

The Church in the Valley

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[0 : 00] And it's wonderful to be able to worship God together with you. I'm George DeVeist, for those of you who do not know me. We are missionaries with Resonate Global Mission and serving in Ukraine, as you've heard already, and have been a part of this church now for many years as your hands and feet sharing the gospel and working around the world for God's kingdom.

So it's good to be with you in person. This morning I'd like to share a text with you that has a lot to do with the kind of work that we're involved in, and then share with you some about that work and about what this might mean even for us here in Appleton.

So I'd like to ask you to turn to Ezekiel 37, verses 1 to 14 in your Bibles, or follow together along on the screens. Ezekiel 37, verses 1 to 14.

This is the word of the Lord. 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. He led me back and forth among them, and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry.

[1 : 29] He asked me, Son of man, can these bones live? I said, Sovereign Lord, you alone know.

Then he said to me, Prophecy to these bones and say to them, Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord.

This is what the Sovereign Lord says to these bones. I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin.

Then I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the Lord.

So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I was prophesying, there was a noise, a rattling sound, and bones came together bone to bone.

[2 : 33] I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them, and skin covered them. But there was no breath in that. 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. 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. Then he said to me, Son of man, These bones are the people of Israel.

They say our bones are dried up and our hope is gone. We are cut off. Therefore prophecy and say to them, This is what the Sovereign Lord says.

My people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them. I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And then you, my people, will know that I am the Lord.

[3 : 53] When I open your graves and bring you up from them, I will put my spirit in you, and you will live. And I will settle you in your own land.

Then you will know that I, the Lord, have spoken. And I have done it, declares the Lord. This is the word of the Lord.

So like I said, it's great to be with you again. It's been a very busy time of ministry, a very unexpected time of ministry for us.

Even this year has been extraordinarily busy with workshops around the world in places like Liberia and Romania and the Netherlands and Geneva, Switzerland.

And let's see, where else did God take us this year so far? Zambia and even Gallup, New Mexico, of all places.

[5 : 02] And God has been good. Bringing life in places filled with that. And in just how many days, Sarah?

17 days, is it? That we moved back to Europe. And so we're really looking forward to that. We'll be moving to Budapest, Hungary, where we will be continuing to minister to Ukrainian refugee

communities, but also to expat and refugee communities around Europe.

And hopefully, Lord willing, have the opportunity to do some ministry in Ukraine itself. That's a difficult thing right now because of the ongoing war, but we hope that God will open that door for us, and we are praying for that.

And so we want to thank you for your prayers. And I want to start this morning, actually, with a story, a testimony, about your prayers, about the power of your prayers, because your prayers make a difference.

We can't do what we do without you, and especially without your prayers. So we do want to ask you to pray for us in all these transitions that are coming up in our life, in our life in the coming weeks and in the coming year, because your prayers are so important.

[6 : 33] Your prayers change things. They make things happen. They protect. They provide. And I could share, actually, a number of stories this morning of how your prayers have changed things in our ministry.

But there's one particular one that's especially meaningful to me, and that's the story of Ruth. This is Ruth. I first met Ruth in 2023 at our East African School of Reconciliation in Kenya.

And she was the first ever participant that we had come to one of our schools from the nation of Liberia. I don't know how much you know about Liberia.

Liberia is a relatively small country in West Africa on the other side of the continent. So Ruth saved her money, took out a loan so that she could fly all the way across the country, all the way across the continent, and participate in this ministry of reconciliation that she had heard about.

Liberia has a history of conflict. Since 1980, there have been a number of civil wars in Liberia that have been brutal. Many, many people died.

[7 : 48] And unfortunately, that was what Ruth grew up in, in this time of conflict. So when she heard about Healing Hearts Transforming Nations, she believed that maybe this is something that God could use to bring healing and reconciliation to the people of Liberia who have been divided for over 40 years because of the civil wars and tribal conflicts.

Who have even been divided in their churches because churches took sides in the politics and in the conflicts. And so they started to divide and started to fight against each other.

