

**KAILUA CHRISTIAN CHURCH**  
**SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 23, 2025**  
**SERMON “NUMINOUS DREAD”**  
**SCRIPTURE: JOB 38:16-21; 1 CORINTHIANS 13:9-12**  
**REV. IRENE WILLIS HASSAN**

**Job 38:16-21**

“Have you journeyed to the springs of the sea  
or walked in the recesses of the deep?

**17** Have the gates of death been shown to you?

Have you seen the gates of the deepest darkness?

**18** Have you comprehended the vast expanses of the earth?

Tell me, if you know all this.

**19** “What is the way to the abode of light?

And where does darkness reside?

**20** Can you take them to their places?

Do you know the paths to their dwellings?

**21** Surely you know, for you were already born!

You have lived so many years!

**1 Corinthians 13:9-12**

**9** For we know in part and we prophesy in part, **10** but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. **11** When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. **12** For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

**Sermon: Numinous Dread**

When I was a teenager, I lived in a group home for troubled young women in Louisiana. I lived there about a year and a half following years of crises in and out of juvenile detention and shorter-term care centers mandated by the court system for unruly behavior. My hope is that meeting me now, you would never know that I was such a rebellious teenager because God is good, and Jesus changes lives. By His ultimate glory and grace, I am well now.

The transition between 16-year-old Irene on the streets, bashing in windows, doing drugs, and waking up at parties not knowing where I was, and 37-year-old Irene preaching the Good News of Jesus to you, heavily involved something that my favorite

theologian, C.S. Lewis, called "the Numinous." Many of you know this story of how I got from "there" to "here," but it's so strongly tied to my faith that I think it bears repeating. Also, there are a lot of new folks who haven't heard it.

I was so unruly in that girls' home in Louisiana that I was eventually kicked out. My parents, exhausted by my behavior, didn't want me back, but they did buy me a ticket home to Washington state. I had to figure out where to live when I got there. I couch-surfed, spent some time living on school playgrounds and at the river park, and got a job working at an ice cream shop. I was saving up money to buy a ticket back to New Orleans. I didn't really have a reason—only that Louisiana had been a place where I had felt safe, even though I had sabotaged it. I had no plan, no place to live—I just knew I wanted to go back.

So I saved up, and by my 18th birthday, I had enough for a ticket. My birthday, August 27, 2005, was going to be my freedom day. I told my mom about my plan, and she immediately asked me to see a counselor with her. She didn't think it was a good idea and even offered me \$200 to just come talk with them. Of course, I wanted the money, so I agreed.

I sat in the counselor's office, listening to my mom cry and the counselor drone on, waiting out my time so I could cash in and leave. Then suddenly, a voice popped into my head—unlike anything I had ever heard before or since. It said, "Stop. You're going to die." It was like my own thoughts had been overridden. I stopped the counselor mid-sentence and, as if someone else was speaking through me, said, "Okay. I'll stay. Mom, what do you want me to do?"

To my mom, it was a miracle. She asked me to stay nearby and attend community college, and she'd help me get an apartment. That sounded dreadfully boring to me, but I could not shake the numinous dread of that voice. My birthday came and went, and two days later, on August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans. Had I gone, I would have been there—homeless, without connections or a plan.

That voice, that "numinous dread" as C.S. Lewis would call it, saved my life.

In Job 38:16-21, God asks Job if he has walked in the depths of the sea, if he has seen the gates of death. God reminds Job of the mystery and vastness of divine wisdom. In 1 Corinthians 13:9-12, Paul reminds us that we know only in part, that we see through a glass darkly. We do not yet fully understand, but one day, we will see clearly. The numinous, as C.S. Lewis describes it, is that awe-inspiring awareness of something greater than ourselves—something that cannot be reduced to mere human explanation.

