

BELPRES CHURCH

Sermon Title: Unassisted Triple Play

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Scripture:

Ezekiel 37:9-10

“Then he said to me, “Prophecy to the breath; prophesy, 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:

Good to see all of you here, as well as those of you who are joining us online. Thank you for being here. Scripture is the same scripture we've been reading for the last, I don't know, five or six weeks, valley of dry bones, where God brings dry bones back to life. And at the end of that story, it says this, then God said to me, prophesy of the breath, prophesy on a 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. So I prophesied as he commanded me and breath entered them and they came to life and stood up on their feet, a vast army. So Holy Spirit, help us know what this means, in Jesus' name, Amen. So one of the most rare feats in baseball is the unassisted triple play, where one player makes all three outs in one play without the assistance of any of his teammates.

Usually it involves catching a ball, stepping on the base, tagging a runner, all at the same time. And what's interesting is it doesn't require a ton of skill. It just is a bunch of weird, random things happening together at the same time, by chance. Many American Christians live as though life were a series of unassisted triple plays. Where we try to do it all by ourselves without any help from our teammates. But, but God calls us into community. I saw a satirical article in a publication called The Babylon Bee that kind of makes fun of this. And it's talking about a fake church. And it said in an effort to boost the church's income and provide church members a way to go to church without talking to a single person, Tradewinds Church installed a coin operated side

door that allows attendees to bypass the greeters, the crowds, and well, anyone who might try to talk to them.

Unfortunately, dozens of congregants mobbed the new entrance, prompting the church to introduce a more expensive door. For just \$15, people don't have to talk to anyone. And right now, some of you are thinking we so need one of those. Like that would be awesome. American Christianity has this kind of just me and my Jesus kind of vibe to it. But that is not biblical. And globally, most other cultures are much more community oriented than we are. And this is something that our Chinese and African brothers and sisters in Christ can really help us Americans grow in, which is why it's good that we're together. Because the Bible calls us to community. God himself is a community. Father, Son, Holy Spirit, all one, one community. God is a community. And we are made in God's image, which means we are made for community.

Christianity is personal, but it's not private. And for the last few weeks, we've been preaching about this valley of dry bones that comes back to life. And that last line, breath entered them, they came to life and stood up on their feet, a vast army. And Anthony mentioned this a couple weeks ago when he preached, we are God's army and our weapons aren't earthly, they're spiritual. But the thing about an army is it's a community. It's a team, no one's alone. And it's interesting that a lot of verses that American Christians interpret personally, were actually given to whole communities.

So for instance, the verse in the Bible that wins the prize for the most egregiously ripped out of context verse ever is where, Jeremiah 29:11, very good front row. Very good. Yes. Jeremiah 29:11, For I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper, not to harm you, plans to give you a future. Oh God has a plan for me. That's so awesome. That's a terrible translation because the you is plural. God says this to the entire nation of Israel. So as I did last week, I have translated this correctly for you into the Dudley standard version, for I know the plans I have for y'all, plans to prosper, not to harm you's guys, plans to give all y'all a future and a hope. That's the way to translate that verse.

It's corporate. it's corporate. And without community we suffer. Right now, even though we are more technologically connected than ever, all the research shows that we are in an epidemic of loneliness. Because we do not need pixels on a screen. We need each other. But there's a problem, isn't there? We is often better than me, but we can be weird sometimes, right? Like weird things happen in churches. Last week, someone said to me, I heard that a couple of weeks ago, Ryan Beattie had to read your sermon because you had laryngitis from cheering at a Mariners game. No, no, I had a cold.

And pre-COVID I just would've shown up and preached, but I had a cold and I didn't want to freak people out. So Ryan, how do these things get started? Weird things happen in churches. Sometimes we get on each other's nerves. We don't agree in this church on anything. We don't agree on anything in this church. Sometimes I'll get an email from someone that says, I hate that song, I hate that decision, whatever it is. I

hate it. Don't you ever do that again? Never, never. I hate it. And the very next email is from someone else who says, I love that thing, do it every week. What are we supposed to do with that?

