

Reviving These Dry Bones

Ezekiel 37:1-10

Mark Potter

Good morning church! Most of you got an e-mail this week from Pastor Jim saying that after much prayer and discussion, our Overland Park Campus Pastor Nominating Committee has recommended for yours truly to become their next campus pastor. Let me take a moment to address the elephant in the room: I won't be seeing some of you as often as I'm used to, which makes me incredibly sad. It took me several months to fill out that application because I wanted to hear directly from God and have conversations with certain people before applying. And I did get that clarity, multiple times from multiple people, that God was leading me to apply. But even still, I had no idea I'd be chosen. I just knew God was asking me to take that next step of obedience. If you are ever in that situation, I implore each of you to do the same.

Having said that, my family and I are super excited to begin our new call, to get to know the OP congregation better, and to align our ministry context with our daily life. I'm humbled to follow in the footsteps of my good friends, Pastor Bob and Pastor Todd and Pastor Tami, and to continue the work that they began. And the good news is, we are still part of Colonial. We are one church!

But most of all, I want to express my sincerest and deepest and most heartfelt levels of gratitude for the way my South KC church family has supported me, loved me, and prayed for me over the years, especially when I was diagnosed with cancer. I kept everything -- all the cards, all the gifts -- I have a list on my phone of all the ways this church blessed us during that time. We are indebted to all of you... And that's the beauty of grace. It's a free gift that we are given on our death bed that we can never fully pay back even if we tried. From the bottom of my heart, thank you for being a loving and gracious and supportive congregation!

Last week Pastor Jim told you I would be preaching a stand-alone sermon on whatever I wanted, and I told him that I wanted to preach on the Spirit of Revival... And that's when he knew he made a mistake! After this sermon, the PNC might just change their mind!

A lot of what you'll be hearing this morning comes straight from the Scripture -- which is Truth with a capital T -- and some of what you'll hear are observations from myself and others related to where and how the Spirit of God might be moving in a new way in 2023. You may hear a couple things today and say, "Pastor Mark, I don't know if I agree with your assessment of the culture that we're in." And I'm ok with that. Because I'm coming into this sermon with a posture of humility and teachability, with open eyes and open ears to see and hear where God might be moving in our midst. And my prayer is that you would as well.

See, I have a theory. I say it's a theory and not a hypothesis because a hypothesis is an assumption with little or no evidence to back it up, while a theory is a principle formed to explain the things already shown in data.

So, are you ready for the theory? My theory is that we are embarking on a catalytic, Spirit-led movement in the U.S. unlike anything we've experienced in over fifty years.

Some of you are like, "Whoa!! Preach!" I've got a name for y'all. We call you people the "Presbycostals." You've been praying daily for revival for thirty or forty years! Others of you are like, "Duh, tell me

something I didn't know." You are my "Bapturians." You guys participated in revivals every single weekend growing up. But it was the same people getting saved every Sunday!! A third group is sitting there silent, thinking, "I don't know if I agree, I haven't heard the rest of the sermon yet." You guys are just sitting patiently with your arms folded waiting to hear me quote something from Timothy Keller, John Calvin, or the Westminster Confession. You are my "Frozen Chosen" friends otherwise known as "Loyal Skeptics."

Why do I believe that we are on the cusp of a catalytic Spirit-led movement unlike anything we've experienced for the past 50 years? I'll tell you why... later on. Don't you hate it when pastors do that to you?

First, please join me in a word of prayer.

Recall with me, if you would, a time in our nation's history in the not-too-distant past when there was a great deal of fear over a viral pandemic.

A time that included race riots and a call for racial justice.

A time that included a heated Presidential election and rising inflation.

A time when there was a drug epidemic and anger over gun violence.

A time when people feared nuclear war.

A time when there was a push for gender equality.

A time when the country became divided over abortion legislation.

A time of growing suspicion and cynicism. Conspiracy and controversy.

Rage and resentment. Distrust and divisiveness.

Apprehension, anxiety, anger, and alarm.

No, I'm not referring to the last three years. I'm referring to the year 1968. That year was the year in our nation's history when everything seemed to be falling apart. The U.S. experienced record numbers of casualties in the Vietnam War. It saw the assassinations of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Bobby Kennedy. That year, our country experienced unprecedented race riots, drug abuse, Olympic protests, a Cold War, and political polarization. And to top it off, there was fear over a viral pandemic called the Hong Kong flu, or H3N2 virus, that claimed the lives of one million people.

