



Sermon Title: Army of the Kingdom

Anthony Ballard

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Scripture:

Ezekiel 37: 9-10, 26-28

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.

²⁶ I will make a covenant of peace with them; it will be an everlasting covenant. I will establish them and increase their numbers, and I will put my sanctuary among them forever. ²⁷ My dwelling place will be with them; I will be their God, and they will be my people. ²⁸ Then the nations will know that I the LORD make Israel holy, when my sanctuary is among them forever.'"

Transcript:

Our verses today are from Ezekiel chapter 36 and chapter 37 selected verses. In Ezekiel's, well, God says, "I will show the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, the name you have profaned among them. Then the nations will know that I am the Lord, declares the sovereign Lord, when I am proved holy through you before their eyes. He said to me, prophecy to the breath; prophecy son of man, say to it, this is what the Lord God says: Breath, come from the four winds and breathe into these slain, that they may live. So I prophesied as he commanded me, the breath entered them and they came to their, and stood to their feet a vast army." The Lord says, "I will make a covenant of peace with them. It will be a perfect permanent covenant with them. I will establish and multiply them and will set my sanctuary among them forever. My dwelling place will be with them; I will be their God, they will be my people, when my sanctuary is among them forever. The nations will know that I, the Lord sanctify Israel."

So BelPres, God is concerned about His reputation in the world and He hates when He gets a bad name. But God has a plan. He wants to see his good world was stored to his original intention. So when He says that He will make His dwelling place with us, He is saying that he will make his greatness known in the world again and he's going to do that through his kingdom army, which is all of us.

Let's pray. Heavenly father, Lord Jesus, King Jesus, we come to you now and I ask you Lord to give us eyes to see, give us ears to hear, and the Lord use me however you see fit in this message. I pray this in Jesus' name, amen.

My name is Anthony Ballard and I'm on our Go and Grow team here at BelPres and thank you again all for being here. Those of you online, thank you for joining us today. Last summer and the summer of 2020 during the mini Black Lives Matter protests, I saw one particular flyer for a protest happening in Seattle. The protest named eight different societal issues that it wanted to address. It was things like education justice, policing and housing and economic justice, and justice in our legal system, and even climate justice. Each of these issues was more complex and layered than the last one. Reading that flyer made me very overwhelmed.

At the same time, I was also reading extensively the anti-social justice rebuttal rebuttal articles because I needed to know what every side thought of what was happening. But doing this made me even more overwhelmed. I was on staff here at BelPres as the Associate for Justice and Racial Reconciliation; meaning, it was my job to know all this stuff. Other churches in our area, they were asking me questions about the BelPres strategy. Some of them even asked me to preach. If you guys know my story, I said "No" every single time.

But in my personal life, my white friends were asking me questions about the protests and what to make of it all. Then, my black friends needed prayer and they needed hope. The whole planet was protesting and tweeting about what was my job to help guide us through. But then, the unthinkable happened: when a peaceful protest in downtown Bellevue was hijacked and turn to loony. In all this, I had no idea what to do. I didn't know what the third way was. Nothing seemed to agree. I was walking through this valley of dry bones.

But then it hit me that in all my reading and in all my talking and posting, I needed to pause on that, and I needed to pray and ask God what to do. So, in this true story, in my desperate attempt, I prayed and asked God, and I said, "What do the people want?" He told me they want the kingdom, but they don't know it yet. Amen.

The kingdom he's talking about, of course, is His kingdom. The kingdom of God, which is His rule, is the government on His shoulders, and it's His way of doing things. Every king has a kingdom. Every kingdom has an army, and every army has a mission. Our God's mission is to remake this earth to be more like heaven and that is called the Kingdom of God. In verse 10 of chapter 37, Ezekiel says that "I saw a vast army." I want us to hold

onto to the word army because in modern times we tend to conflate the word army with multitude. But the Hebrew word for army here used is chayil, and it literally means military force. The dry bones that are coming together aren't just a lot of people, but it comes together as a military force, an army.

You may be thinking, "I don't want to join the army." That's too bad because if you're a disciple of Jesus, you're a citizen of the Kingdom of God. And if you're a kingdom citizen, you're automatically enrolled in this kingdom army. Because eventually in this Christian life, you're going to have to fight something, whether it's yourself, your flesh, or the devil himself, you're going to have to fight at some point. And so, the question is, what do armies do? Armies engage in conflict. Armies never do anything safe. Armies never do anything easy. And then armies never do anything alone. So, you're not part of an army if you're a one-man army. BelPres, on paper, we are a church of 4,000 people, in person and online. That is a kingdom army.