And sometimes we hurt each other because we're broken people. Church is the place where the person I least want to be around is always there. And that's a good thing. That's a good thing. Because as we work through our differences, it causes us to grow spiritually, lean on Jesus, get more humble, learn to sacrifice for other people, which grows us up. And we find a deeper unity than the shallow unity of sameness. You will never, and I mean never, be spiritually mature with on your own. Jesus is not asking you to pull off an unassisted triple play. He's asking us to work together as an army, a community. And the Bible gives us some promises of the benefits of we over me. So, first is this.

You, singular, are not alone. You are part of an army and we, plural, are with you. And whether you admit it or not, you need us. The Bible says this, let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, that is grow spiritually. Not giving up meeting together as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another. We do not grow spiritually on our own. Life on life is what changes lives. So if you're feeling kind of apathetic about your faith, kind of just flat about Jesus or church, and you're not connected in community, I think we found your problem.

The log that rolls away from the fire stops burning. You do not have to do this on your own. We are an army together. You are part of an army. We are with you. A woman in our church sent me an email about how she experienced community in this church after her husband died while he was in his thirties, very young. And she said this, right after he died, I was really struggling with accepting help from all the people who were trying to help me. I needed it. But I was used to being the person who brought people meals or anonymously covered expenses and I hated being on the receiving end.

Anyone? Anyone? Then a friend took me to task and told me that every time I refused help, I was not only depriving someone of the joy of giving, I was sitting in judgment on the people that I had helped in the past. Because see, my actions were saying that I thought I was too good, competent, self sufficient, to need anything. Which meant, I thought I was better than everyone else. Ouch. It was painful to my pride, but I forced myself to accept what folks had to offer. And that conversation was pivotal in my understanding of service, humility, and Jesus. This church cared for her, not only by bringing meals and all of that. Yes, that too. But also her friend who called her out and challenged her to grow spiritually. You don't have to do this alone. You're part of an army and we are with you.

Second promise. You matter because we need you. If you know Jesus, his holy spirit has put spiritual gifts in you and we need what you bring. In his letter to the Corinthian church, the apostle Paul talks about all the different spiritual gifts that people have in a church and he compares it to the body. And he says, just as a body though one has

many parts, but all its many parts form one body. So it is with Christ. If the ears should say, because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body. It would not for that reason stop being part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? The eye cannot say to the hand, I don't need you. So what was going on here in the Corinthian church was that some people thought that the more visible gifts, preaching, teaching, speaking in tongues, were more important than maybe someone who had the gift of administration or helping people.

And Paul says, no, everybody is important. I mean, eyes may be prettier than ears, right? Like when was the last time you heard someone say you have the most beautiful ear lobes. Because that would be creepy. But without ears you can't hear. And if the whole body was an eye, how weird would that be, this giant eye rolling around. Also creepy. I am the most visible person on Sundays, but I am not the most important. Parking lot hosts, greeters, usher, set the mood as people come into church with a pleasant greeting that opens them up to worship. Our AV team sets up microphones without which you couldn't hear a thing. Everybody's important. And Paul goes on to say, now you, plural, are the body of Christ. And each one of you is a member of it. Now you may be going, well, I don't want to be a member of anything. I don't want to be in community with you people. I just want to go to church here. But what's the opposite of member? Dismembered, body parts everywhere. That's a horror film. You don't want that, you don't want that.

There are people in this church with needs that you are uniquely gifted to meet. And you have needs that people in this church, their need is to meet your need, to have the joy of giving. So a couple of action steps. One way to be more connected would be to, how shall I say this, come back to church. Come back to in person church. You guys in the room, you're here. You guys online, now some of you online, you should not. Some of you for lots of different reasons should not be coming back yet.

And we understand that. We understand that some of you should maybe not be coming back yet, but let's be honest. I mean, we've had a lot of people confess to us, the reason I'm not coming back is because I've gotten really used to doing pajama church. So pajama Christians. So come back.