My testimony of entering faith began with an experience of "the numinous"—that unexplainable voice that quite literally stole the words from my mouth and saved my life. You may not have had such a jolting encounter with **the numinous** as I did as a teenager, but C.S. Lewis believed this awareness is inherent to all human beings. He argued that it is what separates us from the beasts and affirms our connection to a loving God.

Even if your experience of faith differs entirely from mine, Lewis would assert that you still have an innate understanding of the numinous, because God created you to feel His presence. In his 1940 book *The Problem of Pain*, Lewis explains that if you were told there was a dangerous animal behind a door, your response would be instinctual fear. However, if you were told there was a ghost in the next room, you would feel awe and dread—a response not merely of fear but of encountering something beyond the natural world.

We don't just have that feeling when we are told there's a ghost or something spooky nearby; we have that feeling when we see a sunset over the ocean, we have that feeling when we hold a newborn in our arms for the first time, we have that feeling when we consider how vast the expanse of the universe is. The numinous awe of something greater than ourselves penetrates the edges of our souls.

In Chapter 38 of Job, God reminds Job of the numinous – all the things we know exist but are and always will be beyond our comprehension, like the gates of death and the edges of the dark universe. Job, the oldest book of the Bible, was written 7,000 or more years ago, and all the points about awe and dread that God makes in that chapter still remain true, even amidst so much advancement in modern science and technology. Job's response to God in chapter 42 after 4 solid chapters of God listing to Job all the things he does not and will never know, is a simple acknowledgement of the numinous dread – "I know nothing," Job says, "I am but dust and to dust I shall return."

5,000 years after Job, Paul writes in 1st Corinthians that we see dimly in a mirror now a partial story of our existence and who God is. Across the span of human experience from the beginning of public square storytelling to the age of Instagram Reels, we share stories of the dread, the awe, the numinous – that which is beyond our comprehension but we know deep in our souls is true: that there is something greater than us, a force of existence, that pulls us towards it.

All this spiritual woo-woo spooky stuff brings us to now, here, at our church. Right now, our church is caught up in anxiety over finances. It's an important thing to consider indeed and I hold our leadership, especially the trustees, in so much esteem for tackling the problem with headstrong integrity. I know the trustees often feel like the weight of the world is on them and the fear of failure for all of us is held on their shoulders.

But what if, instead of focusing on the fear of failure, we listened for that numinous voice? Maybe the church will fail financially next year. But what is clear is that something powerful is happening here. We are growing. We are changing lives. We are bringing people to Christ, sheltering them, and walking with them through the most pivotal moments of their lives. Even in a dark hour for our church finances, we are writing stories onto hearts of those in our congregation and beyond that they will carry with them for their whole lives.

We have so much to look forward to—welcoming new members, our retreat, and the transformative work of the next internship cycle. We are launching four young leaders into ministry, creating opportunities for families to find hope and meaning. Kailua Christian Church has always leaned into faith with courage and awe. We are a church of absolute faith.

We see only in part, like looking through a dim mirror, but God sees in full. The same God who spoke from the whirlwind to Job, who called Paul to proclaim the Gospel, who whispered to me at 18 and saved my life—that God is with us now. That God is moving in this church, shaping something greater than we can currently see.

Instead of asking, "Will this church survive?" let us ask, "What is God doing here?" Instead of asking, "How can we avoid failure?" let us ask, "How can we fully embrace the faith journey before us?" Because make no mistake—God is working here, and our call is not to fear but to lean into that divine presence with trust and wonder.

Sometimes, we must lean into that awe instead of picking apart all the reasons something can't be done. It's clear that God is working here. There is tremendous momentum. Instead of fearing failure, let us embrace the certainty that God is present and moving among us. And even if, one year from now, this church were to close, we will have succeeded in so many ways—from 1959 until today.

Let us listen to the voice of the numinous. Like Job and Paul, let us trust in the awe and wonder of what God is doing among us. And let us continue to walk in faith, knowing that the presence of God is far greater than any fear of failure. Amen.