

BELPRES CHURCH

Sermon Title: Out of Control

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Scripture:

Ezekiel 36:24, 33-36

²⁴ “For I will take you out of the nations; I will gather you from all the countries and bring you back into your own land.

³³ “This is what the Sovereign LORD says: On the day I cleanse you from all your sins, I will resettle your towns, and the ruins will be rebuilt. ³⁴ The desolate land will be cultivated instead of lying desolate in the sight of all who pass through it. ³⁵ They will say, “This land that was laid waste has become like the garden of Eden; the cities that were lying in ruins, desolate and destroyed, are now fortified and inhabited.” ³⁶ Then the nations around you that remain will know that I the LORD have rebuilt what was destroyed and have replanted what was desolate. I the LORD have spoken, and I will do it.’

Mark 1:9-13

⁹ At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰ Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. ¹¹ And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”

¹² At once the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness, ¹³ and he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted^[a] by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him.

Transcript:

Good morning. My name is Annie Duncan, I'm the executive pastor here, and it is so good to be in worship with you all. The scripture this morning comes from Ezekiel 36,

and we pick it up in verse 24, and this is God speaking to Ezekiel. He says, "For I will take you out of the nations. I will gather you from all the countries and bring you back into your own land." This is what the sovereign Lord says, "On the day I cleanse you from all your sins, I will resettle your towns and the ruins will be rebuilt. The desolate land will be cultivated instead of lying desolate in the sight of all who pass it. They will say, 'This land that was laid waste has become like the garden of Eden. The cities that were lying in ruins desolate and destroyed are now fortified and inhabited.' Then the nations around you that remain will know that the Lord has rebuilt what was destroyed and have replanted what was desolate. I, the Lord, have spoken and I will do it."

Ah, so good. We are nearing the end of this sermon series called Remake. Taking a closer look at the Book of Ezekiel and how God is in the business of remaking us. In Ezekiel 36, it's the chapter right before the chapter on the valley of the dry bones, which we've spent some time in these past few weeks. But in Ezekiel 36, in this chapter right before that, God says, I will 16 times. 16 times he says that. "I will take you out of the nations. I will bring you back to your own land. I will resettle and rebuild what's been destroyed. I will do it." What is going on? Why is God so adamant that all of this remaking is something that God will do?

Well, a few verses right before God's litany of all those I will statements, God says that when Israel lived in their own land, guess what, they defiled it by their conduct, they lived crazy lives, and so God dispersed them. Israel was out of control, right? And then in exile, they're confronted with their sin and they see their need to put God in control. And so then God promises them, I will. I will remake you. God's adamant that God will remake Israel because it's something that Israel cannot do on its own. And today, the remaking theme that we are going to be unpacking more of is letting go of control. Yeah. Nervous laughter, right?

Earlier this week, my husband asked me what I was preaching on. And I said, "Oh, letting go of control." And he laughed at me. And I was like, "Hey, what?" And he's like, "Oh babe, you're serious." He's like, "Oh, that's going to be a really good sermon for you to preach on." I'm like, "Aw, he knows me too well," right? But letting go of control is hard. Why do we even need to do it? Can't we just skip this one? No, we can't skip this part. This is an important part of the remaking process, because we relinquish our control to Jesus, to God, because Jesus' way is better, Jesus' love is wider, Jesus' grace is deeper. And as Jesus' followers, for us, it's acknowledging that actually we don't want to be in control. We want to follow Jesus. We want to be formed by Jesus. In order to do that, we have to give Jesus the control. So they'll press, who are we following and who is forming us?

Are we following Instagram trends more than we are following Jesus? Are we being formed more by our politics than we are by God? Like Israel in the book of Ezekiel, we know what it's like to be in control ourselves, and how at times that can lead us down a path where we are whoa, out of control. So what does Ezekiel teach us? And how do we let go of control? First, we are led by the spirit. Right after all these I will statements that God makes, guess what happens next. Check this out. "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."

So talk about going from this high point, right, where God's like, I'm going to bring you back. I'm going to remake you. I'm going to put a new spirit in you. And Israel is like, "Yes. Yes.