Huh? Come to church in your, the people here say you can come to church in your pajamas. Just come to church, right? I mean, we don't want to just be pajama Christians, right? So the pastor said as he stared into the camera meaningfully to create a greater sense of conviction. Now we love that you join us online. We do. Please keep joining us online. We love that. This is not really, this is not to shame you, but also come sometimes here in person. Because the most common comment we hear over and over from people returning after 19 months is, oh my gosh, worship is so much more powerful in person.

And it is because we are the body of Christ and that is literal. We are the physical presence of Jesus to each other and to our world. God himself took on a body when

he came in the person of Jesus. We are embodied beings. And worship for both you and for us is better when you're here. So we get that sometimes you have to join online. We get that. Please keep doing that. But also come here sometimes if you're able. Come here sometimes, it's better in person. Another way to be more connected would be to join a serve team, to be a greeter, usher, parking lot host, help with our kids and students. And we serve in teams to create greater connection and community. And right now we really need you. We are desperate, as a matter of fact, because we can't keep doing Sundays and everything else without you.

But also, for you being in a serve team, and many of you do this, being in a serve team connects you to community, which helps us grow spiritually, be less lonely and our lives get richer. And you can sign up online or in the lobby after the service. We need each other. For instance, research shows that kids and students who have five or more caring adults in their lives, other than their parents, have healthier social and emotional lives and are far more likely to retain their faith as adults.

Amen.

And my kids were privileged to grow up with that kind of community, with Sunday school teachers and youth leaders in this church. But as well as at the pool that we were part of every summer. And we joined that pool in part because so many people from this church were part of that pool. So my kids had the same Christian adults in their lives here at church and in the pool and grew up in community.

And there was one moment in particular where I was so grateful for this community. And I shared it with you a couple of years ago when it happened, but I want to reshare it because it kind of shows how we need each other. And when my oldest daughter, Holly, who I have permission to tell this story, she loves it when I tell stories about her. So when she went to college, she wanted to live in a sorority, which meant she had to go through rush. Which is where you go to social events, a bunch of social events for five days with the sororities and they decide whether to invite you in or not. It's called rush, aka hell. And she stayed nights with us because she was at the University of Washington, she stayed nights with us. And all was going well until the morning of the fifth day, the last day to make an impression.

And on the morning of the fifth day, she discovered a stain on her dress that wouldn't come out. This created a lot of tension. So I said, just wear another dress. Seemed perfectly reasonable to me. No, no, no, no, no. It had to be this particular dress and the dress was white, so I said, well maybe you could use some white out. Shockingly, that didn't help either. And there was yelling and crying and screaming. And some of it was even from her. And so I drove her across the lake, wearing the stained dress and I kept saying, this is going to be awesome. You're going to make a joke about the stain. They're going to see that you are cool under fire. You're smart. You're clever. You're funny. It's going to be great. Nothing worked. But then a miracle occurred. My

brilliant wife who was back at our house, called a friend of ours, who is part of this church and part of the pool, she'd also been in a sorority.

And our friend called Holly as I was driving her across the lake and talked Holly off the ledge in just a few minutes. And what did this friend say that was so miraculous? The exact same things that I had said to Holly. Only sometimes you need to hear it from someone that's not dad, right? And Holly felt better. She got into a great sorority and all of that. I could not pull off an unassisted triple play. I needed our community in that moment. It's called communal parenting. Very, very handy. You are not alone. We are an army together. You matter, because we need you. And finally, you get to be part of something bigger when we work together. My predecessor always used to tell me, the great thing about Belle Press is it's got all of these thoroughbred horses with tons of horsepower.

The problem is they're all going in a different direction. And that is so true. But if we work together, think of all the things we can do. We are often much more powerful than me. Think of the kids' lives we could change. Or the people on the east side we could care for in the name of Jesus. So here's another action step. What if everyone in this church tithed? Tithe is a Bible word that means to give 10% of your income to the faith community you're a part of to be used for God's purposes. The Bible commands it. And many of you do this. Thank you. It's one of the best ways to build trust in God, which alleviates fear, because we see him provide for our needs. Plus it brings joy because we get to be part of making a big difference together.

