

KAILUA CHRISTIAN CHURCH
Sunday Worship, January 7, 2024 – 10:00 a.m.
Sermon: The Spiritual Search for Simplicity
Rev. Irene Willis Hassan

Scripture Readings:

Isaiah 60:1-6

1 Arise, shine, for your light has come,
and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.
2 For darkness shall cover the earth
and thick darkness the peoples,
but the LORD will arise upon you,
and his glory will appear over you.
3 Nations shall come to your light
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.
4 Lift up your eyes and look around;
they all gather together; they come to you;
your sons shall come from far away,
and your daughters shall be carried in their nurses' arms.
5 Then you shall see and be radiant;
your heart shall thrill and rejoice,[a]
because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you;
the wealth of the nations shall come to you.
6 A multitude of camels shall cover you,
the young camels of Midian and Ephah;
all those from Sheba shall come.
They shall bring gold and frankincense
and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD.

Matthew 2:1-12

1 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, magi from the east came to Jerusalem, 2 asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star in the east and have come to pay him homage." 3 When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him, 4 and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah[c] was to be born. 5 They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it has been written by the prophet:
6 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah,
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd[d] my people Israel.' "

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7 Then Herod secretly called for the magi and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 8 Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search

diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.” 9 When they had heard the king, they set out, and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen in the east, until it stopped over the place where the child was. 10 When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 11 On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. 12 And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Sermon: The Spiritual Search for Simplicity

Do you ever feel like you’re coming to church just because it’s a habit at this point? You know you’re supposed to and you’ve reserved the time for it on Sunday morning, but maybe your relationship with God and others is more affected by your personal spiritual practices like devotionals or nighttime prayers than it is by coming here every week. If you feel like church is sometimes more of a ritual chore than a place of spiritual restoration, this sermon is for you.

As I’ve repeatedly told you, the younger generations have decided that they don’t need church to have a close relationship to God. What younger people often do now instead is read their horoscopes. Many people my age and younger follow their astrological signs and use them to inform everything from relationships to investments. We often say things like, “Mercury’s in retrograde, now’s not a good time to invest in the stock market,” or “I can’t date him, he’s a Libra, I don’t have good experiences with Libras!” These are very common thought patterns that you hear among my generation.

Why are we so focused on star patterns that aligned at our births as a spiritual practice? The author of our scripture reading from Matthew today seemed to understand the appeal. The Magi written about here were astrologers who searched for star signs to guide their spiritual paths, which is what led them to Jesus. Matthew inserts this story of the Magi because it fulfills the scripture from Isaiah 60 that kings of all nations will come to see the Messiah. It highlights that Jesus didn’t only come for the Jews – He came to save peoples of all backgrounds, including foreign lands that had been reliant on star signs for generations.

Astrology is one of the oldest marriages of science and spirituality, and that’s why it’s popular among us young people as well as referenced in scripture. There’s a prevalent sense that astrology predates the complications of the modern world’s huge multitude of religions, opinions, and ideas. In the Information Age where we’re constantly overloaded by more information than we can possibly process, and we have access to hundreds of religions and arguments for and against them, young people have flocked back to one of the earliest, most basic forms of spirituality: star signs.

As information gets more complicated, we continually seek new ways to make access to the Divine simpler. A scroll through any application on the internet will give you access

to information about any religion, and often conflicting accounts of all of them. We know that we feel connected spiritually to the Unknown of the universe, but trying to wade into the complications of how people connect with and understand God leaves many of us more confused than when we started researching it. Is Christianity 3 Gods or one? If Jesus was the Son of God, what does Joseph Smith have to do with that? If Islam is a religion of peace, why does the Quran advocate so much conquering and war? If Buddhism is an individualistic practice, why are there such rigid structures and rules for monostatic sects? Any religion can get holes poked in it, and we young people have thrown up our hands against the barrage of information and elected to go back to one of the earliest forms of religious understanding in the stars.

Matthew recognized astrology's appeal in the ancient world among those seeking hope and meaning, symbolized by the Magi's appearance. Jesus came to heal divisions among cultures under Him, and the appearance of the Magi represented the union of East and West, Jew and Gentile, Rich and Poor under His authority. Matthew's intention was to reach an audience less versed in complex Jewish theology than his immediate peers. Similarly, as modern youth seek spiritual simplicity through astrology, Matthew employed the Magi's tale to signify a fresh start at Jesus's birth, moving beyond intricate Jewish rules. This event marked a new era surpassing both the complexities of Jewish practice and the objective detachment of astrological symbolism. Young people are looking to simplify the plurality of religious thought in the contemporary world through astrology, and Matthew looked to simplify the plurality of religious thought in His time through Jesus.