And they became more tribalized. So people closed themselves up into their own tribal groups. And that's what happened in Ruth's church as well. And it became very closed.

And the leaders became very political. And rather than being a solution to the turmoil in the nation, they perpetuated the turmoil in the nation.

So Ruth came looking for some help in how to find healing between the ethnic groups, between the tribal groups, and how to find a path to reconciliation that's centered on the cross, that's biblical.

[9 : 34] And she was part of the group that I mentored in Kenya. So I got to know her a bit better. This was our group. We found out that she was a single mother. She was never married.

She'd been abandoned by her father as a young child. She grew up in deep poverty. And what she discovered as she worked through this process of healing and reconciliation was how much she needed it for herself.

And she found some deep healing for her own life and returned home with a plan to share about what God had done for her and what God could do for Liberia. And her goal was to gather a team of church leaders to bring them back to the International School of Reconciliation in 2024 in Kigali, Rwanda.

And that's exactly what she did. She took leaders from her denomination, pastors, and came back with a group.

Now we knew early on that this must be an important group, that God was doing something here because on their way to the International School in Kigali, they had to fly through Nairobi, Kenya and had a layover in Nairobi.

[10 : 54] And when they went to get on to the next flight from Nairobi to Kigali, an employee from Kenya Airways said, no, you can't get on this plane. You need to have a visa for Rwanda.

And the problem is that Liberians don't need a visa for Rwanda, and they can't get a visa for Rwanda.

And so they were trying to convince this airline employee that there aren't visas for us to go to Rwanda. They don't exist. We don't need them. And this employee was absolutely certain that if you're from Liberia, you have to have a visa to go to Rwanda and refuse to let them board the

plane.

And they missed their flight. And they were stuck in the airport. And they were calling and trying to figure out what do we do? We can't get a visa. They're insisting that we have to have a visa. They're not letting us on the plane. And we started to pray. And we said, God, what's going on here? Why is the enemy preventing these people from coming?

[12 : 01] One of our colleagues who's in this picture, Patience, who's in the very middle in the back, she was able to get into the airport to find them.

And she lives in Nairobi. And she started taking care of them and started working on this. And we started using all the different diplomatic channels that we could find. And finally, somebody showed up at work the next morning who knew that Liberians didn't need visas to go to Rwanda. And said, why are they telling you this? And let them on the next flight. And we were overjoyed when they arrived and we picked them up at the airport. And we thought, well, what is going to happen here?

And this team did an amazing job. This is as part of the workshop. Here they're presenting the wounds of Liberia. We take them through a thing called the thief workshop.

In John 10.10, it says the thief comes to kill, steal, and destroy. The thief has come to every people everywhere in the world and has been very active. And so they're identifying what did the thief steal, rob, destroy, kill amongst their peoples, in their nation.

[13 : 20] And Ruth was in my group again, my mentoring group. So we did the practical part of this workshop at a large Christian university.

So the school ends with a practicum where the participants who have gone through this process, we trained them how to lead the process, then they go out and do a real workshop in a real setting. So we went to a large Christian university in Kigali working with students through, through, what's it called here? I forgot the name.

Inter-Varsity. And they gathered a group of students and God did amazing things through this process there.

And I could tell more stories about that, but I want to tell you a little bit more about Ruth. We found out that Ruth's birthday is March 15th while we were there at the university.

[14 : 22] So one of the members of our team secretly went out and had a cake made for Ruth and brought it in and we had this great celebration with all the students in our group that we were taking through this healing and reconciliation process.

And it was absolutely wonderful. And Ruth began to weep. And she told us that nobody has ever celebrated her birthday before.

It was the first time in her life that she had had a birthday party. She didn't know that we even had more in store for her, so we got back to the ministry base that we were working out of that evening. They were waiting for her for a whole other birthday celebration. And it was a wonderful evening. It was such a blessing. And it was so wonderful to see Ruth's joy at being celebrated.

The next morning, however, Ruth got a phone call.

[15 : 35] Her younger daughter, Mercy, had been in a coma for two days already.