I've been spending quite a bit of time listening to Ed Stetzer lately. Ed is the Executive Director of the Billy Graham Center at Wheaton College. Several of us got a chance to hear Ed speak at our General Assembly last summer. In his talk titled "A Post-Covid Missiology," Ed compared the tumultuous year of 1968 to the tumultuous year we lived through just a few short years ago.

Like in 1968, Stetzer stated that we have recently endured through something much larger than a singular viral pandemic. In addition to COVID-19, we are toiling through six other pandemics which he details in his article, *The Six Other Pandemics We Need to Talk About* (March 15, 2022 in *Outreach Magazine*)

1. Disease of mental illness
2. Distrust
3. Division
4. Defamation
5. Disorientation
6. Disruption

While I don't have time to unpack any of these in detail this morning, I want you to understand that we are experiencing what he refers to as a *cultural convulsion*. As a result of this cultural convulsion, many of our neighbors, coworkers, and classmates are desperate for signs of hope. Some have likely asked themselves the same question that was asked in the mid to late sixties, when *Time Magazine* published this question on its April 8, 1966 cover: "Is God Dead?" (show *Time* cover image)

Now of course, we all know that God is not dead. He is alive and well, and His Spirit is moving in powerful ways. So, the question for us is not so much "Is God Dead?" but rather, "Is the Church needing to be revived?"

Back in the late 1960s, as challenging as it was, God moved in a powerful way in the years to follow. In fact, on Feb 3, 1970, heaven broke loose among some college students attending a 10 a.m. chapel service at Asbury College in the small town of Wilmore, Kentucky. This revival and others like it set the country on fire, leading to what would become known as the Jesus Movement, when an estimated 30 million people professed faith in Christ for the first time.

There were so many young people being saved that *Time Magazine* published a different cover on June 21, 1971, titled "The Jesus Revolution." (show *Time* cover). Several of you are very familiar with this because you not only lived it back then, but you also relived it recently through the *Jesus Revolution* movie that was just released in theaters.

Here at Colonial, that was the same time period when a charismatic California gymnast hippie pastor named Ted Nissen and his outspoken, evangelistic, discipleship-minded youth leader named Richard Beach recruited a couple of young wrestlers named Buffalo Bill and Bobby Lehleitner to join the very first Summer Staff seminar here at Colonial Presbyterian Church. And that resulted in a season of unprecedented growth and disciple-making in the life of our church. A whole bunch of young people were eager to receive, follow, and worship Jesus as an alternative way to the cultural convulsions that they were experiencing at that time.

My reason for sharing all this is to simply offer a word of encouragement that sheds light on and brings hope to this unique cultural and historical ministry window that God is opening for us. In the Bible, a ministry window is referred to as a Kairos moment -- God's unique season of opportunity. It literally means a "crucial time," or an "opportune moment." Kairos can also be described as God's anointed time, or harvest time.

What I want to suggest to you is that God is leading us into a Kairos moment. Now, we don't know how long this window will be open, or what the final outcome will be. Only God knows that. But I believe that God wants to use this Kairos moment to rattle, restore, and revive the parts of His Church that are dry, decaying, and dead.

My sermon is titled, Reviving These Dry Bones, and our scripture is found in Ezekiel 37:1-10. If you are able, please stand with me for the corporate reading of God's Word.

"The hand of the LORD was upon me, and he brought me out in the Spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of the valley;^{1a} it was full of bones. ²And he led me around among them, and behold, there were very many on the surface of the valley, and behold, they were very dry. ³And he said to me, "Son of

man, can these bones live?" And I answered, "O Lord God, you know." ⁴Then he said to me, "Prophecy over these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. ⁵Thus says the Lord God to these bones: Behold, I will cause breath^u to enter you, and you shall live. ⁶And I will lay sinews upon you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live, and you shall know that I am the LORD."

⁷So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I prophesied, there was a sound, and behold, a rattling,^u and the bones came together, bone to its bone. ⁸And I looked, and behold, there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them. But there was no breath in them. ⁹Then he said to me, "Prophecy to the breath; prophecy, son of man, and say to the breath, Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live." ¹⁰So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army."

Thank you, please be seated.

This passage describes a vision given by God to the priestly prophet Ezekiel regarding the nation of Israel's rebellion and exile. During this time period, Ezekiel had been exiled to Babylon along with other Jews as a punishment for continuing to break their end of the covenant.

