

**KAILUA CHRISTIAN CHURCH
SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 22, 2024
Message: FAITHFUL GRAY HAIR
REV. IRENE WILLIS HASSAN**

SCRIPTURES

Isaiah 43:14-19

14 This is what the LORD says—
your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel:
“For your sake I will send to Babylon
and bring down as fugitives all the Babylonians,[b]
in the ships in which they took pride.

15 I am the LORD, your Holy One,
Israel’s Creator, your King.”

16 This is what the LORD says—
he who made a way through the sea,
a path through the mighty waters,

17 who drew out the chariots and horses,
the army and reinforcements together,
and they lay there, never to rise again,
extinguished, snuffed out like a wick:

18 “Forget the former things;
do not dwell on the past.

19 See, I am doing a new thing!
Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?
I am making a way in the wilderness
and streams in the wasteland.

Isaiah 46:1-4; 9-10

1Bel bows down, Nebo stoops low;
their idols are borne by beasts of burden.[a]
The images that are carried about are burdensome,
a burden for the weary.

2 They stoop and bow down together;
unable to rescue the burden,
they themselves go off into captivity.

3 “Listen to me, you descendants of Jacob,
all the remnant of the people of Israel,
you whom I have upheld since your birth,
and have carried since you were born.

4 Even to your old age and gray hairs
I am he, I am he who will sustain you.
I have made you and I will carry you;
I will sustain you and I will rescue you.

9 Remember the former things, those of long ago;
I am God, and there is no other;
I am God, and there is none like me.

10 I make known the end from the beginning,
from ancient times, what is still to come.
I say, ‘My purpose will stand,
and I will do all that I please.’

Sermon: Faithful Gray Hair

I spend a lot of time talking about the experiences of the young. I do that for the reason I preached about last week – our younger generations are experiencing deep pain and separation from God. Just as Jesus calls on us to go out and find the lost, the captive, and the broken-hearted and bring them into freedom in Him, we should focus on understanding the young generations and how to effectively evangelize them. My recommendation last week was to intentionally walk with them through the passion and purpose that makes their hearts come alive in the Holy Spirit, and harness that power into the stability of our community working together for the Kingdom of Heaven.

However, you’ve heard that sermon from me plenty enough times about the urgency of changing what and how we do church to effectively reach the young people. This sermon is about our kupuna. Everyone who calls on Jesus and follows His Way has a place in the Kingdom, not just the young people seeking passion and purpose.

I chose two separate verses from a similar chunk of the book of Isaiah. Bible nerd goggles time.

Isaiah is separated into three chunks: the first third (chapters 1-39, “Proto-Isaiah”), which was likely written during the fall of Jerusalem and the beginning of Babylonian captivity in the 6th century BCE. This was a time of great turmoil for Isaiah’s community, and the verses of the first section reflect this confusion and heartache. The second section (chapters 40-55, “Deutero-Isaiah”), which we read part of today, was written 50 years later, when Cyrus the Great came to conquer the Babylonians and mercifully granted the Jews back their land and allowed them to rebuild their temple. The third

section (chapters 56-66, “Trito-Isaiah”) was written after the Temple was rebuilt and order restored for the Jewish community. It harkens a glorious future in which God’s reign will last forever under the promised Messiah who will deliver them into a permanently peaceful future. Isaiah is often referred to as the “5th Gospel” for this reason, as much of the language used by and about Jesus reflects the prophecies of the last section of Isaiah.

You can take the Bible nerd goggles off now.

The section we’re talking about today is that middle one, where it’s clear that hope is on the horizon, but Isaiah’s community has to remain faithful in order to get to that glorious, peaceful future. I think in some ways we’re experiencing that middle section of Isaiah as a community; there was a season of hardship here in which the systems we had for the church were broken down, and now we’re at a point of hope that we can right this ship by the grace of God. However, we’re not yet at our transformed future in which we can all rest easy and pass on our responsibilities to the church to younger generations and fade off into retirement with the easy knowledge that the church is in a secure place. The gray-haired folks of the late Babylonian exile would strongly identify with your exhaustion.

You see, in Isaiah 46, the author is speaking to the kupuna. He’s addressing an audience that remembers the chaotic fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians 50 years before, and are now old and gray as they see promise rising on the horizon. He talks about how many who don’t remember the fall because they were too young have since rebelled against God and taken up the idol worship of their captors, under the Emperor Nebo. Does this sound familiar? You may feel old and gray, remembering the days past when communities of faith worked together robustly to serve each other, their communities, and God. You recognize that a rift happened somewhere in there and the younger generations separated from God and instead attempted to follow the ways of the world. We see that separation manifested in divisive politics, angry attacks on social media, violent attacks in real life at our schools, malls, and churches; we see that separation manifested in increased addiction, depression, and divorce rates. You remember the “old days” in which God was the center of people’s hearts and lives, and you may remember it as a more peaceful time.