A few weeks ago, Pastor Dudley said that the church is not an audience to be entertained, but it's an army to be deployed. I talked with a friend named Paul a little while ago. He's a former Marine officer. He said an army is deployed to enforce diplomacy when other forms of diplomacy have failed. And so here's the question: where have we seen diplomacy fail in our region? Quite a few places, right? But this is why the church on mission is so, so important. And so, I knew what I was going to be doing this sermon on armies that I was going to want to throw every Lord of the Rings reference into the sermon, right? You guys know. But the truth is, as I was doing that, I found that those references will miss the mark because an army of the kingdom is an army without arms. We don't use earthly weapons.

Second Corinthians tells us that "For although we live in the flesh, we do not wage war according to the flesh, since the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but are powerful through God for the demolition of strongholds." Our weapons are prayer and action. And we do that by doing justice and service to our world. So I want you guys to say this with me: prayer and action.

When Jesus sends his army into a territory, He doesn't send in people with AR15s. He sends in the merciful, the meek. He sends in the peacemakers and He sends in those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. And those who hunger and thirst for righteousness or those who seek to treat every person as the image of God. The peacemakers are people who go into situations of conflict and they listen to understand, and they create solutions to issues and problems. They make peace in conflict.

So Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount of Matthew 5, He's not just blessing people. He's talking to his kingdom army. He's saying, "Here's how my army is going to act. Here's how my army is going to pray." Every king is concerned about their reputation. God wants people to know him and His goodness. He says "the nations will know that I am the Lord declares the sovereign Lord. When I am proved holy through you before their eyes." Last year, we saw that the whole world was crying out for His justice. So when

the church doesn't lead this, we miss an opportunity to let people know the holiness of God's name. Psalm 89:14 tells us that "the foundations of God's throne are justice and righteousness." And if it's justice and righteousness, that means that in His kingdom is full of this stuff. The kingdom is the goal and justice is how we show people what the kingdom of God is like.

That flyer that I mentioned with the eight different social issues, the truth is none of those issues are impossible for a church like BelPres because many of you are already in positions to have kingdom influence in your work in these social spheres. As an army, we are already in position to do justice. And again, many of you are in decision-making positions. And you don't have to do this stuff alone. We have hundreds of people who work in Microsoft and Amazon and in our school districts. We have an army of people that are already together in position. Now, you just have to talk and get organized. Some of you are already doing great things as individuals, but greater things are possible in an army. If you need help getting started with this with ideas or prayer or anything, my email is on our website and I want to hear from you. But give me time to respond if all 4,000 people email me at one time.

The fact is when the whole world protests about crying out for justice, it means that there is a lack of kingdom. Not because of anything God has done, but it's because his kingdom army has been inactive. And so, we need to do justice wherever we live, work, play, and learn. We can start tomorrow. This next thing I'm going to mention is a little bit difficult for some of us because the truth is we also have to show up at the protests. When you look at the images of the protests and you get past the pictures of propaganda for either side, you see images like these. These are real images from last year's protests. These are the images of the brokenhearted. These are the hearts that Jesus said that He came to bind up. These are people who are not experiencing the kingdom.

A friend of mine posted a picture on Instagram. He posted it every single day, like clockwork. In about the 60th time that I saw this picture, my heart finally started to break. This is a picture of a woman with a sign that says, "Show up Church." This is a kingdom woman. Her sign wasn't about justice for George Floyd or Breonna Taylor. She made a sign calling the church, the people of God, to speak life into a dry bone situation. But the question is where were we? Many churches did their own protests and demonstrations across the country and we even did our own called Together We Stand. It was a time when 700 people from BelPres showed up and we sit out on Bellevue Way with signs for peace and racial justice. For me, this was one of the most special days during the pandemic last year.

But can I challenge this BelPres? Can I a little bit more, maybe? Okay. While we showed out, we did not show up. Because showing up doesn't look like us standing safely in front of our church building. It looks like us sending an army of prayer warriors into Capitol Hill, into downtown Bellevue, to pray for people, to lay hands on people, to listen to their hurt and anger, to create solutions to the issues which many of us can

do. That is what the church, that is what the army that's deployed, is all about. I'm not here to chastise us, but I am here to say let's remake.

