

KAILUA CHRISTIAN CHURCH (UCC)

Sunday, September 3, 2023

Rev. Irene Willis Hassan

SERMON – SAND AND ROCK

Scriptures:

Isaiah 26:1-6 & Matthew 7:24-27

NRSV Translation read by Vernon Pang

Isaiah 26:1-6

26 On that day this song will be sung in the land of Judah:

We have a strong city;
he sets up walls and bulwarks as a safeguard.

2 Open the gates,
so that the righteous nation that maintains faithfulness
may enter in.

3 Those of steadfast mind you keep in peace,
in peace because they trust in you.

4 Trust in the LORD forever,
for in the LORD GOD[a]
you have an everlasting rock.

5 For he has brought low
the inhabitants of the height;
the lofty city he lays low.
He lays it low to the ground,
casts it to the dust.

6 The foot tramples it,
the feet of the poor,
the steps of the needy.

Matthew 7:24-27

24 “Everyone, then, who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. 25 The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall because it had been founded on rock. 26 And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. 27 The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!”

Sermon: Sand and Rock

Last week, I talked about how the power of transformation is really the key mission of the church. When we try to cut corners in ministry to make it easier or simpler, we alienate and even endanger those around us. Jesus empowers us into doing great things and calls us into being His hands and feet bringing the lost and broken back into belonging.

Churches that dilute Christ's message of transformation into something simple, like a potluck after church and collecting donations for a food drive once a month, are all at risk of dying right now. The young people walked away from those churches, disillusioned by the emptiness they presented when the Bible we base our fellowship on is so dynamic in contrast. The church that coasts easily through the week with mindless gatherings and volunteer projects will be all gone within a decade or two.

Today we're going to talk about the reverse problem that can happen to a church that also causes disillusionment in new disciples. There are plenty of large, bustling churches that successfully create an environment of transformative hope for the lost and the broken of the world. If you've ever been to these services, you'd see that they're energetic, emotional, and inspiring. In an average service like this, you hear multiple testimonies of people who turned their life over to Jesus after experiencing destructive journeys of addiction, illness, or loss. In many ways, it's a powerful thing to witness.

A lot of the people at IHS liked going to these services because it made them feel something after a lifetime of paperwork, pain, and hopelessness. Some of them would even say things like "instead of getting high on ice, now I get high on Christ," because the feeling they had when stepping into those churches felt like getting high. I've told a few of you the story of a woman who would come find me about once a month saying "Chaplain! Chaplain! I got saved this weekend!" to which I would respond, "Praise God, that's great!" But then like clockwork, a week later she would disappear back into her drug-fueled life of prostitution and chaos. It eventually started sounding like the "boy who cried wolf" every time she would come back and claim to be "saved" again, but nothing actually changed in her lifestyle as a result.

And yes, Jesus does give us infinite Grace to be forgiven and change our lives. And yes, being Saved by Him is perhaps the most powerful experience a human being can have. But the thing is, I recognized the experience of my IHS folks who saw those emotional rock band churches as another way of getting "high", only to go back to the superficial high of drugs again. I was 17 and homeless and one of those churches took me in and introduced me to Jesus. I had a near death experience and this church literally saved my life as well as saving my soul. Yet, two weeks after my conversion, the family I was staying with from the church sat me down. They told me I had to say that Jesus was the only way to God otherwise I was going to hell and I couldn't be in their house anymore. I didn't know what to say. I had only been saved two weeks previously, I was still a child, and I was being threatened to lose the only home that I had. I still had so many questions and all of it was forced to a screeching halt by this sudden ultimatum. Carefully, I told the family that I needed to think about it because I wasn't sure the world was so absolutely black and white. They told me that there's no room for

gray in Christianity and sent me packing. Just as quickly as I was “saved”, I was dumped back into my life of homelessness again.

As an adult with 20 years of Christian faith behind me, I can say that I believe Jesus is the only way to God for me. However, the emphasis here is on the 20 years. I’m not saying that it took that long to come to the understanding that Jesus was the only way to God; my emphasis on the length of time is that I’m still stably Christian so long after my dramatic conversion. I’ve watched so many people continue chasing that “high” of the conversion moment without knowing how to move consistently into a new life, and it concerns me. Like the mainline churches that try to simplify church into an intellectual house of discussion and light volunteerism, evangelical churches try to simplify church into an emotional house of drama and absolutism. And the problem is that humans aren’t simple, especially when it comes to our relationship with God during times of crisis.

Highly emotional, altar call driven churches often make this mistake that I encountered in my own youth: in those environments, there’s no theological exploration or plan of stabilization offered as a way to move deeper into one’s own faith past that dynamic salvation moment. Statistically (you may have noticed that I like results-driven statistics), many youth in emotionally driven churches like these drop out by the age of 20 when they start asking hard questions about their faith and don’t receive thoughtful or explorative answers from the church. Or worse, the unchecked power of the leadership of those churches cause sexual and financial abuse scandals due to the thinness of the theology and instability of their administrative practice. While we all make mistakes, we all have difficult moments of temptation, but it’s very easy to let the setbacks of our lives slide us back into old, unhealthy habits if we don’t have a firm foundation to stand on after we commit to changing our lives.