You've heard our cry." And then here's the belly. Here are some dry bones. Bones so dry like they don't even smell anymore. They're just dry, dry, dusty bones, right? And yet, this is where the spirit leads Ezekiel. It's similar to another story where we see Jesus go from what we might consider a high point to a low point. Mark 1, Jesus gets baptized. It goes like this, "At that time, Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. Just as Jesus was coming up out of the, he saw heaven being torn open and the spirit descending on him like a dove, and a voice came from heaven, you are my son whom I love, with you I am well pleased. And at once, the spirit sent him out into the wilderness and he was in the wilderness 40 days being tempted by Satan."

So like with Ezekiel, we have this high point, right, where Jesus gets baptized, and the Spirit's there, and God's there, and then the wilderness. I mean, what's going on with that? Right? Jesus and Ezekiel, they both model for us with this first step of letting go of control it looks like, and it's being led by the spirit. Okay. But wait, if letting go of control means we're led by the spirit, how do we do that? How are we led by the spirit? Well, if you have faith in Jesus, God's spirit is already inside of you. Jesus talks about this in the book of John, "The holy spirit whom God will send in my name will teach you all the things and remind you of everything I've said to you."

Holy spirit, the holy spirit is, we talk about this a lot at Bell Pres, like those holy spirit nudges, where you might get a thought that's not like your own, or you're reading scripture, and all of a sudden, these words are highlighted, and it's like, they're just jumping off the page, or somebody praise for you in community and you're like, oh man, that really resonated with me. The holy spirit knows how to get our attention. And

the more we are in relationship with Jesus, the easier it's going to be to discern how all the holy spirit may be leading us.

When we're led by the spirit, and sometimes that means confronting our wilderness, confronting those dry valleys, being faced with our sin and temptation, and knowing that empowered by the holy spirit, we can conquer those things. Now, how many of us know that we love what God says? We love what God says, especially when it's things like, I'm going to remake you, or you're my daughter, you're my son, with you I am well pleased. We love those things, right? We love what God says until the spirit takes us where we don't want to go like the wilderness or the valley.

Pastor Scott says often that God loves us just the way we are, and that's the part we love, right? Oh God, you love me just the way I am. God loves us just the way we are, but too much to let us stay the way we are, right, because he does. He wants us to be remade. He knows that his spirit can breathe new life, right? So we got to let go of control and be led by the spirit, and go to those valleys, go to the wilderness, go to the places where God wants to breathe new life.

And just so we're clear, here's what not letting go of control might look like. If Jesus was not the perfect son of God and had a hard time letting go of control, kind of like me, maybe like you, here's how the aftermath of his baptism might have gone. So Jesus is baptized. The spirit's just descended on him. And God says some nice things about his son. And then the spirit's like, okay, Jesus, it's time to go. And Jesus is like, oh wait a second. Because some of my friends are here, the disciples, and they really wanted to get a selfie with me and this descended dove here, so hold on spirit. And then post baptism, I got my party. It's over at John's house. He's got some grasshoppers chilling in some honey, so we got to go over there. This whole weekend, it's kind of been all about me. It's my baptism. So I'm going to need a couple of days to recover, so spirit, check back. We good?

Now, thank you for laughing. That sounds ridiculous. Guess what, because it is ridiculous. We sound ridiculous when we ignore the spirit, or if we try and control the spirit, right, we sound ridiculous. That's why I didn't share a story from my own life of how ridiculous I sound when I try and control the spirit. But being led by the spirit, it's part of how God wants to remake us. But sometimes that means if we ignore it, then we miss out on what God might have for us. We think we can just do things ourselves, because we're a pretty self-sufficient society, right?

For example, the week before I left for my eight week sabbatical this summer, I was frantically trying to hand things off and take everything that's on my plate and make sure that it would be covered for the eight weeks that I was going to be gone. As the executive pastor here, I have a lot of meetings that I needed other people to run and a lot of initiatives to figure out, so it felt a little bit daunting to try and be gone for eight weeks, and I was starting to second guess, like, should I even go? Is this a good idea? And as my anxiety began to rise, I got this nudge, talk to pastor Rosalyn. Now, pastor Rosalyn is one of our pastors here on staff. You'll know her because she's lovely. She knows how to work with people. She also has a wonderful British accent that can calm any storm just by her opening her mouth, right?