The valley of dry bones was an image, or a metaphor, for Israel's spiritual state. Their idolatrous hearts resulted not only in the literal exile and death of many people, but these dry bones in Ezekiel's vision also signified the metaphorical exile and death of their covenant relationship with God due to the consequences of their sin. But just when Ezekiel thinks that all hope is lost, God asks him a question: "Can these dry bones live?"

And then the Spirit of God tells Ezekiel to prophecy over the bones, and he obeys. And the bones begin to rattle and come together, and flesh forms over the bones. But they are still lifeless, so God tells Ezekiel to prophecy again, and breath enters their bodies. And they stand up, all together, like a great army preparing for battle.

This prophecy would have reminded Ezekiel's hearers of the creation narrative when God formed Adam from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life. And then God wanted to create a companion for Adam, so He formed Eve from Adam's rib, and when God brought her to Adam, he said she is "bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh."

But upon succumbing to temptation, God forced them out of the garden as exiles. What's more, their punishment included spiritual and physical death and the removal of God's unlimited presence, protection, and provision. Their only hope was that God, by His grace, would perform a new act of creation, a resurrection, a revival of their dying hearts, decaying bodies, and dried-up spirits.

And what was true for Adam and Eve was also true for the nation of Israel: They needed God's Spirit to breathe life into them and revive them from within.

From our Ezekiel passage, I want to highlight seven common characteristics of Spirit-led revivals. And these things are true for revivals that I've studied in the Bible as well as throughout church history.

1. Revival begins in the middle of the valley, not on the middle of the mountaintop.

When I was growing up in the youth group here, we used to take ski trips to the Rocky Mountains. And my youth leader and mentor, Ryan Kapple, would have us point to the very top of the mountain all the way above the tree line and say, "That's a beautiful view, but there's a reason that nothing grows on the top of the mountain." Spiritual highs and mountain-top experiences are memorable, but they aren't where revival begins.

Throughout history, you'll notice that revivals always emerge during times of significant spiritual and moral decline. Would we say we have been experiencing significant spiritual and moral decline in our country recently? What about in the church as a whole? The good news is that revival begins in the middle of the valley, just like it did in Ezekiel's vision.

2. Revival is always God's initiative. It was God who gave Ezekiel the vision, and God's hand that brought Ezekiel out and set him down in the middle of the valley. The whole thing was orchestrated by God – God's voice, God's hand, God's command, and God's Spirit initiating the act of revival. Church, if you pursue revival for the sake of revival, you are pursuing the wrong thing. For revival cannot be manufactured by men. Instead, I urge you to pursue a relationship with the revival-initiator. Revival is always God's initiative.
3. Revival is marked by a season of crying out to God in prayer and repentance. Ezekiel and the other prophets were continually pleading with the nation of Israel to repent of their sins and listen to the very voice of God.

Speaking of prayer, a wise minister once said, "You can tell how popular a church is by who comes on Sunday morning. You can tell how popular the pastor is by who comes on Sunday night. But you can tell how popular Jesus is by who comes to the prayer meeting."

In Mark 11, as Jesus confronted the people who had turned the temple into a place of commerce, He rebuked them by saying, "My house will be called a house of coffee and donuts!" Is that what He says? "My house will be called a house of musical instruments? Preaching?" No! He says, "My house will be called a house of *prayer!*" Mark 11:17

The men's ministry leadership team has been reading an old book by Jim Cymbala called *Fresh Wind, Fresh Fire*. And in it, Cymbala says that revivals start with individuals whose hearts are inwardly groaning for God's presence and unwilling to settle for the status quo.

He says, "Whether you study the Great Awakening, the Second Great Awakening, the Welsh Revival, the 1906 outpouring on Azusa Street in LA, or any other period of revival, you always find men and women who first inwardly groan, longing to see the status quo changed in themselves and in their churches. They begin to call on God with insistence; prayer begets revival, which begets more prayer." -*Fresh Wind, Fresh Fire* (60)

Speaking of fresh wind...