Why isn't Jesus still the answer to unifying religious thought, as intended by Matthew? The complexity of Christianity over its millennia-long existence contributes to this. With numerous denominations and a vast array of ritualistic practices, Christianity has evolved into a convoluted structure. As a result, young individuals entering churches encounter rituals that seem detached from the simple essence of God walking among us to show us the way. Consequently, many opt for the simplicity of astrology, finding solace in the predictable patterns of stars that offer a sense of mystery and illumination without the overwhelming complexity associated with Christianity's contemporary structures.

Young church planters see and understand this generational yearning for simplicity in faith among the complexities of information we experience at every waking second. For this reason, you see Christianity being rebranded as the "Jesus Movement." You often hear new converts these days adamantly declaring that they're not Christian, they're "Jesus Followers." An anonymous campaign called "He Gets Us" launched a major initiative at the Super Bowl in 2022 that emphasizes this deconstructing of Christian dogma and simplifies it into personal identification with Jesus. Church plants don't recognize denominations or even the word Christian in their titles anymore – they're all simple names about the goal they're trying to accomplish such as "Inspire Church" or "Love Church".

Contemporary church planters are right in their instinct to simplify Christianity into a Jesus Movement that's devoid of the high church culture of stand up, sit down, repeat

this, et cetera. The only thing that's really needed in Christianity is to believe in Jesus and make disciples in His name. Simple. The rituals and liturgies that we use to accomplish our faith in Him and enact His Great Commission are just tools to help us. If they're too foreign and complicated for seekers exploring their faith, or if they become so ingrained that we forget why we're doing them, those tools end up being counter-productive.

Since Jesus' birth, God has been trying to unite us in faith in Him across culture and ideology. He's been trying to give us this simple equation from liberating ourselves from death, sin, and suffering. Jesus very explicitly reprimanded people for overemphasizing ritual in places where the ritual was replacing the basics of loving and trusting God. As a devout, ritualistic Jew, he was also mindful of the valuable place that ritual holds in keeping faith alive and manageable, but He consistently reminded his followers that the rituals are only helpful in as far as they take us in keeping our faith alive.

The surge in astrological interest among young people reflects a desire for simplicity in an increasingly complex world filled with overwhelming information and convoluted church practices. Stars are simple, they're just part of nature, we reason. They don't require artificial reasoning from some book or tradition.

However, astrology, despite its appeal, carries its own intricate set of rules and interpretations. For instance, as a Virgo, I should possess "earthy and practical" traits, which anyone who's ever met me knows doesn't align with my actual personality. When discussing this discrepancy with astrology enthusiasts, they delve into intricate details like moon signs and other complexities, indicating that astrology isn't as straightforward as it seems.

Jesus is simple, though. He holds the weight of our sin and suffering for us if we only believe in Him. We've added a lot of rituals and liturgy over the years to make that idea stick with us, but those rituals have lost their meaning for many who are desperately seeking simplicity in this complicated world.

The Dinner Church model that we'll be launching this year is exactly that: a simplified model of church that appeals to a generation inundated by information. In the early years of Christianity, Christians met at each other's houses over a meal and discussed Jesus and His expectations of us as His disciples. We're going to be doing that on Thursday nights – a simple dinner with theological questions for discussion that help us develop our faith from where we're at rather than where the high rituals and liturgy of traditional church dictate we should be.

If you've gotten lost in the habit of ritualized church and what we do here on Sunday morning has begun to lose its meaning, then the Thursday night model may be a good

place for you to reawaken your faith. If you're searching to return to that moment after Jesus' birth when cultures and ideas, races and social classes came together to bow to the boy born in a cave, the Thursday night model may be a good place for you to remember that organic moment. Dinner Church, or whatever we're calling it, will be designed to get you out of the ritual, which may have turned into an automatic motion every week for you rather than something that empowers you to live your faith more fully and courageously.

Of course, we'll still have our traditional Sunday service. Jesus didn't eliminate ritual or tradition, He simply asked that those rituals and traditions intentionally maintain our faith rather than hinder it. If the traditions of Sunday morning continue to fill your soul and strengthen your relationship with Jesus, we welcome you on Sunday morning. If you need a reset button, we welcome you on Thursday night. If you need a mix of both, we will provide both and celebrate whatever path helps you to cross the divides of information, culture, and the many differences that make us human to unite under Jesus.

The visit of the Magi was the simplification of all the complications that we face in life, from different cultures and languages to different practices and rituals, and united them under Him who simply asks us to believe in Him. The young people are searching for this simple communion with God in astrology. We know that the true simple communion with God is through Jesus, who not only provides a simple path to relationship with Him – He transforms our whole lives by his abundantly loving sacrifice. Let's make a safe place for the young people to find that simple connection to God in a world of complicated information, and in doing so, give them more than they could have ever imagined.

Amen.