

BELPRES CHURCH

Sermon Title: Remake

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Scripture: Ezekiel 37:1-10

¹ The hand of the Lord was on me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the Lord and set me in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. ² He led me back and forth among them, and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry. ³ He asked me, "Son of man, can these bones live?" I said, "Sovereign Lord, you alone know."

⁴ Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones and say to them, 'Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord! ⁵ This is what the Sovereign Lord says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. ⁶ I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the Lord.'"

⁷ So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I was prophesying, there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone to bone. ⁸ I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them, but there was no breath in them. ⁹ Then he said to me, "Prophecy to the breath; prophecy, son of man, and say to it, 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Come, breath, from the four winds and breathe into these slain, that they may live.'" ¹⁰ So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet—a vast army.

Transcript:

So great to have those of you joining us online and all of you, so wonderful to put all of our worshipping communities together to kick off the fall. New Hope, Chinese Covenant, Sanctuary, Modern, one church in Jesus Christ. And choir, Bel Canto, this morning I have realized just how much I have missed you. It is so great to have you back, so wonderful.

Holy Spirit, use Your word to bring us to life, to breathe new life into the dead places. We know You can do it, and we pray this in Your name, Jesus. Amen. Well, we are starting a new sermon series called Remake, where we're going to look at the passage that Pastor Alexis has read, along with a few others over the next few weeks, about

how God remakes all things here on Earth to be more like His heaven, how God heals what's been broken, unites what's divided, brings hope where there's hopelessness, so that what's been wrecked and ruined can be restored and remade better, bigger, stronger than it ever was before.

Let me ask this. Is there anything in your life or in our country that needs to be remade right now? Like, I don't know, maybe like everything? As I said a couple of weeks ago, we are just in a season of suckage. That's my word. I like it. And 18 months of a pandemic that is still with us. Back in June when we were planning this sermon series, we were using the phrase, "Oh yeah, it'll be post-pandemic." So not so post-pandemic. Some of you from New Hope or Chinese Covenant are immigrants trying to make your way in a new country in a pandemic, and that's super hard. Some of you have lost your jobs. There's racial injustice. Some of you may feel spiritually dry, like maybe things are going okay, but you're wanting more and a bigger life. And then there's all the division that is wrecking families and churches and our entire country. Everybody seems mad at everyone all the time about everything.

A couple of months ago, I was at the doctor for an annual physical, and the nurse was asking me questions. Have you had any heart problems in the last year? Have you had any illness in the last year? Have you had any depression in the last year? And I just looked at her. She's like, "Right, moving along." It's just been one of those years. Now, not everything is terrible. Some of you, your life is going awesome, but you know what, with Jesus, it can always be more awesome still, and bigger, better, deeper.

And this passage shows us that God is in the remaking business. God shows the prophet Ezekiel a valley of dry bones that He is going to bring back to life. But before He revives them, He does something very interesting. In verse 2, Ezekiel says, "He led me back and forth among the dry bones, bones that were very dry." That is, before God does any remaking at all, before the happy ending, God forces Ezekiel to look at the dry bones and grieve over them, because here's the thing. Remaking begins with remembering what we have lost.

It's what we're doing as a nation. This weekend, that terrible day 20 years ago, 9/11, so much hatred, but also so much heroism in the first responders and the passengers of Flight 93. And the biblical word for this is lament. Lament means to take time to reflect on and talk about the pain and the hurt of what's been lost. And lament is all over the Bible. The Psalms, a lot of them are laments. Jesus laments. There's a whole book in the Bible of nothing but laments, called Lamentations. Super fun book, super cheery. I encourage you to read it. It'll pick you right up.

And lament is important for a couple of reasons. First, lament matters because it draws us closer to God. God wants us to bring our pain and our anger to Him, because it builds relationship. Second, and we see this a lot, unexpressed pain turns into all too easily expressed anger or depression. What we bury makes us mad and sad, so we need to lament. And then third, we experience just how good the good news is when we first grieve the bad news. And the bones that Ezekiel sees here, they represent the Israelites, and they have been conquered by the Babylonians and taken into exile in Babylon. And God says, "Can these dry bones live?" And Ezekiel says, "Sovereign Lord,

You alone know." In other words, God only knows. It's kind of cynical, because all Ezekiel can see is dead things, no life.

And maybe that's how you feel. Can this broken friendship be restored? Can my loneliness end, can my school life or work life be revived? Can racial injustice be stopped? Can this marriage be healed? Can these dry bones live? And the point of the passage is that yes, they can. But first, before we move to the new thing God is going to do, we have to remember, lament, grieve, so we can fully heal.

