

**KAILUA CHRISTIAN CHURCH
SUNDAY, JANUARY 26, 2025
SERMON “BECAUSE WE ARE FREE”
SCRIPTURE: LUKE 4:14-22
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Luke 4:14-22

14 Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside. 15 He was teaching in their synagogues, and everyone praised him.

16 He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read, 17 and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:

**18 “The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
19 to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”[a]**

20 Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. 21 He began by saying to them, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”

22 All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips. “Isn’t this Joseph’s son?” they asked.

Sermon: Because We Are Free

I mentioned a few weeks ago that Syria has been on my mind lately, especially given the sudden fall of their dictatorship and the uncertainty surrounding what comes next. I’ve explained to you before that I spent a significant portion of my early career after seminary working with Syrian refugees early in their war, so it’s a topic close to my heart. Those experiences were foundational to my pastoral journey. I have a specific memory from my time there of a woman whose husband and children had died in bombings, and she was still praising God and explaining that God would give her justice; followed shortly in the same day by a man who had encountered a similar situation in the war and became a devout atheist as a result. The encounters in Syria in many ways made the text of the Bible and the foundational questions of faith come alive for me and shaped how I understand faith, resilience, and God’s calling.

My role in Syria was to support a team of Syrians working to build schools for refugee children. It was a massive program involving hundreds of volunteers across a network of Middle Eastern cities from Istanbul to Amman. Together, we built schools, hired teachers, and provided resources like social workers, doctors, and lawyers to wrap the program in holistic care.

Among the senior leaders was a remarkable woman named Hind. She had a way of making everyone around her feel seen and valued, as though they were her best friend. Even as the leader of this

enormous operation in the midst of a crisis, Hind took time to connect personally with every worker and volunteer. I know this because she did it with me. I was deeply honored that, in the scope of her responsibilities, she even knew my name.

Hind and I bonded over our shared Christian faith, which is a minority religious identity in Syria. Most of her leadership team was Muslim, but Hind's faith in Jesus was the anchor that sustained her through the heartache and challenges of war. She often asked me to pray for her before she gave speeches or entered refugee camps. I both fearfully and enthusiastically accepted this privilege, recognizing the weight of her request and the renown of the requester herself.

One day, Hind whispered something to me that I'll never forget: "Pastor Irene, we Christians are very lucky because we are free." She winked and shared how, through her years of peacebuilding work, she had formed close relationships with Jews and Muslims. While deeply admiring her partners' commitment to justice and peace, she observed that the religious and cultural structures within their traditions often felt weighty, filled with strict expectations: pray at this time in these garments, eat this but avoid that, and so on. Hind contrasted this with the freedom she experienced in Christ—a freedom not defined by the meticulous observance of rules but by grace and relationship.

Her proud declaration of freedom in Christ invites reflection: what does this freedom truly mean? Does it imply we're free to live however we choose, without any boundaries or accountability? From the perspective of our cousins in Judaism and Islam*, Christians might seem like spiritual free spirits—or even party-goers—compared to their structured practices. "There go the Christians again, drinking wine and mixing genders in worship." "Oh, those Christians, eating ham sandwiches and grabbing coffee on the Sabbath." While it's true that Christianity is less regimented in certain practices, the real question is: why are we free?

Hind's insight points me to Jesus' declaration in Luke 4:14-30, a defining moment in His ministry. Filled with the Spirit, Jesus returns to Nazareth and reads from Isaiah's scroll in the synagogue:

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18-19, NIV).

Then He boldly proclaims, "Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21).

This was a shocking moment. Jesus identifies Himself as the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy—the one anointed to bring freedom, healing, and restoration. But He wasn't the Messiah they expected. The Jewish ruling class anticipated a powerful leader who would restore Israel to national glory, someone deeply entrenched in their religious systems. Instead, they were faced with Jesus: a carpenter's son from Galilee, walking among the marginalized, redefining power and purpose, and offering freedom not through rules but through transformative love and grace.