So after a few minutes, after I got that nudge, go talk to pastor Rosalyn, I left my office. Walking down the hall, who do I run into, Rosalyn, right? And she says, "Oh Annie, I'm so excited for you to go on sabbatical this summer." And I said, "Pastor Rosalyn, how do you do this? How do you be gone for eight weeks?" And she said, "Oh Annie, it's just a daily adventure. You wake up every day and you say, father, daddy, what do you want to do today?" I'm sorry, Rosalyn, for butchering your beautiful accent. And then after she said that, she prayed for me, and it was like she took my very chaotic out of control mindset and basically shook me and said, "Annie, just be led by the spirit." I was like, "Oh yeah, got to remember that."

So how do we let go of control? We are led by the spirit, and second, we respond because we still have something to do in this, right? You've heard the phrases before, like, let go, let God, or Jesus take the wheel. Those phrases make it sound like there's nothing for us to do. Well, that's wrong. Letting go of control doesn't mean that we do nothing, because letting go of control isn't passive. Letting go of control is still very active. We see this as we walk through chapter 37, it's clear that God's in control, but Ezekiel still has an important role to play. The spirit takes Ezekiel to the valley. God leads Ezekiel back and forth among the bones. God asks Ezekiel question, Ezekiel responds. God tells Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones, and so Ezekiel does.

Letting go of control means that we are led by the spirit and we respond and we check in with God and respond again. It's this back and forth. It's dialogue. It's not passive. It's not like endlessly feeling aimless, but it's active because our relationship with God is active. Jesus illustrates just how active it is in the book of John when he says, "Very truly I tell you, the son can do nothing by himself. He can only do what he sees his father doing."

Whenever I put together Ikea furniture, maybe some of you are like this, I lay every part out and I read the instruction manual from start to finish before I even begin on step

one, because how many of you have done this before where you get to the end and you're like, I still have like 10 parts left. Where do they go? Right? Okay. Following the spirit, when we give up control and follow the spirit's lead and respond, it is not like an Ikea instruction manual. We may have the first step, but we might not have the second step yet. And that's okay. That's totally okay. For some of us in how we respond to God, it might look like, okay, God, you told me to start a small group. Now what? Or, okay, God, you told me to talk to that guy at work about Jesus. Now what? Or okay, God, I forgave that person. It took a bit of time, but I was able to do it. Now what?

While that can be a frustrating place to be because we don't know the next step to take, yet, it's actually a good place to be, because us going to God and checking in and asking God often, okay, God, now what? That's us letting go of control, and it's checking in with God who is in control. And because God isn't a ruthless dictator that micromanages our every move, sometimes when we ask God, what now, we might not know for a little bit, and we'll have to wait on God, right?

I have a good friend that she felt God nudging her to apply for a role at her kid's school. And so she's talking to me about it. We prayed about it. We're like, yeah, you should do this. This is totally in line with your gift set. This was a really big deal for her because she is a mom of four and this was going to be her first step back into the workplace after having kids. She prepared and she interviewed and we prayed over it and she didn't get the job. And we were like, "Oh, that's weird. We really felt like God was in this."

And then nine months later, no, she didn't have a baby, but nine months later, the school called and they're like, "Hey, we have another open position. Can you start now?" She started this week and she's thrilled. It was just kind of this whirlwind. She was like, "Oh, it was on God's timing. It wasn't on my timing," which is just like, that's so God, right? Sometimes we follow those nudges and we think God's going to respond the way that we think he should respond on our timeline, but it's different.

Sometimes I think that we believe in this lie that when we're following God and following the spirit and responding and letting go of control, that it's going to look really linear. Like, okay, pastor Annie says, let go of control. Okay. Letting go of control, following the spirit, responding. Look at me, now I'm like a little bit more holy, and look at how linear that was, right? I've read my Bible cover to cover. I do not see any linear characters that it just happens so controlled and precise that way. Furthermore, when I look at my life and when I look at others of you all in this community, it doesn't seem

like following Jesus is super linear like that, but it is an adventure. It's got some ups and downs, some mountains, some valleys, some twists, some turns. It's an adventure.