Now, it needs to be said that lament is not the same thing as wallowing or whining. All of us know people that complain constantly, even when things are good. Some of us are those people. That's not lament, that's wallowing. Here's what lamenting, lament is an unfinished sentence that says, "This hurts, but God..." And lament is not rushing to complete the sentence, whether for yourself or listening to someone else lamenting, because we don't know what but God will do, but we do know that God will do something.

Most of us can say that even in the midst of this pandemic, God has been doing good things. Some of you have connected with family in a deeper way. Some of you have learned the joy of not being busy all the time. And as a church, good things happen. We had more people in All In groups than we've ever had before, and people said that made them feel connected to God, each other, and the church. We gave over \$2.8 million away to do things like support refugees from Iran and Afghanistan with food and housing. We helped over 80 individuals and families in this church with rent, utilities, groceries. We joined with the Jubilee REACH grocery project to provide food for 600 families who couldn't afford it. And we sent over \$300,000 to Congo to help victims of genocide and to help bring peace there. God was at work, even in the middle of the dry bones. Lament is when you grieve the dry bones, knowing that God is still up to something.

This week we dropped my son off at college in California, and a couple weeks before that we dropped our youngest daughter, our youngest child off, Lucy, last one, dropped her off at college at University of Utah. Oh, I was not ready for how that was going to feel. Oh man, last one, the baby left the house, the empty nest. A few days before we dropped her off, some friends asked Christina, "Are you going to cry?" And she said, "Maybe, but he will for sure," pointing to me. But when we said goodbye, guess who was crying? Uh-huh (affirmative), it was my wife, and me a little bit too. And on our way out, there were these students in the hall and my wife said, "Move over and make way for crying parents."

And now every time I pass her room in our house, I think, oh, that's Lucy's room and she's not here. The other day, I was looking at all the cereal that we have, because my son eats a lot of cereal, and I was thinking, who's going to eat the cereal now? Jackson's not here. I'm grieving over cereal. It's pathetic. It's lament. Okay, borderline whining, but it's lament. But I also know that God is going to do new things. We're going to get to see our kids' lives unfold, and that's awesome.

Recently we asked some folks in our church the question, what has the pandemic been like for you? In order to remember, before I move on to the second part of this sermon, which is all about remaking, but before that let's remember, let's just take a look at some of the experiences of people in this church. And then after that, there'll

be some time for you to reflect and give your pain to God. Let's hear from some folks in our church.

Lament is an unfinished sentence that says, "This hurts, but God..." And those last two words are filled with hope. After Ezekiel laments the dry bones, God begins to remake them. And God says to Ezekiel, "Prophesy to these bones." Basically that means preach to these dry bones, and that's kind of weird, right? You might go, "Wow, what's that like to preach to a bunch of dry bones?" Ask any pastor. We do it every Sunday. I'm only sort of joking.

God's remaking begins when we preach to the dead places in our life, preach to the broken marriage, preach to the financial problems, preach to the loneliness, preach to the school problem, and say what Ezekiel says here, "Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. This is what the sovereign Lord says." And remaking starts when we preach to the dead places in our lives, because we are claiming God's power, and we are reminding ourselves that impossible has never stopped our God. Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. I refuse to give up. I refuse to give in. I refuse to cave in to despair, because you are not sovereign. God is, and He is remaking all things.

And Ezekiel says, "As I was prophesying, there was a noise, a rattling sound as the bones came together, bone to bone." And notice God doesn't just zap the bones and they instantly come alive. It's a process. It happens in stages. God's remaking in our life sometimes takes months, even years, but we get little glimpses of it along the way. Because when God starts to move, there'll be a rattling in your life, little bits of hope here and there. You make a new friend, you get a new job, you quit a destructive habit. And at first it starts out really small, but it gets bigger and bigger and bigger. And then Ezekiel says, "Tendons and flesh appeared on them, but there was no breath in them. So God said, 'Prophesy to the breath.' So I prophesied as He commanded me, and breath entered them. They came to life and stood up on their feet, a vast army." Because see, this is how God works. I spoke the truth to the dead things in my life, and there was a rattling sound in my life. And day by day, month by month, year by year, they came together, so that the things that were once dead in my life now stand as a vast army and they fight for me. This is what the sovereign Lord says: "My people, I am going to open up your graves and bring you up from them. I will bring you back to the land of Israel. Then you will know that I am the Lord when I open your graves."

And that image of... I love this new choir with the... love it with a kind of a amen. Yes, thank you. You're just agreeing with God's promises and truth. That's a good thing. And that image of opened up graves obviously points forward to Jesus's resurrection. And this text gives us some promises of what comes out of those opened up graves, and there's a lot of them. I'm just going to briefly name a few, and in the weeks ahead, we'll go into more detail. This is just overview.