And the doctors couldn't figure out what was wrong. And they had sent her to a church because they assumed she must be demon-possessed because they couldn't figure out any reason for her to be in this coma.

Ruth had no idea what to do. She was shocked. And she, there was two days, there were two days left until we finished.

And she didn't know, do I just leave now and go home because it's 24 hours for her to travel home? Or do I wait until the end and just, and trust that the people back home will be able to take care of things?

And she was confused and we started praying and she was trying to get more information and, and, and just a couple hours later she got a second phone call.

[16 : 45] Her sister had just had a baby by C-section and her stitches had ripped out and she was bleeding out and being rushed to the hospital.

And they didn't know if she was going to make it. Ruth couldn't believe it. Now she's starting to wonder what's going on here.

What's happening? How can, how can this all be happening at the same time? And, and she was really beside herself. And then about an hour later she got a third phone.

one of the things Ruth did during, when she went through the workshop herself again at the beginning of the school was make a commitment to find her father and to reconcile with him, to forgive him and try to work towards reconciliation and restoring that relationship.

Now for whatever reasons, Ruth's father had, had maintained a relationship with her sister but not with her. And Ruth's father, when he heard that she was in the hospital and in a very serious condition, got on a motorcycle taxi to go to the hospital to be with her.

[18:16] And on the way there, their motorcycle was hit by a truck. And he had a broken leg, a broken hip, a broken shoulder and a head injury and had to be taken to a large hospital in the capital city of Monrovia.

And they didn't know if he would survive. And Ruth was devastated. It was an overwhelming attack. We're wondering, what does God have in store for this lady if the enemy is doing things like this?

And we sent out prayer requests around the world for God's people to pray.

To pray for Ruth, to pray for her family, to pray for protection. And as God's people started waking up around the world and started praying for Ruth, God began to answer those prayers.

But the next day, Mercy came out of her coma, was taken back to the hospital. She was dehydrated because she had been lying for three days in a coma.

[19:43] Ruth's sister pulled through. They saved her life. her baby is doing well and growing. And the first thing Ruth did when she returned to Liberia was to find her father in the hospital and to start rebuilding her relationship with him by forgiving him for abandoning her and for all the pain that he had caused her in her life.

And just this past June, Ruth's dream came true. We held the first ever School of Reconciliation for West Africa in Monrovia, Liberia.

And Ruth was a part of the team leading and organizing and it was an amazing time where we were able to train 24 church leaders from all over Liberia in this process of healing and reconciliation and they today are taking this to their churches and their communities all over the country.

And it's amazing that one week after we were there, one week after God kind of broke in and started this work, the president of Liberia came on national TV to announce the need for a reconciliation process for the nation.

And during the revolution, during the civil wars, two presidents were viciously murdered on live TV and their bodies were dumped.

[21:30] And those bodies were exhumed and given a proper state burial as part of the first step in the process of reconciliation for the nation. And I got to meet Ruth and her daughter Mercy and it was a wonderful time.

And this is because God's people were praying. Your prayers are precious. We covet them.

We can't work without them. We want to thank you for praying. And one of the things that I said early on was that a big part of all this conflict and all the struggle and the strife that happened in Liberia was the fact that the church, rather than being an agent of healing and reconciliation, being a peace builder and addressing the issues of injustice and the things that were done wrong in the country, rather than being a part of the solution in the nation where God had placed it, actually was part of the problem by taking sides and by wanting its own power and its own comfort and its own prestige.

wanting to be a part of the ruling class, the ruling tribe. And that led to a lot of the pain and a lot of the brokenness and it fed the conflict in the nation rather than helping resolve the conflict in the nation.

And this is a dynamic that we find all over the world in places of conflict. It's the 30th, it was just last year, 1994, was the 30th anniversary of the horrific genocide against the Tutsis that happened in Rwanda, which over 100 days, more than a million people were slaughtered in the most horrific ways.

[23:42] part of the process that developed to help the church there because one of the interesting things to know about Rwanda is that in Rwanda, before the genocide, 86% of the population of the nation attended church every Sunday.