I know a guy who's a driving instructor on a very technical course. Here's an aerial shot of the course that he teaches on. What this picture doesn't capture though is along with the twist and turns, it's got some ups and downs and a lot of blind corners, right? When my friend, he takes new drivers around this course, the new drivers have no idea what to expect, but they have their instructor with them, and that instructor knows exactly what the car can do, and that instructor knows the course so well they could probably drive the course blindfolded. And I asked my friend what it's like instructing new drivers around that course. And he said, "Well, I am pushing them to drive faster than they are comfortable with. And they learn the fastest when they listen and trust." I think that is a pretty incredible metaphor.

When we let go of control, it is like we have God as our driving instructor. He's our co-pilot, right? God knows the course of life that we are on. He knows every twist and turn that we are going to make. There are no blind corners to God, because there's no surprises to him. And he's with us every step of the way. Our response is simple. We listen and we trust. How do we let go of control? One, we are led by the spirit, two, we respond, and three, we hold onto the truth.

Right before Jesus goes into the wilderness, God says to him, you are my son, with you I am well pleased. And then it's in the wilderness that he's tempted three times, but not once does Jesus falter because he knows who he is, and he holds on to his father and his father's words. Right before Ezekiel is led into the valley where all he sees is lifeless bones, God promises new life and restoration. Sometimes I think this remaking, it starts with tearing down. But even while we're looking at the lifeless bones, we can hold on to the truth that God has said. I will put a new spirit in you. I will remake you. I will bring you back.

What's a nugget of truth that carries you through? What's something God has said to you that you hold onto in the valley or in the wilderness? If you don't have anything, if you're like, oh, I'm not sure about that, a really good place to start is the Bible. The Bible is full of God's words of truth to us. Here's a couple of action steps for this week in how we as a community can learn how to let go of control. First, pray, God, show me where I'm out of control and could put you in control. Listen for God's voice, listen for the holy spirit to nudge you and direct you. And when you hear it respond, respond and obey.

Second, and this one goes right in pair with the first one, second, talk about it. You all, letting go of control is hard, and we are not meant to do this life alone. We are a vast army together, united, right? So talk about maybe what you hear. Or maybe if you're having a hard time hearing from God, do that in community, grab a friend, grab your all in group and talk about it, right?

Third, and this is an action step for today, write a prayer in the lobby. We've got some teachers and some staff at a local school that had a really rough end to their week last week. And we want to be that community. We want to be that vast army that rallies around them. So we've got pens and paper in the lobby for you to write encouragement or prayer, and those messages will get delivered to the impacted school early this week along with some treats and coffee. So the paper and pens are in the lobby. Thank you, Bell Pres for being that vast army of a community together.

I'll close with this, the song that we sang right before I got up here called Jireh, that lyric from it where it says, I don't want to forget how I feel right now on the mountain top. I can see so clear what it's all about. So stay by my side until the sun goes down. I don't want to forget how I feel right now. On those mountaintops, we can. We can see so clearly, right? It's those times where we know what God's up to, or we see God's truth so evident in our lives, but those are the moments that we carry into the wilderness. Those are the moments that we carry into the valley. We remember God's truth and we know that he gives us permission to be out of control, because he's Jehovah Jireh. He's the one that provides. He's the one that's in control of it all.

So Jesus, we thank you that you are Jehovah Jireh. You are the one that provides for us. You are the one that carries us through. God, help us to see ways today in our lives that we can hand over a bit more of control to you because you are worthy to be trusted. It's in your name that we pray. Amen.

Discussion Questions: Ezekiel 36:24, 33-36 & Mark 1:9-13

Read this week's scripture(s) & answer the below questions with your friends, family, or All In small group.

Opening Questions:

- Icebreaker: You are given \$1000 and told you must use all of it to anonymously bless another person. What would you do with the money?
- 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 does it look like for you to let God be in control? Does it feel active or passive?
- When we follow the Spirit, we are often given the first step to take, but not a second. Why do you think the Spirit only gives us one step at a time (and wouldn't it be nice if the Spirit gave us the 10-step process all at once)?

Closing Question and Application:

- Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you to 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.