During the week of the verdict for the trial of Derek Chauvin, the officer who killed George Floyd, we were anticipating that if the verdict went one way, protests would possibly turn to riots. About 20 people from east side, churches formed a prayer and action team for the protests and we were going to go to those protests, the scary ones. We were going to be kingdom people there. We were going to go with the spirit of Isaiah 61, we were going to go and bind the broken-hearted through prayer and action. We were not going to take sides; but again, bind the brokenhearted. We will provide physical aid to people like bandages and water. And most importantly, we were going to be explicit about who we were serving, which is Jesus.

This group of people were determined to speak life into a dry bone situation. But here's the thing. None of us were excited. In fact, every person was afraid because we realized that we were going to these protests and we would likely get cussed out for being Christians. Things would be unpredictable. We'd have to run away from tear gas or fires. This will be dangerous. And so one of the men from our church, his name is Rich Morris, and he's in his seventies. He was in this meeting and he said, "I'm all in for this, but I'm old and I can't run fast." We told Rich that he could drive the getaway car and be in prayer at a distance.

I say that because everyone has a role in this stuff. Even if you live at a senior living facility, you have a role in this too. Paul, the Marine officer was there. He asked us and he said, "Are we aware that it's possible we can get arrested? And are we okay with that?" Then, the whole meeting got quiet because none of us wanted to go to jail. That's when Grace, a woman who's on our justice team here, she said, "The gospel is worth my life."

When you really get to know the good news of Jesus, you start to say crazy stuff like that. You become a crazy person in a good way. But this is the third way. It's not clean cut. It's not easy. It might even be a little crazy, but this is how we are supposed to be. We have time for this team to become an army. Imagine if all 700 of us who were out there for Together We Stand were in downtown Bellevue the night of the protest. How different would that have been?

So our sister in Christ, in her words, Show Up Church, are a challenge for us today. Because we can't mistake this current calm for peace. After the looting in downtown Bellevue, we were a part of the clean-up crew. But now we're an army remade and we're going to show up in the chaos, not only after. And I say next time, because these protests happen about in a three to four-year cycle. And so when this happens again and the streets of Bellevue are full of protesters and police, they are going to be met with an army unlike any that King County has ever seen. Amen?

But some of us, I understand, are not ready yet for this type of thing. That's okay, but I don't want you to stay there. I have some homework for you and this is your homework for the next two years. And it's a two-year homework because I don't preach often. Here's what you're going to do. Stay in training. If not for yourself, do it for the city. Maybe you're thinking, "I'm not good at praying for people." Now you have a reason to grow in your prayer life. Then, start praying for others here at church on Sundays, where it's easier. Do it in the lobby. Do it while people are around. Then, practice receiving prayer from our prayer ministers or pastors. Do it every week. Even when life is good. And then lastly, hear the word of the Lord and let it change you. Let the Bible critique even your most favorite opinion, analyst or influencer. You will not be able to pray for a police officer and/or an anti-police protestor with the hindrance of bias.

I don't know who's all here, but also want to make a special invitation to my African brothers and sisters from New Hope. Because I know I'm talking about things related to America, but you are tied to this fight as well. We need you to seek the good of the city to where God has called you. And God has brought you to this city in this country for such a time as this. We need your help. We need African prayers and we need African ideas to face this. The nations are not crying out for more church services. They're crying out for the kingdom of God. I'm not just saying this. All seven continents held protests for racial justice last year, including Antarctica. Do you know how bad it has to be for Antarctica to protest? We got these people and penguins on the whole place.

But all the troubles that we're seeing is because of a lack of kingdom. Afghan refugees, Haitian refugees, fleeing broken governments, Americans storming the Capitol to force an earthly government. They all want the kingdom, but they don't know it yet. Does this sound difficult to you? You should nod your head, "Yeah, good." It should sound difficult. It just sounds super difficult because that No means that we need the Holy Spirit to help us. Even a church like BelPres.

But thankfully the kingdom of God is not a place that we're going to. It's a time that God has already ushered in through Jesus Christ. The kingdom was inaugurated with the coming of Jesus, and it's going to be consummated with his second coming. As an army, our victory is already won, but we still have injustice and people still die. But the difference is that the kingdom is already here, but it's not yet fully here. It's both at the same time.