Both Jesus and Isaiah talk about the necessity of having a solid foundation when times get hard. Isaiah writes: “Trust in the LORD forever, for in the LORD GOD you have an everlasting rock.” Jesus tells us that having trust in Him will help steady our hearts when the storms of life threaten to tear us apart.

The task then of the church is to build the foundation in God that we can place our trust when the storms of life threaten us. To build that foundation, we have to be willing to walk with each other deeply and faithfully through those storms. That means not relying on potlucks and simple, mindless acts of charity that end up hurting more than helping. However, it also doesn’t mean having dramatic, emotional “highs” that you have to seek out again and again, nor does it mean presenting ultimatums without thoughtful discussion. Having a foundation means continuing to walk with God past that

emotionally-driven conversion moment. Having a foundation means being in a safe community to ask questions, explore, and grow, while also holding true to a goal of transformation in Christ that we are meant to grow into.

So if the dramatic emotional highs of non denominational churches don't create that foundation, and the thoughtless rhythm of the mainline protestant churches doesn't create that foundation, then what does?

This brings me, again, to why I'm standing here before you today. Kailua Christian Church has proven repeatedly, from your brave origin story to the many seminarians you've supported into discipleship and leadership, that this church is a great foundation for people to not only discover the abundance of new life in Jesus, but also the stability through the storms of life that come even after we've devoted ourselves to Christ. KCC doesn't offer an emotional high that wears off at the first threat of a storm. KCC doesn't offer a vaguely moral community without a solid foundation in Jesus. What you all have here in this church is truly special, and just because your numbers have dwindled in recent years, I want you to know I see the power that Christ has placed in you.

At KCC, I don't see the UCC church of my childhood that offered nothing for me when I was in pain. I grew up in a very typical UCC, with the rainbow flags and the political preaching, standardized classes like "Our Whole Lives", and intellectual Bible studies that didn't encourage any emotional engagement. Then when I got pregnant at 15 years old, that church totally abandoned me and did nothing for me through my subsequent years of severe turmoil that led me to jail and homelessness. They meant well, but their intellectual exploration was sand when I asked for the solid rock of Jesus' love in my time of need.

At KCC, I don't see the non denominational church that brought me into the wonderful empowerment of turning my life over to Jesus, only to quickly dump me back out on the street again with unanswered questions. I don't see the church that vacantly cycles people through an emotional high of conversion without the subsequent sustainability. They meant well, but their chaotic drama and thin theology was sand when I asked for Jesus' wisdom in my time of need.

KCC is a place where the broken can find renewal, which is what we are called to do in Christ Jesus. And after that renewal, KCC is a place where people can build a foundation, ask important questions, and be held in stable love and belonging through the post-conversion storms. KCC builds in people the spiritual strength to not only change their lives, but sustain through years of discipleship and grow in Christ with time and nurture.

You all may feel like your identity is built on sand as you watched the church shrink around you the past several years. But I'm here to tell you you're wrong – we're not sitting on sand here. The sand in the foundation I see here is a church that was trying to choose a direction as you were watching the world becoming increasingly polarized. You may have been thinking: are we going to go with the mainline protestants, and make radical statements that purposely brand ourselves as visibly “edgy” with the rainbow flags and politically motivated social justice statements – even if some of those statements take us away from the centrality of Christ's saving power? Or are we going to go with the evangelicals, that have their big emotional rockbands and dramatic altar calls, even though we don't necessarily like that style or music very much and find it sort of theologically thin? You may have felt like you needed to choose a direction or die, and that anxiety over having to choose caused massive rifts among you. That anxiety and doubt in Christ's calling for your unique church was your sand.

I don't think you have to choose, because God has instilled in this church a great power in your ability to both transform lives toward Christ and also provide a stable ground for them to walk on that journey afterward. The world may be polarized, but Christ is the rock that brings us together, and this is a church that reflects that. That is a rare gift for a church to have.

Dear church, you have a gift in providing that foundation for anyone who walks through the door. You both allow room for the gray areas of asking questions about God and theology that are natural to have, while also being solid in Jesus' calling to transform lives through faith in Him. You provide hope and love in times of heartache, while also providing joy and belonging in times of celebration. You stand on the foundation of Jesus while the rest of the world crumbles into increasing doubt and division. There's a real treasure in this congregation and I have faith that God will work many great things through us yet to come. KCC is the church I needed when I was 15, and as a newly 36 year old, I'm proud to tell my 15-year-old self that I've found her a safe church to thrive in. Thank you for being that church, and may we continue to turn toward the Rock of Salvation and away from the sands of doubt and anxiety over His calling for us.

Amen.