It has not only called themselves believers or Christians, but actually attended church every Sunday. And yet, a genocide took place where in some places pastors even killed the Tutsi members of their congregation.

Where Hutu members of the congregation killed Tutsi members of the congregation. And there was, there was a failure in the church to be the people God intended us to be. the church, rather than being a place of healing and reconciliation, became a place that perpetuated the stereotypes, the prejudices, the things that divided the people.

And even gave some doctrinal support for it. And so part of the process that developed for church leaders in Rwanda was actually to put the church on trial.

[25 : 06] They developed a courtroom scene. And so that trial went like this. So the judge sat in the front, the prosecutor came up and read the charges against the church.

And they would say, we the nation stand to accuse the church of failing us. The church has been here for over a hundred years teaching love and respect of human life.

And yet, a genocide has just taken place. the church did almost nothing to prevent or stop this genocide. And worse than that, some leaders and members actually took part in the killing.

Now, we have been waiting for the church to acknowledge its sin. But all we have seen is denials and justifications of their actions and a refusal to take any responsibility.

So, in view of this, Your Honor, these are some of our recommendations. All the churches should be closed. All Bibles should be confiscated. And another group of people should be taken through a process of being trained and given responsibility for the morals of the nation.

[26 : 22] And then the pastors discuss this and try to work with this. And we lead them through a process of saying, what was God's intention for the church?

Who is the church supposed to be in the nation? Now, in the first week of July, we had the first opportunity to host one of these workshops in Gallup, New Mexico.

For Native Americans, we had some Hispanics, some African Americans, Canadians, some white Americans, and one Nepalese person, which was wonderful.

And we trained a Navajo elder in this process, Reverend Richard Silversmith. And he asked if he could rewrite this drama for the North American context.

And this is what Reverend Silversmith wrote. Honorable Judge, we the nation stand to accuse the church of letting us down. The church has been here for 500 years, supposedly teaching love and respect of human life, and yet the nation is more unequal and polarized than ever.

[27 : 51] The church has done nothing to prevent the decimation of our nation. And worse than that, some leaders and members of the church actually took part in it by stealing our land under the cover of biblical doctrine, something called the doctrine of discovery.

They made us feel ashamed of who we are, even though we're image bearers of God. They kidnapped our children to place them in residential schools, supposedly to kill the Indian, but save the man.

They abused our young people and destroyed the children that were born because of it.

They took our valuables in exchange for trinkets and alcohol. And we've been waiting for the church to acknowledge their sin, but all we see is continued denials, justifications of their actions, and a refusal to take any responsibility.

And so even in very recent history, these things continue. the government continues to push us off land that we've been given.

[29 : 26] Into the 1990s, something called the 60s scoop was taking place in Canada where children were kidnapped from indigenous families and put up for adoption for a fee.

And many Christians paid for them. So your honor in view of such atrocities, these are some of our recommendations.

All churches should be closed. Bibles should be confiscated. Another group of people, preferably First Nations leaders, should be given the authority to train all present and future leaders in the morals of the nation, establishing education that incorporates truth, love, and dignity for all humanity, and restores practices of care and healing of the land and ecosystem.

And these recommendations should be carried out immediately. Thank you, your honor. Israel, in the text that we read today, Israel in the Old Testament is a people chosen by God to represent him to the nations.

Israel was supposed to show the world what it means to live as God's people, to live and order life in God's presence. And Israel was to be the model for all the nations of the world that drew all the other nations to God.

[31 : 04] But they failed. they were seduced by the surrounding nations. First, they wanted a king like everyone else.

Then they wanted the lifestyle that everyone else had, the riches that everyone else had, the power like everyone else, the gods like everyone else. They wanted to be just like everyone else.

to be dead. And so now in our text, they find themselves living in exile, a living death. God's life.

So Israel says our bones are dried up and our hope is gone. We are cut off. And friends, Satan's plan for God's people hasn't changed much over time.

