

KAILUA CHRISTIAN CHURCH
SUNDAY, MARCH 3, 2024
“COME ALIVE”
REV. IRENE WILLIS HASSAN

SCRIPTURE

John 2:13-22

13 The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. **14** In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves and the money changers seated at their tables. **15** Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, with the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. **16** He told those who were selling the doves, “Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!” **17** His disciples remembered that it was written, “Zeal for your house will consume me.” **18** The Jews then said to him, “What sign can you show us for doing this?” **19** Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” **20** The Jews then said, “This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?” **21** But he was speaking of the temple of his body. **22** After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

Sermon: Come Alive

Content warning: Violence, Suicide. If this is not a topic you can endure today, I welcome and affirm you to find a quiet place outside the sanctuary to walk alone and be with God for the next 15 minutes or so, with no judgment or upset from me.

I rarely preach on “current news” topics because I believe that all earthly things like governments, news cycles, and moments in our time are passing, and in contrast, God and His Vision of the Kingdom are eternal beyond any trials we experience during our time on earth. As Ecclesiastes wrote, *“For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.”* However, there is an important balance between God’s eternal Kingdom and the very real topics of our daily lives and the current world we live in. Without engaging the issues of our time, we don’t have a jumping point into which we can participate in God’s Vision. The real context that we live in informs the eternal context that God lives in. So, attending to that balance, today I’m addressing a topic from the news cycle this week.

You may have read that last Sunday while we were worshiping here together, a young US Active Duty Airman named Aaron Bushnell live streamed onto the internet while lighting himself on fire and died horribly in front of the Israeli Embassy in Washington DC. He screamed, “Free Palestine!” until his body could no longer sustain words. Many of us asked: How could a person do such a thing, and what was the point of a young life so violently lost?

I actually wrote a research paper on this topic during my first year at Seminary. We were meant to be choosing a “Practice of Faith” to research. While many of my classmates chose reasonable things like Contemplative Prayer, The Lectio Divina, or Yoga, my cheeky self chose “Religious Self-Immolation” as my researched faith practice. My professor grumbled that the project was really meant to be a Practice of Faith that we intend to engage in ministry, but I counter argued that these verses from John 2 about Jesus turning over the tables at the Temple demonstrate the reality of extreme acts as part of our faith journey and they deserve a place in the narrative of lived faith. Printed copies of that paper which 22 year old divinity student Irene wrote so many years ago are on the back table of the Sanctuary, if you’re interested in reading it.

In the verses we read from John 2, Jesus takes out a whip and starts screaming at the money changers to get out of the Temple. This would have been a very confusing scene, because the act of selling sacrificial objects at the Temple gates had been around for centuries and Jesus walking in there yelling and swinging a deadly weapon was surely an unusual interruption. In this reading from John, Jesus is purposefully upending the status quo of his time in an attempt to “wake up” his community that massive change was about to happen. Jesus knew that in a few short years the Temple would be reduced to nothing, and all the money and sacrificial objects exchanged there would simply be dust in the wind of time. Jesus’s dramatic entrance into the Temple that day signaled a cry for his people to change their hearts toward preparing for the coming changes rather than being mindlessly swept away in the rubble.

Similarly, Airman Bushnell’s last words before lighting himself on fire included statements that he was doing this to wake up the country into not accepting the status quo. Airman Bushnell is part of a long line of religious activists who committed horrific self-immolations in the name of “waking up” their communities. Arguably one of the most famous photos of all time is of Thich Quang Duc, a Buddhist Monk, fully engulfed in flames sitting on a busy street corner of Saigon, Vietnam to protest the Vietnam War in 1963. Jesus may not have died at the moment that he committed a similar violent act at the Temple, but the act certainly contributed to his impending crucifixion in the near future. The goal of all 3 men was the same: to do something extreme enough that the people around them would wake up, even if it resulted in their own dramatic death.

This sermon doesn’t advocate for Airman Bushnell’s cause. While I am personally invested in peace and justice for both Palestinians and Israelis, you’ll never hear me tell you from this pulpit how to vote or what to believe politically. Much less, I’ll never tell you to commit acts of extremism in the name of a political cause. What this sermon does advocate for is to live your faith in a way that wakes you up and makes you come alive.

It may sound ironic to say that faith should make you “come alive” after talking about how faith in a cause literally killed all three of the men I referenced in this message. However, the curious thing about self-immolation or crucifixion is that the religious people who endure those acts do so exactly because it involves being intensely and single-mindedly focused on your faith. If anyone has ever burned their hand on a hot stove, you know that the small act of even putting a finger tip in fire causes our bodies to recoil in immense pain. Similarly, crucifixion is thought to be one of the most painful methods of death because of its agonizingly slow suffocation and shock process. To intentionally light

your whole body on fire, or intentionally endure hanging on a cross by nails until death, requires some serious spiritual centeredness. That sort of intentionality requires a person to be truly alive in their beliefs, and in this light, the acts of violence that they engaged in the name of waking up their community were very much acts of life.

I want to be perfectly clear, again, that I would never ask you to commit violent acts for your faith, or any cause, really. One wonderful thing about being Christian is that Jesus absorbed that violence for us on the Cross, because he loved us so deeply. I am asking you, however, to come alive in your faith in response to Jesus' dramatic call to us to wake up. Be awake, be aware, and live deeply into what makes you come alive.

Last week, I talked to you about whether your commitments are performative to maintain the status quo, or alternatively, if you've invited Jesus into your commitments. This week, I'm asking you to take a deeper dive into exploring your faith and giving your heart over to God. The Kingdom of Heaven isn't run-of-the-mill money changing for sacrificial objects. The Kingdom of Heaven is a place where all peoples feel so deeply moved in their souls that they can't help but come alive in their faith. For some, that looks like burning to death in the name of justice. For others of us, it looks like purposefulness in our relationships, in our careers, and our church. Jesus asks you to come alive in your faith and all the places in your life that your faith informs, from interactions at the grocery store to building a new project at work.

Coming alive looks like being present in the joy and heartache of your pursuits. Coming alive looks like purposefulness through the ups and downs, and firm resolve that God will prevail through it all. Coming alive looks like willingness to let go of the ritual objects that are dust in the wind of time, and pick up our crosses to follow Him into the renewed future He seeks for us. Faith isn't a thing that you do once a week in this sanctuary, it's something that ignites you to be joyful and inspired in all aspects of your life. Don't accept the status quo of your routines – kindle the places of curiosity and growth that Jesus expects from you, and make them come alive.

The question I leave you with in response to the violent call from Jesus is: What makes you come alive? What is Jesus calling you to wake up and see?

I leave you with the words of Howard Thurman, whom I've quoted to you before because he's one of my favorite theologians ever. In his words:

“Ask what makes you come alive and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.”

Amen.