First promise to come out of opened up graves is things that are disconnected become connected again. Ezekiel heard a rattling sound. The bones came together. It's an image of things being disconnected being reconnected. 20 years ago, after 9/11, we were so united as a country, and now we are so divided as a country, divided in families, divided in this church. But God unites what the world divides. That's one of the reasons that we are all worshiping together today, Modern, Sanctuary, New Hope, Chinese Covenant. And some of you Modern folks may be going like, "Wow, this

is kind of traditional." And some of you Sanctuary people may be going, "Oh, this is kind of modern." And some of you from New Hope and Chinese Covenant might be going, "These Americans are just crazy. I don't understand anything that's going on. This doesn't make any sense at all."

But we wanted to kick off the fall like this, because in a world that is so divided, we wanted to be, at least for fall kickoff, a church fully united in Jesus Christ. And we are so blessed here in this church. Very few churches could do this. Very few. We are blessed with all of these different cultures, all of this different kind of music, all of which shows us how big God's kingdom is, expands our worshiping abilities and our worship life. It's not a subtraction, it's an addition. And we are so blessed to have this here. Most churches don't. It doesn't make us better, it just means God's doing something here that's exciting.

It's also why starting next Sunday, New Hope and Modern Worship will be combined at 11:00 service every single Sunday from here on out, because what the world divides, God unites. It's why I would encourage you to get in an All In small group, because so many people did that and they said, "It connected me better to God, to other people, and to this church." And they start next week. You can sign up in the lobby. You can sign up in the party in the parking lot afterwards. Or if you're online, you can sign up online as well. God is going to reconnect what has been disconnected. We are claiming that promise for this year, and we'll move into that.

Second promise that comes out of opened up graves, a deeper connection to God. Several times in this passage, God says He's going to restore the dry bones, and He says, "Then you will know that I am the Lord." He says "the Lord," because Israelites knew God, but they thought of Him as a local deity, just kind of the God of Israel. But when in Babylon in exile, they discovered He was there too and saw how big He is. Whatever dry bones there are in your life right now, God is going to breathe life into them, and then you will see how big God is.

And then the third promise that comes out of opened up graves is a bigger vision. At the beginning, all Ezekiel can see is dry bones, no vision for what they could be. Maybe all you see right now are dry bones, but God sees more. God sees the days, the weeks, and the years ahead. I saw a meme on social media that I thought was amusing about Prince Harry and Meghan Markle, which I know after the Oprah interview, kind of controversial, but just forget about that part. And the meme said this. It said, "So let me get this straight, because Harry and Meghan's kids are American citizens, they are now eligible to become President of the United States? Wow. Way to play the long game, George III."

Maybe all you see right now are dry bones. God plays the long game, and He sees what you cannot see. God gives Ezekiel a big vision of these bones reunited into this vast army. We are those bones come together. We are God's vast army called to a spiritual battle. The church is not an audience to be entertained. It is an army to be deployed, deployed to participate with Jesus as He remakes all things. Marriages made new, tensions between parents and kids eased, senior citizens feeling valued rather than ignored, racial justice and reconciliation, divisions in our culture healed, immigrants finding a new home, and hopeless people are given hope. It is a big vision

about the remaking of all things, starting with me and then moving out to the places where I live, work, play, learn, and to the places in the world God has called us. Recently I was talking to a professor at Whitworth University, where I'm on the board, great university. And he told me that he was talking to some professors from Harvard and other universities that are doing this huge study on faith in America, which mostly means Christianity. They say that since 1999, the decline in numbers of people identifying as Christian is so steep, so rapid, so huge, they can hardly measure it. The number of people who believe in Jesus in America is in free fall, in spite of the fact that the other part of their study, which uses all these sophisticated measurements, shows that the benefits of being Christian are enormous in almost every part of life. Truly committed Christians have better marriages, better health, better educational outcomes, and score higher on life satisfaction tests. They call it "a unexplainable disconnect between the benefits of being Christian and the numbers of Christians," an unexplainable disconnect.

You know what I call that? An opportunity, that people who are disconnected from God can find hope through Jesus, who is God Himself, coming in human form to connect us. And we have so much opportunity. People from all over the world are moving here to the East Side. Look at all the towers going up in Downtown Bellevue, tens of thousands of workers coming, not just to Bellevue, but all over the East Side. So many of them are far from God and need the hope that Jesus can bring. And we are right in the middle of it and get a chance to tell them in a gracious way of the God who breathes new life into workplaces and marriages and families, about the God who brings dry bones back to life.