3

In some ways it was a more peaceful time, but honestly a lot has changed for the better. I think many in my generation would argue that the 50s, 60s, and 70s were not a more peaceful time for many – black people in our country were subject to Jim Crow laws; women couldn’t have credit cards or own property; oppressive systems were inherent in those days, which we have corrected enormously over the last several decades. I’d argue that the church wasn’t always a beacon of moral integrity, either; many mainline churches from the Methodists to the Congregationalists seemed to fall asleep in a sort of “spiritual coma” during those decades, forgetting to evangelize and instead leaning on their own power in society, which was based on human power dynamics rather than God’s. Many also experienced the church of the late 20th century as ripe with misogyny

and bigotry.

I highlight this because the Church was not perfect then, or now, and it wasn't even perfect as far back as the book of Acts, but God is always calling us to be better and continually align with His vision of the Kingdom that has not yet been actualized here on earth. While imperfections existed in the Church of the 1st century, the 20th century, and now, it's important to recognize that faith the size of a mustard seed goes a long way no matter the context we're in. Yes, there were serious imperfections in the church in the 1st century – but the original apostles faithfully and valiantly grew the Gospel of Jesus in that time throughout the whole mediterranean world. The Church of the 20th century left a legacy of the Kingdom as well. The 1960's Church was at the forefront of the Civil Rights Movement. The 1920's-1960's Church provided the most robust and useful system of organizing hospitals, shelters for the vulnerable and needy, and creating centers of care for families in all walks of life. Human error and sin has occurred in the church throughout all of history, but so has faithfulness and world-changing inspiration.

Isaiah demonstrates this tension in the Church: In Chapter 43, He sees the need to strip the old ways and make things new, and then shortly after in Chapter 46, He recognizes the good and faithful gray hair that has stayed with Him through the challenges.

To me, when I reflect on Isaiah 46:9: "Remember the former things, those of long ago; I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me" these positive reflections of the churches our kupuna built in the 50s and 60s is what springs to mind. Many of you have voiced experiences of the church being a strong center of faith and family during dark times in your lives, which is something that our younger generations unfortunately, don't have or even understand. When I think of the church of the 50s and 60s, I think of something strong and important – but also something that had to be torn down and made new, as is reflected in Isaiah 43, only slightly before Isaiah 46. Both things can be true – true reflection of the Kingdom came from the Church of your younger years, and the need for true change in that same Church and making "the new thing" had to happen as well.

4

God expects change to happen. In just 3 chapters previous to this verse, Isaiah states the famous lines from Chapter 43: "Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing!" (43:18-19a) God intends for whatever is happening in the Church to be exactly as it is, even all the pain and difficulty coming along with it, just as He did in the days of Babylonian exile. He's clearing a path for the new thing to come.

In Isaiah, God strikes down Israel for "bringing meaningless offerings" (Isaiah 1:13). Perhaps many things about the somewhat complacent church of the late 20th century accrue to the "meaningless offerings" that God found detestable in Isaiah. Yet, He also recognizes that the faithful kupuna that watched the whole thing unfold – the fall of church attendance and the lone kupuna waiting in the pews, the younger generations collapsing into violence and depression, and faithfully praying He will redeem His church – and turned to Him through the whole thing.

You didn't run when the Church of the western world fell apart over the last 75 years. You didn't rebel and renounce God, as your children and grandchildren did. You saw the whole thing; the good and bad parts of the Church, the massive changes happening in both the Church and wider culture in that same time period, saw the decline in attendance and volunteer effort, and still continued showing up because you had faith that this is where God meant you to be.

In chapter 46 of Isaiah, God sees your faithfulness, even as He tears down the whole thing in preparation to rebuild. He's been stripping the Church of its sins of apathy and bigotry over the last 75 years as he promised He would in Isaiah 43 and before, but that doesn't mean He's changed, and it doesn't mean He doesn't see everything you've done to stay faithful to Him. Throughout the Babylonian exile, He watched His faithful remnants grow old and continue to look to Him even as the world changed around them. He tells them, "Even to your old age and gray hairs, I am he, I am he who will sustain you. I have made you and I will carry you; I will sustain you and I will rescue you." (46:9)

God sees his faithful remnant with the gray hair and promises to rescue them. Although the days of old are gone for good because God has ordained it to be so, this remnant will be recognized for their faithfulness throughout this time of trial.

The future will be different. We need to offer that life-changing passion and courage that the young people seek, since they are the lost sheep of the flock. That should be our focus, according to Jesus' words. But just as importantly, God sees you and your history of faithfulness and is committed to hold you and guide you through it. God recognized his gray-haired remnant through the Babylonian exile, and He recognizes that same faithful remnant in our time now. Have faith and courage that you are seen and valued by God.

Amen.