God has called the church to be salt and light in the community where it's located. Satan continues to try to snuff out our light and to steal us of our saltiness.

[32 : 13] And we especially see this in countries in conflict. Churches are often, like in Rwanda and Liberia or like in Russia's war in Ukraine or in many other places of the world, rather than addressing the injustices and the issues in the country, they're either focused on heaven, saying no, the church isn't political.

We don't get involved in these things. We're all going to heaven, so the things of this world don't matter. Or they get caught up in internal theological debates and turn in on themselves, and so they have nothing to say to the world around, because they're arguing with themselves all the time.

Or they develop the same sins, the same greed, the same prejudice, the same power struggles, the same immorality, and more and more of just the same as the world around it, so that when people look at the church, they don't see anything different.

And that's Satan's plan. Satan's plan is that there would just be no difference between the church and the community and the world around it. It would just be more of the same.

And that is when the church is in the valley. God's plan is and the God is and the hope is God.

[33 : 54] We're cut off. But Ezekiel's word from the Lord to Israel and God's word to us today isn't a word of hopelessness, it's a word of hope.

God is still a God who can make the driest bones live. God gives Ezekiel this incredible word of hope to Israel in captivity in their living death and he gives us an incredible word of hope for a church that has failed to live up to its calling in the world.

God can make these bones live. And God never gives up on his church. God never changes his plan for his work in the world and God always has the last word.

Do you remember the story in John 20 of Jesus appearing to the disciples after the resurrection? What kind of group were they?

was this a victorious group celebrating Jesus victory? No. It was a discouraged group.

[35 : 20] They were afraid. They were painfully aware of their failure. They had abandoned Jesus in his time of need.

and they had lost all hope. And they were hiding behind locked doors because they were afraid.

And then Jesus appears inside that locked room with the disciples. angels. Now I always say it's a good thing I'm not Jesus. I think if I had been Jesus I probably would have said something along the lines of what is wrong with you?

Don't you get it? I mean I just spent a whole three years of my life pouring into you everything and I've told you over and over and over again what was going to happen that the son of man would be crucified, be handed over, crucified, and on the third day he prays again and what do you do?

You go lock yourselves in a room? Don't you understand anything? Why don't you start over with somebody else? But is that what Jesus said?

[36 : 39] No. He doesn't rebuke them. He doesn't say that he's disappointed in them. He doesn't call them failures. What he said was peace be with you.

As the father has sent me, I'm also sending you. And by this he was saying that God has not changed his plan.

God still believes in his church and his people. And then Jesus does something very amazing. He breathes on them. He breathes on them.

Just like in Genesis 1, where God breathes, or Genesis 2, where God breathes into the man that he made. He comes to life. And just like in Ezekiel 37, where the breath comes and this vast army, God's people, are raised up and come to life.

God's people, and now Jesus breathes on his disciples as he sends them out. And this group of extremely unlikely people go from there and change the whole world.

[38 : 08] people, and one thing I've seen over and over in my ministry in Ukraine and now in this work we do with Healing Hearts Transforming Nations, is that God is a God of hope in every situation.

Christ's accomplished work on the cross has won the victory. He has brought us life from our death and sin. He has healed our wounds. He has provided an answer to our pain.

And God's word to the church in the valley today is that he is still the God of hope in all situations. He is the God who can still bring life to dry bones and he never will give up on his church as his agent to fulfill his mission for our lost, hurting, and death-filled world.

So God's word to the church today is that you are the light of the world.

You are the hope of your nation. And God believes in you and he sends you with his breath of love.

[39 : 28] Let's pray. Heavenly Father, thank you for not giving up on us. Thank you for not leaving us in our fear, leaving us in our comfort.

Thank you for not leaving us in our pain and in our sin. thank you so much for being the God who brings life from death and who can make dry bones live and breathe again.

This morning, Lord, we pray for your church, for this church here, but also for your church around the world, that you would be breathing life into your church so that it would be your faithful agent of healing and reconciliation with you, with each other, and with all creation, here and around the world, for your glory, and in Jesus' name, amen.

Amen.