4. Revival arises from the powerful wind, or breath, of Holy Spirit.

In verse 9, God said, "Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live." In Hebrew, the word, *ruah*, is translated wind, breath, or Spirit. This was another reference back to Gen 2 when God breathed His *ruah* into Adam's nostrils. A similar concept is found in John 3 when Jesus tells Nicodemus that no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he

is born of the Spirit. He says, "The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going." (John 3:8)

Many of you have heard this story, but it's worth repeating. A few weeks ago, as Pastor Jim was telling us about a new movement of the Spirit he is experiencing in his own life, he asked the staff to sit and wait on quietly on the Lord at the beginning of our worship meeting. So we spent several minutes in silent prayer. It was the first time we'd done that altogether in that meeting. So we sat in silence in the Fireside room at South KC when, suddenly, a rushing wind came howling through the chimney. It was sudden and loud and unpredictable and powerful. It definitely got our attention.

"Decayed churches can most certainly be revived by the preaching of the Word, accompanied by the coming of the heavenly breath from the four winds." -Charles Spurgeon

Rushing wind is one of the sounds of revival. But there is another sound that occurs...

5. Revival is associated with shaking, or rattling. Ezekiel 37:7 says, "As I prophesied, there was a sound, and behold, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone." The Hebrew word for "rattling" in verse 7 is *raash*. And it means to roar, or to quake. The Greek equivalent is *seismos* as in seismograph or seismometer, which are devices used to measure earthquakes.

Do you recall in the gospels when Jesus was crucified and He cried out to the Father and gave up His spirit (*ruah*). When He did that, the Temple curtain tore in two and the earth shook, or rattled. There was an earthquake, a *raash*. And all those dead bodies – those dry bones – were raised to life. Why did Matthew include this in his gospel account? Because it actually happened, and because when Jewish readers would've read that, their minds would have been reminded of Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones. Simply put: The death of Jesus was a catalytic event that inaugurated a resurrection and revival of dry bones.

This, of course, eventually led to the formation of the Early Church. In Acts 4, we read about a time when the authorities are conspiring to arrest Peter and John but the authorities recognize the power of God at work within them so they decide to let them go. So they begin to worship the Lord. And then in verse 31 the Scripture says, "And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness." (Acts 4:31).

Revival is associated with shaking, or rattling.

6. Revival requires obedience to God's Word.
In the vision, God gave Ezekiel very specific instructions, or commands, and Ezekiel followed through. God did the reviving, but Ezekiel also had an important part to play. Ezekiel believed the promise and obeyed the command, and the bones came together. In a similar fashion, if we are to usher in revival, we must believe the promises and obey the commands found in God's Word.
7. Revival leads to a united army of soldiers ready to engage in spiritual battle.
The result of Ezekiel's vision was the revival of a united nation of soldiers under one messianic King, which is the King of Kings, King Jesus. For Jesus is the one who reconciles all people to the Father through His death and resurrection.

Pastor Jim has been leading us through the book of Ephesians, and there is an interesting parallel between Ezekiel 37 and Ephesians 2, for both chapters deal with the themes of resurrection and reconciliation of a divided people. In Ezekiel, it's referring to the divided monarchy while in Ephesians, it's referring to divided people groups. But in both examples, dead sinners are being raised to life and two groups are reconciled together in Kingdom Oneness.

Later on, in Ephesians 6, Paul warns this united army of believers to prepare for battle and to put on the full armor of God. But this battle is not against a particular person or political party or nation – in other words, it's not a physical battle against flesh and blood -- but rather it is a spiritual battle against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. (Eph 6:12)

So how does all these seven characteristics of Spirit-led revival apply to us today? That's a great question... for Pastor Greg to answer next Sunday. I'm going to answer that question indirectly by giving you an illustration, which is typically how Jesus taught.

You know when you're pumping gas, gas stations give you a few options for unleaded fuel (show gas station pump pic). You have the one on the left, the cheaper one – the one I usually use for my car. Then there's the one in the middle, which I use on my wife's car, unless I'm by myself, then I use the one on the left. Then there's the most expensive "high octane" premium gas on the far right which I've never even considered using because I'm too cheap.

To achieve high octane ultra-premium gasoline, it needs to go through a process called *catalytic reforming*. Don't you love that name? Many of you can already see where this is heading.

What does this catalytic reforming process entail? It is a chemical process invented by a research chemist named Vladimir Haensel in the 1940s whereby short-chain molecules are combined to make larger molecules that are used to convert petroleum refinery naphthas distilled from crude oil into high-octane liquid products called reformates, which are premium blending stocks for high-octane gasoline. Most of you are like, "Cool. I don't care."

