

KAILUA CHRISTIAN CHURCH
SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 2, 2025
SERMON “EMPOWERING JEREMIAH”
SCRIPTURE: JEREMIAH 1:4-10

Jeremiah 1:4-10

4 The word of the LORD came to me, saying,

5 “Before I formed you in the womb I knew[a] you,
before you were born I set you apart;
I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.”

6 “Alas, Sovereign LORD,” I said, “I do not know how to speak; I am too young.”

7 But the LORD said to me, “Do not say, ‘I am too young.’ You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. **8** Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you,” declares the LORD.

9 Then the LORD reached out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me, “I have put my words in your mouth. **10** See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant.”

*****May the Lord add His blessing to the reading of His Word.*****

Sermon: Empowering Jeremiah

The lectionary* delivered me the opening of the Book of Jeremiah this week. Jeremiah is the youngest prophet of the Bible, and he demonstrates his acute awareness of his age in the opening of the book. It was a serendipitous text to find prescribed by the lectionary today, because young people and their gifts of prophecy and ministry are on my mind this week.

KCC’s young adult internship program 2025 is beginning today as the committee plans to meet after worship to review applicants and discuss the goals of the program. As a refresher, or for those of you who are new, this year is the second year of a Pastoral Development Service Learning Program that our church hosts for students aged 20-25 studying theology and ministry to serve our church and grow their sense of pastoral calling. This program was developed as a “reboot” of a program this church co-hosted with Kaimuki Evangelical Church in the late 70s, in which KCC’s Pastor Howard Yoshida empowered then 21-year-old Warren Nakano to bring over several young people from the mainland to build a Young Life program here in Hawaii.

The program continued to evolve when Pastor Howard invited Dale Vallejo-Sanderson to come live with him and serve KCC long-term after the Young Life plant concluded. Those decisions snowballed into several life changing transformations for the young people involved in the original internship: Dale Vallejo-Sanderson went on to serve in multiple capacities at KCC from Youth Leader to Senior Pastor; Connie Mitchell signed on as Associate Pastor of KCC and went on to be the Director of IHS; Warren Nakano went on to plant a church and continue empowering new generations of young pastors (so much that his funeral exceeded our sanctuary’s capacity and went on for several hours!), Paul Grable fell in love with Kammy, stayed in Hawaii after the program ended, and continues to serve KCC leadership to this day – and so on. That program from the 70’s changed lives and created a generation of faithful servants and pastors who continue to credit Kailua Christian Church as a meaningful place of spiritual formation for them.

The current program was built not only with this revolutionary Wind of the Spirit that transformed so many lives half a century ago, but also because it’s practical for our church’s spiritual gifts and its physical needs. We need more manpower, we need more young energy, we need more funding. This program provides all those things on top of honoring the rich history it was borne from.

Yes, we need these things to function and grow properly – manpower, youth, and money – but more importantly, the historical internship program as well as the contemporary internship are more than just satisfaction of deficits. KCC's history of empowering young people into their pastoral callings is unique because it really is and always has been more than an internship: it's been a call for young people to witness and prophecy, just as in the Book of Jeremiah.

I was watching a TV show the other day where one of the main characters joked that internships are basically slave labor. The expectation is that an inexperienced young person comes on and mindlessly follows directions of the elder professionals at a dirt cheap price, and hopefully the intern takes away some skills from the experience. However, as I highlighted with Warren, Dale, Connie, Paul, Noelani Jai, Glen Ogasawara, and so many others – KCC's pastoral development program was, and continues to be, so much more than an exchange of resources. For every person who has experienced pastoral development guidance with KCC, it's been a life changing event of witness and prophecy – which is just about as far away from “slave labor” that one can get.

When last year's interns departed, all three of them commented that they'd taken internship programs before but this one was different. Many internship programs reflect the understanding of the character from that TV show – the interns are meant to do as they are told and fill in pukas of manpower and funding for their host company. Our recent interns lamented that in past internships, they were always pigeonholed into children and youth ministries whether that was their passion or not, because that's where help was needed.

Yet, at KCC, we empowered these 3 young women last year to think of themselves as leaders. To believe their voice, talents, and gifts truly mattered. We sought their advice in our leadership meetings. We gave them creative license to shape programs that reflected their spiritual character and ours. We let them take the lead in a controlled environment, believing that they were truly called by God to do so on our behalf.

And that brings us back to Jeremiah. When God called him, Jeremiah was young—so young, in fact, that his first reaction was to protest. “Ah, Sovereign Lord,” he said, “I do not know how to speak; I am too young.” It's a sentiment that resonates with many young people, especially those stepping into leadership roles for the first time. They doubt their abilities, question their worthiness, and fear that others won't take them seriously.

God's response to Jeremiah is a reminder to us all: “Do not say, ‘I am too young.’ You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you.” God didn't see Jeremiah's youth as a limitation. Instead, God saw it as an opportunity. In the same way, KCC has created a space where young people can step into their callings with confidence, knowing they are supported and empowered by both the church and God.

This is the heart of our internship program. It's not just about “trying out” ministry or filling gaps in resources. It's about creating a space for young people to respond to God's call, just as Jeremiah did. And it's not just their lives that are changed—it's ours too. Their passion and fresh perspectives breathe new life into our congregation.

As we prepare to review applicants and set goals for this year's program, let's hold onto Jeremiah's story. It reminds us of the transformative power of faith and encouragement. We're not just offering internships; we're affirming God's call in the lives of these young people. We're saying, “You are called. You are capable. You are not alone.”

And this call extends to all of us. God's work isn't limited by age, experience, or skill. He calls the young and the old, the inexperienced and the seasoned, the shy and the outspoken. Whether you

feel qualified or not, God's promise remains: "I am with you." If you feel the stirrings of God's Spirit, trust that He will equip you for the task.

This year's interns will be stepping into their callings, and we have the privilege of walking alongside them. But let's also reflect on our own callings. How is God nudging you to step out in faith? Is He calling you to mentor, encourage, or pray for these young leaders? Or is He inviting you to take on something new in your own life?

Let's be a church that empowers the Jeremiahs among us. Let's see the potential in the young, the elderly, and everyone in between. Let's trust God's ability to equip them and celebrate the gifts they bring. As we nurture and encourage our interns, let's also remember that we, too, are called—called to believe, to act, and to trust in the God who promises to be with us always.

Amen.

*The lectionary is a scheduled collection of scripture readings used in Christian worship, designed to guide congregations through the Bible in its entirety over three years. This structure connects biblical themes to the liturgical seasons, such as Advent or Easter. I read the lectionary weekly—it's a helpful tool for both balance and honoring seasonal narratives. Today's reading came from the Revised Common Lectionary. If you're looking for a way to read the Bible in its entirety while following the rhythm of church seasons, I recommend exploring it.