

**KAILUA CHRISTIAN CHURCH
SUNDAY, MARCH 17, 2024
SERMON: THE STRONGEST PERSON
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SCRIPTURE

John 12:20-33

20 Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. **21** They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” **22** Philip went and told Andrew, then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. **23** Jesus answered them, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. **24** Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain, but if it dies it bears much fruit. **25** Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. **26** Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

27 “Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say: ‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. **28** Father, glorify your name.” Then a voice came from heaven, “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” **29** The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, “An angel has spoken to him.” **30** Jesus answered, “This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. **31** Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. **32** And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people[a] to myself.” **33** He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

Sermon: The Strongest Person

One question that often comes up when I tell people I’m a pastor: if Jesus was the Messiah, and therefore the strongest human to ever walk the planet, why did he have to die so violently? It doesn’t make any sense that the most powerful person in human history would die in such a miserable and humiliating way.

The community of Jesus’ time held the same argument – that the Messiah will be a Strong Man, capable of defeating Rome and conquering nations. They envisioned him on a chariot of glory, coming down from the clouds and striking down the enemies of Israel, not some carpenter dying on a cross surrounded by sinners and degenerates.

With the imagery in mind of a strong man knocking down Romans effortlessly versus a carpenter dying on a cross: I want you to think of the strongest person you know. I’ll give you a moment to conjure that person in your mind - who is the strongest person you know?

For me, it’s many people – but one of them is our own Alice Esaki, who has given me permission to share her story with you. When Alice was 9 years old, she survived the Tsunami that hit Hilo in 1946. She retells the harrowing story of watching her mother

and siblings being swept out to sea while the floor of her home bottomed out and sucked her into a deadly torrent of water. Alice and her father were the only surviving members of her nuclear family.

I asked Alice, where do you think God was in all of this? Do you blame Him? Alice tells me no, she didn't blame God. Instead, she believed He was with her, guiding her through the tidal wave to safety. Navigating the aftermath of the Tsunami, Alice found herself asking God for His redemption and to place new life and purpose into her and her father. Alice went on to have a family of her own, a new home here on Oahu, and a place to remain close to God and her community with us at Kailua Christian Church. Alice arose broken from the waters that took her family and her home, and through God's guidance she found the transformational power to build a new life after the flood.

Alice was not a strong person in the sense of having physical intimidation, cunning prowess, or political acumen, like the community of Jesus' day envisioned a strong person to have. Alice is strong specifically because she overcame a terrible thing and allowed God to mold her into a new thing. I'm guessing the strong person you have in your own life is the same – I'm guessing your person endured the trials of life and triumphed over them, just as Alice did. We don't see people who have had everything handed to them as strong; we see people that climbed out of a pit of darkness and found their way into the light as strong.

Jesus was one of us, dying on that cross, and Jesus was one of us, rolling back the tombstone after undergoing that harrowing experience. The story of Jesus dying brutally and returning to life is reflected in the story of the strongest of the strong people we know.

Now, some may argue that God transcends our understanding and cannot be likened to mortal beings. It's expected that God's Messiah would be a valiant crusader that triumphed easily over obstacles, instead of dying miserably on a cross because God doesn't need to overcome suffering and achieve redemption like we do. Humans are finite and broken, and God is not. However, this acknowledgment that Jesus didn't need to die, but rather *chose to* as an act of solidarity with us, reinforces the embodiment of divine love and grace. God didn't have to sacrifice His son, because He doesn't need redemption from brokenness like we do; yet, he chose to do this so He could experience what we experience and walk with us on our journey through the tribulations of life.

God could just send us a set of rules and expect us to follow them as a preventative care resource, as He did with the 10 commandments. He could just provide guidance from afar through His prophets, expect us to fail, and then send the stereotype of a "Strong Man" to come clean up the mess at the End of Days.

But God's love for us extends far beyond merely adhering to a set of rules. He desires our flourishing and well-being, acknowledging that simply following rules cannot shield us from the trials and tribulations of life, especially when we are not at fault for what transpires. Alice could have crumbled into despair that terrible day in 1946, but Alice chose to follow God into the restorative plans He kept for her because Jesus taught her

the way out of darkness by His own example. What good do religious rules have when your house and family are being swept away from you instantly in a natural calamity?

Indeed, many have grappled with faith when faced with adversity, feeling disillusioned by the notion that adhering to religious rules should guarantee protection from harm. Yet, by the grace of God, the essence of Jesus' sacrifice transcends mere rule-following; it offers a profound revelation of God's love and compassion. God sent Jesus because he wasn't just a set of preventative care rules on stone tablets – he was the living flesh embodiment of how to triumph over the darkness inherent to the human experience.

God wasn't planting wheat stocks and expecting them to simply get stronger by following the rules of sun, soil, and water. God knew that storms would come and knock those plants down, pests would invade the crops, or any number of unforeseen problems could happen, despite careful watering and fertilizing. God knew that a simple set of rules to govern righteousness is not enough for humans to transform. Through Jesus, God scattered the dead wheat and watched it multiply. He went beyond the rules of gardening and planned for the unknowns of life. Through Jesus, He gave us the tools to navigate the chaos beyond the rules.

True strength isn't measured by the possession of all the tools for success or by avoiding challenges altogether. It's not about being the farmer who tends to a crop with meticulous care but fails to prepare for the inevitable storms of life. Instead, real strength emerges when we confront the storms head-on, when we find ourselves amidst the wreckage of shattered dreams and broken plans. In those moments, it's not about merely surviving; it's about thriving despite the adversity. The strongest among us are those who refuse to be defeated by life's trials. They take the seeds of their shattered dreams and scatter them anew, cultivating fields that yield even greater abundance after the storm has passed. They embody resilience, perseverance, and the unwavering belief that even in the darkest of nights, a new dawn awaits.

So answering the question - if Jesus was strong, why did he have to die so violently? He had to because God understands that storms of life threaten us even when we follow all the rules. God understands that the strong person has the tools to navigate the storm, not simply hope that the rules for righteous life prevent the storms from happening. Jesus died to help us navigate those storms.

As we continue our Lenten journey, may we draw strength from Jesus' example, trusting in God's promise of renewal and transformation. Let us embrace the storms of life with courage and faith, knowing that through Christ, we are empowered to overcome every trial and emerge victorious in His love.

Amen.