Some of you probably heard the concept of already and not yet. Here's an illustration. This summer, I watched a TV show called Band of brothers. It's a true story set in World War II. It's the story of Easy Company who's the second battalion of the 101st Airborne. They fought in the Battle of the Bulge. They freed a concentration camp and they were among the first to take over Hitler's Eagle's Nest. The first time they saw battle was on June 6th, 1944. Some of you know that day. It's called D-Day. On D-Day, this was the day that the largest our modern human military history had assembled and had been deployed. On D-Day in the form of five huge armies, they established a foothold

on Normandy. They planted their allied flags, and they said, "This is our turf." It was a 20-hour day, and at the end of that 20 hour day, five beach heads had been established. And they had been established in such a way that there was never again, a question about what would be the outcome of the war. Because that had already been determined on D-Day.

But 11 months of battles later, we get the next period event of the war and it's called V-Day, which is the day of victory in Europe. We need to know that more American lives were lost in that 11-month period between D-Day and V-Day than all the other years of the war. More lives were lost. But still there was never a question about how it was going to turn out because of D-Day. It wasn't a question of if people were going to still die or if there was still more battles to be fought. And for the Band of Brothers, there was never a question during the Battle of the Bulge as to whether the V-Day was still going to happen. It was just a matter of when.

That, BelPres, is how we're supposed to understand the kingdom of God. With the coming of Jesus, God has planted his flag on enemy turf and he said, "This is my planet." He claims it in the name of the cross. Through the resurrection, He has declared there's going to be a V-Day day that is going to complete what has already happened. In our entire existence as Christians, we're supposed to live with a certainty of the future based on what's already happened 2000 years ago with Jesus Christ. Again, there's never a question of how it's going to turn out. It's simply a matter of when it's going to come to its conclusion.

The Bible does not promise us that we're not going to have to fight battles. There's never even been a promise that we're not going to die. But what we have in promise is that we win no matter what happens. We win if we live. We win if we die. We win in our rejoicing. We win in our suffering. We win even when we make mistakes. And we win because God has already done the winning for us. All he has to do is bring it to conclusion. Yeah, you can clap for that.

BelPres, God has invited us to be a part of Operation Remake. Operation Remake may cost us our lives or even our livelihood, and that might sound a little crazy. But if it does, talk to a Christian in Iran or China or Afghanistan. We are supposed to live the future in the present.

God's kingdom right now. This is going to make us seem really crazy because it means that we're not just going to create new schools, it means that we're going to recreate our entire school districts. This means that we're going to show up to the messy protest and we're going to preach the good news of the kingdom. And it means that we're going to continue meeting with Seattle police officers and the anti-police people until justice and reconciliation are achieved.

BelPres, we are a church remade. We've already done so much good in the world, but we're not going to stop yet. We're not going to stop until it's on earth, as it is in heaven. We're not going to stop until King County is kingdom county, and we're going to do it together, and we're going to do it with other congregations. And we're going to be a vast army full of the holy spirit.

To close, Ezekiel said, "so I prophesied as He commanded me. The breath entered them and they came to life and they stood on their feet, a vast army." BelPres, stand on your feet. Those of you at home, stand on your feet. We are a vast army. And so that word that Ezekiel heard about God's dwelling being with us gets concluded by John and the Book of Revelation. And here, this is our kingdom hope. It says, "And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them and they will be His people; and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes.'" I'm getting choked up. Happened in sanctuary, too. I can finish. He said, "Death shall be no more. Neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore for the former things have passed away." "And He who is seated on the throne said, 'Behold, I am making all things new.'"

BelPres, the day of victory is coming. Let's do like our sister in Christ said and show up church wherever we live, work, play, or learn. Even at the protest where people need us. We're kingdom people above all. Let's pray. Heavenly father, thank You that You're not just our king, but You also are our father. God, I pray that You would help us to do everything that we need to do to make Your name great and holy again for people who don't know it. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Discussion Questions: Read Ezekiel 37:9-10, 26-28 and Revelation 21:3-7

and answer the below questions with your friends, family or All In small group.

Opening Question:

- Icebreaker: If you HAD to give up one of your senses (hearing, seeing, feeling, smelling, tasting) which would it be and why?
- 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 Ezekiel 37:15-22, 24 and Philippians 2:1-11 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:

- How do you see yourself serving under the command of Jesus? How do you train?
- What (if anything) makes you feel nervous about being in Jesus' army?
- What would help you this year feel more equipped/trained to help advance God's Kingdom more effectively in the world?

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.