And what if everyone, the average Christian gives one or two percent, that's it. What if everyone in this church tithed? Think of what we could do. There are approximately 200 homeless families in the Bellevue school district. That has a huge impact on those kids' ability to learn. If everyone in this church tithed, we could go a long way towards solving that problem. Not just in Bellevue, but in other places on the east side. Wouldn't it be amazing to walk into the City Manager's office and say, those homeless kids, scratch that off your list of things to worry about City Manager, the church has taken care of it.

If we all tithed, we could build a reconciliation center in Congo where there's so much ethnic violence right now, using the kind of Christ centered reconciliation tools that have worked in Rwanda. Or we could support even more Muslim refugees in Europe who are becoming Christians by the thousands. We heard this week from one of our partners in Greece who works with Iranian and Afghan refugees, that when COVID hit Athens, everything shut down. And he wondered how he was going to be able to keep meeting the needs of these refugees. But at the same time, two women, a mom and a daughter, came to him saying they had no place to sleep, no food. So he offered to have them stay in his own home even though he knew that that was not going to be sustainable. But he couldn't just leave them on the street with all the crime, rape, human trafficking.

So that night he prayed all night, didn't go to bed. He prayed all night asking God for help for these two women. That morning, he got on his computer and there was an email from Belle Press, from us, saying, do you need extra help right now because we can help. And for him it was an answer, immediate answer to prayer. And he was able to rent a place, not just for these two women, but actually to help other refugee families as well. And in fact, he said that when COVID hit Athens, almost all the other ministries supporting refugees shut down. Almost all of them shut down except for the two that we support. And because of us, they stayed open and they're providing hundreds of refugees with food and medical care and housing and Bible studies because so many of them are becoming Christian.

And these two ministries are known all over Athens for how they care for Muslim refugees.

Because of what you give, we did that together. We have it within this church alone to solve so many problems in our community and in our world. We are placed all over in schools, workplaces, neighborhoods, soccer fields. So one last action step for this sermon, join with other Christians where you live, work, play, or learn and start praying together and saying Jesus, in this school, in this workplace, in this neighborhood, what is happening that brings a tear to your eye and makes you pound your fist on the table? Is it some kind of bullying or racial inequalities or poverty or people who don't know you? And Jesus, how can we, the Christians in this place, not me, how can we, the Christians in this place, make a difference together? Because we is often better than just me.

Yes, you can applaud that. A friend of mine is a high school pastor and he took a group of high school students camping one week into the back country to build community, grow in their faith. And after a week, as they were hiking out, there was this river they had to cross that was flooded. And there were about 30 people standing at this flooded river in groups of twos or threes, but separated from each other. And they couldn't figure out how to get across this river. Well, the high school students looked that and said, oh, this is easy. This is easy. We know how to fix this. And they formed a human chain and ferried folks across the river one by one. And afterwards, someone, one of the 30, said, why couldn't we have figured that out? And one of the high school students said, well, I think it's because we just spent a week together building community. And so we looked at this problem and we thought, together, we can fix this.

Those 30 people could have formed a human chain at any time, but they were thinking as individuals rather than as a community. So they got stuck. But as a community, they could solve the problem. There is nothing so dangerous to Satan's plans as a church that is fully yielded to Jesus Christ and that is working together. Together through the Holy Spirit, we can all grow spiritually, experience Jesus more deeply and together push back the margins of evil in our world because of his power that is at work within us together.

Because you see, you are not a boss. You are not an employee. You're not a student. You are not a teacher. You are not a parent. You are not a customer. You are not a consumer. No, you, you are not alone because we are with you. You matter because we need you and you get to be part of something bigger when we work together. Because you, me, us, we, together are God's army. We are the body of Christ through whom Jesus will make all things new. So Jesus knit us together. In spite of all of our many differences over so many things, knit us together into one community. One team. Help us to bring you glory. We ask this in your name Jesus. Amen. Amen.

Discussion Questions: Read Ezekiel 37:9-10

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

Opening Question:

- Icebreaker: What book, movie or TV show have you seen/read recently you would recommend? 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

- 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 holds you back from being more deeply involved in Christian community?
- What "gifts" do you bring to the rest of the BelPres community?

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.