This moment in Luke 4 reveals something vital about the kingdom of God: God's ways are not our ways. Jesus defied human expectations, not out of rebellion, but because God's mission is infinitely bigger and more inclusive than human constructs.

The liberation Jesus proclaimed was not limited to political freedom or rigid adherence to the law. It was a deeper freedom—a freedom that breaks the chains of sin, shame, and systemic oppression.

His mission was for the poor, the blind, the imprisoned, and the oppressed—those who were often overlooked or dismissed by society. This is the freedom Hind recognized and celebrated in her life and work.

Hind’s faith was a living testimony to the liberating power of Christ. She saw beyond the constraints of societal expectations and cultural hierarchies. She treated everyone with dignity, no matter their background, because she believed in the freedom Jesus offers—a freedom that transforms how we see ourselves and others.

Hind explained her perspective to me this way: “Other faiths, as beautiful and good as they are, sometimes weigh their people down with the expectation to act rightly in order to earn their place with God. But for us Christians, it’s the opposite. We are already loved. Jesus came to us first, freed us, and forgave us before we could ever do anything to deserve it. That is what makes us free. We are not trying to earn His love; His love makes us good.”

Her words echo the heart of the Gospel. Through Christ, we are not defined by our ability to follow rules or earn righteousness. Instead, we are made righteous by His grace. This freedom isn’t just for us; it is the foundation of our calling. As followers of Jesus, we are invited to share this liberating love with everyone, especially those who are trapped in darkness, whether by oppression, poverty, or despair.

When Jesus read from Isaiah, He declared good news for the poor, freedom for the prisoners, recovery of sight for the blind, and release for the oppressed. His mission was clear: to bring light into the darkest places. And this is our mission too. As Hind’s life demonstrated, our primary calling as Christians is to help all people rise out of dark places, no matter who they are or where they come from.

Reflecting on Jesus’ declaration in Nazareth and Hind’s example challenges us to reexamine how we live out our faith. Are we extending the same freedom and grace to others that Christ has given us? Are we breaking down barriers and lifting up the oppressed? Or are we clinging to our own expectations, rules, or assumptions about who is deserving of God’s love?

Hind’s example showed for me how very special this freedom God gave us through Jesus is. Hind, despite all the suffering and anxiety she experienced during that war, was a beacon of hope, love, and joy to every single person she touched. She wielded the power of the Holy Spirit behind her to change hearts and move mountains of pain and build literal villages of peace in their wake. She accredited the strength of her soul not to herself but to the freedom Jesus gave her and that she sought to extend to others, and it showed powerfully in everything she did.

Jesus’ mission calls us to embrace the unexpected. It challenges us to see His hand at work in the ordinary and the marginalized, in places we might least expect. His liberation is not confined to our ideas of worthiness or status. It is for everyone—for the poor, the oppressed, the outsider.

Hind recently posted on LinkedIn a photo of her standing in her hometown of Damascus for the first time in over a decade, proudly hugging her daughter with a crowd of beaming people behind her. Hind’s story is the story of the miraculous freedom Christ offers us, and the transformation that happens when we follow Him through the darkness, knowing that he is capable of freeing us into a new light.

Jesus's message of freedom is as relevant today, in Syria, in Hawaii, and across the world as it was in Nazareth 2,000 years ago. His light shines into the darkest corners, guiding us through life's storms and leading us toward hope and redemption. Let us anchor ourselves in the liberating love of Christ and trust His light to lead us through every trial and into His kingdom of grace and freedom.

Amen.

***Theology Note: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – all largely practiced in the Middle East – are collectively referred to as the Abrahamic faiths, as all three trace their spiritual lineage to Abraham, considered a foundational figure in their traditions. Among these, Judaism is the oldest, Christianity emerged as a later development, and Islam is the most recent. While Judaism traditionally does not recognize Christianity as a continuation of its narrative, and Christianity similarly does not accept Islam as a subsequent chapter, there has historically been meaningful dialogue and recognition of shared elements, including prophets and key aspects of their intertwined histories.**