We got an email a while back from a woman named Amy who lives in Rwanda, and she goes to the Center for Champions, which is a school that this church built and started in Rwanda. And this is what she wrote to us. She said, "I was born in a poor family of six children. My father and my mother fought constantly, and I never felt safe in my home. Finally, our father chased our mother and all of his children out of the house. We only had a little bit of money, which she used to rent one room, and that's where the seven of us lived. There were many days we did not eat. There was no money for food. Our mother tried to keep us in school, but a time came when she couldn't pay our fees, so we had to drop out. It was traumatizing to me and my siblings, because I used to perform very well in school, and I had a dream of completing my education so I could take good care of myself, mother, and my siblings. And now I could see that my dream would never be a reality."

So dry bones. Divided, fighting family, poverty, shattered dreams, but God was moving. She went on and she said, "But deep in my heart, I always longed to go back to school and would ask God to help me return. Then my cousin told me about the Center for Champions, which supports needy children like me. My cousin said I should go and try my luck. God's mighty hand was on me, because I immediately was registered for the Center. And I could not believe my eyes when I received school uniforms and materials and then sat in a classroom once again. It was like a dream too good to believe it was true, but true it was anyway.

"My heart was so full of praise to God for taking me back to school, and I determined I'd make the most of the opportunity, be successful in my studies so that I can have a

future that is better than my past. A ray of hope returned into my heart. The environment was so different. I had regular meals and everything that I needed for survival. We also had Bible study that enabled me to know about God's love and care for me. After two years of listening to the gospel, I decided to give my life to Jesus as my Savior and my Lord, and I got a peace in my heart I didn't have before."

And he goes on to say that she's learning construction skills at the Center, and during the pandemic got a job as a mason, which allowed her to get some money and buy a small house for her mother, as well as some sheep, which will become a source of income for her mother. And after she graduates, she wants to go to the university and become an engineer. And at the end of her email, this is what she said. She said, "My heart is so full of gratitude to all the people that support the Center." That means us in this room. "It's because of them that my future hopes have been resurrected." That's the word she used, "resurrected."

Do you hear that? Do you know what that is? That is the sound of dry bones rattling. The story isn't done. She's still in school, but out of a home filled with fighting and poverty and brokenness everywhere. Bit by bit, year by year, God is joining bone to bone and bringing dry bones to life so that Amy can see just how big God is.

So here's your homework, BelPres, for this week. First, remember. You probably noticed on your way in, there's a stone out there in the lobby that was donated to us. And over the next few months, this stone is going to actually change and evolve in ways I'm not going to tell you about, because it's a surprise. In the Bible, when God does something significant, He told people to set up stones of remembrance. So today, before you leave, as you go out of the lobby, tell one of the artists there one word, give him one word that sums up for you the last 18 months. It can be a word of hope or it can be a word of lament, either one. One word to the artists and they'll put it on the stone. If you're online, you can type it in the chat and we'll get it to the artists as well, as a way of remembering.

Second, BelPres, it is time to start preaching to the dry bones. It is time to stop living under the shadow of the dry bones. It is time to stop living with all this division and fear. It is time to start preaching to the dry bones, because what Ezekiel shows, what Jesus's resurrection shows is that God does His best work in graveyards. So whatever is dry and dead in your life, preach to it. Preach to the marriage, to the financial problem, the relationship problem, whatever problem you face, preach to it, because Jesus has the power to turn dry bone people whose spiritual lives have dried up, and wishbone people just wishing for a better life, and jawbone people who just talk and talk and talk and talk, and finger bone people who just point and point and argue and argue, and tailbone people who just feel like their whole life is sitting on their tails in a cubicle and they want more, and chest bone people who have a broken heart, and the backbone people who have courage and hope and joy overflowing the measure. You are not alone. You are part of a vast army through which God is making all things new. So BelPres, it's time to start preaching. Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord and live. So Jesus, we bring our dry bones to You, whatever they are, and we lay them at Your feet, because we know that You are the God who remakes everything. You're the God who breathes life into what has died. And You are the God who turns dry bones into a vast army to bring Your good and hope and healing to the world. And

Jesus, we know You can do it, so we give it to You, and Lord, we look forward to what You're going to do, and we're going to give You all the glory, because You alone deserve it. In Your name, Jesus. Amen.

Discussion Questions:

Read Ezekiel 37:1-10 and answer the below questions with your friends, family or All In small group.

Ice Breaker Question:

- What is something that sparks your curiosity and want to learn more about?

Opening Questions:

- Looking back, were you able to apply any of the things we talked about last time to your life this week? What did you do? How did it go?

Scripture Reflection Questions – Together read the scripture and discuss the following:

- What do we learn about God (e.g., traits, personality, what matters, priorities) in this passage and sermon?
- What do we learn about people, and ourselves in particular, this week?

Sermon Reflection Questions – Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following

- What has been your greatest loss as a result of the pandemic?
- Where do you see signs of God remaking and reviving?

Closing Question and Application:

- Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week? Who might you share this with?

Closing group prayer: Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Thank God for the time together, the conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement in the week ahead.