Well, during this process all of the chemical reactions occur in the presence of a *catalyst* at high temps that elevate as high as 525 degrees Celsius (977 degrees F) and high pressures that achieve upwards of 45 atmospheres. To put this in perspective, 45 atmospheres are equivalent to 1,525 feet underwater and 661 pounds per square inch. Imagine, if you will, trying to dive 1,500 feet down into the ocean without scuba gear, or trying to fill your car tires 15 times the amount of air that they hold. What would happen? Your ears and your tires would explode due to the massive amount of pressure.

Let me ask you a question, church. In the past three years, did you ever feel like your eardrums were about to explode from the deafening cultural noise and intense socio-political pressure?

There were crazy chemical reactions occurring everywhere, all around us, every time you walked outside, or turned on the TV, or opened your social media account. People were pointing the finger and screaming at each other from every side on every issue. I would start naming the hot-button issues and subsequent reactions but even saying the words would trigger a chemical reaction in your brain. So I'm not going to do that.

But as difficult and painful as it was, I want to suggest that 2020-2021 initiated a sort of catalytic reforming inside and outside of the church!

You see, the good news is that I believe God used that catalyst to begin to reform the church by pushing people deeper into His Word and drawing people into saving faith in Jesus.

You say, "Yeah but Pastor Mark, we are already a Reformed people and we come from the Reformed faith tradition. How can we be reformed if we're already reformed?"

I would point you back to an old Latin phrase, *ecclesia reformata semper reformanda*, which means, "The Church is reformed and always in need of reforming according to the Word of God."

Speaking of the church continually needing to be renewed and reformed to God's Word, I was once at a youth conference listening to a little old lady speak who really got my attention. She was a church historian and author named Phyllis Tickle. And what she said struck me. She was pointing out that every 500 years or so, the Church goes through a prolonged period of catalytic reforming. This process was what she referred to as a giant rummage sale where the Church throws much of its polity, doctrine, and tradition on the front lawn, looks everything over, and evaluates what it wants to keep and what it wants to get rid of. It's a cycle that we can point to throughout the history of the Church.

In the First Century, of course, the early church began. The catalyst was the death and resurrection of Jesus which resulted in the sending of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. And despite intense persecution, the Church grew and the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. Then, roughly 500 years later, in the Sixth Century, you had prominent faith leaders including Pope Gregory I upholding the monastic movement as its primary expression for Christian living. Roughly 500 years later, in the Eleventh Century, you had the Great Schism, when the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church divided over issues of ecclesiology and theology. Roughly 500 years later, we had the Great Reformation, when the Protestant Church was birthed. And now here we are, roughly 500 years later, in the 21st Century.

So the question is, what's God up to? And how will He use these cultural catalysts to reform the Church back to the Word of God?

Now get this: The environment in which catalytic reforming takes place is called a *refinery*, and it is dependent upon *stabilizers*.

There are so many verses about how God refines His people, but here's one from Zechariah 13:9 – "And I will put this third into the fire, and refine them as one refines silver, and test them as gold is tested. They will call upon my name, and I will answer them. I will say, 'They are my people'; and they will say, 'The Lord is my God.'"

As the refining fire, God allows us to be tested and tried so we will call upon His name and remain faithful. You see, for true reformation to occur, God needs stabilizers, which are used to preserve what must be preserved and to prevent poison from diluting, damaging, or destroying the whole process.

But if the stabilizer does its job, the final product is the high-octane liquid reformat found in the refinery's ultra-premium fuel.

If you haven't heard my point, let me be clear:

I believe we are embarking on a Spirit-led movement of catalytic reformation and revival unlike anything we've experienced in over fifty years. He has brought us through rising cultural temps and elevated atmospheric pressure for the redemptive purpose of refinement. He has offered us the stabilizers of His Word and His Spirit, and if we are faithful to the process, God will create high-octane reformat churches that will fuel our worship and our witness for generations to come.

Some of you, before you got here this morning, were feeling pretty discouraged and dry spiritually. But God is speaking to you. Remember, God desires to revive those who are in the middle of the valley. If that's you, and you've never been baptized, we're about baptize a couple people and there is no time like the present. The water is warm and we even brought extra clothes! During my prayer, if anyone wants to get baptized today, please come forward during the prayer and we'd love to celebrate with you this morning.

Let's pray.

Transition to baptisms.