hear God telling me that I needed to be in those communities rather than observing them from a spreadsheet.

This sudden shift in my heart frankly terrified me because I knew what goes on in local churches. Council meetings, budget reviews, conflicting voices on mission and culture, gossip – I never felt called into being in that world. I just wanted to sit on the sidewalk with a schizophrenic person and talk to them about what color God is, or eat homemade injeera bread with refugees and learn about how God delivered them from crisis. I was comfortable doing those things – not the stuff with the council and the relational conflicts and the gossip of the local church.

I prayed to God about it and asked Him why He wanted this from me. I reasoned with Him that I'm using the gifts He gave me for ministry – why change it up? Why send me into something new? Was my service to Him with the homeless folks and refugees not good enough?

That time in prayer last year was a transfiguration moment for me. God had spoken loudly and transformed Himself before me so that I could see Him more clearly. My response was the same as Peter or Elisha, in that I attempted to reason that what we had going was already good enough. "I'll prepare tents for you," said Peter, following his traditional instinct for how to react to such a jarring experience. "I know – keep silent," said Elisha, hoping that the New Thing wouldn't happen and he would be allowed to serve his teacher Elijah as they had been doing for so long.

It's only been 6 months, but I'm just so incredibly pleased that God called me out of my comfort zone and into this community. Instead of looking at spreadsheets and documents of the beauty that people are putting together in pursuit of the Kingdom of Heaven, I'm looking at the faces of real people who are struggling together, loving each other through it, listening and learning, and united as one under Him in a vast tapestry of varied experiences among us. Sure, I have to go to council meetings and sure, there's conflicts and gossip, but in this particular church, none of that comes even close to outweighing the spiritual magic that is taking place here. I truly believe that coming to pastor Kailua Christian Church has been one of the best gifts God unexpectedly delivered into my soul.

And I still get to sit on sidewalks with people who talk to themselves every Friday, and I thank you for allowing me space to feed my soul to do that. In fact, it's way nicer to be able to do that as a volunteer representing our church now than as a staff person that has to input weekly reports into the Hawaiian government's HMIS tracking system* and all the other bureaucratic

drudgery that comes with social services. I'm hoping that through the program we're launching this summer, the 1 Corinthians 13 community here will be more connected with the Matthew 25 community there in a way that safely brings us together in God's journey.

Sometimes God switches it up on us and calls curveballs into our lives. It's natural to respond by arguing the validity of what is familiar to us. Yet, God's purpose for our lives is always greater than the purpose we designate for ourselves. When we're open to witnessing the transfiguration of God's purpose and submitting to His will, we find that abundance and amazement follow.

Maybe you've had unexpected changes at work, or with your family, or even with this church. Watch for God and how he is transforming in that moment to show you who He is more clearly. Come and see, Jesus said, and come to see Him we shall.

Amen.

*HMIS = Homeless Management Information System. Social workers and case managers in every state have to use this governmental system to report every single interaction with clientele using a measurement rubric of engagement. I get the purpose of it, but it was definitely time consuming and repetitive. I'd rather be here in an organic community living and growing in God's guidance than on a computer inputting data! Praise God for His wisdom.