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## *The Story: The Kingdoms' Fall* Ezekiel 36:22-28

I just flew back this afternoon from sunny, southern CA. I loved watching the sky every night for that stunning sunset cutting through the smog. Here in WA, we have our own beauty. I love searching the sky when it's dark on one horizon and bright on another. Do you know what I'm searching for? (A rainbow)

Today's message is a search for the rainbow-- for that piercing light out of the rain or as pastor Larry said, out of the fog. It may seem dark, but the promised rainbow is appearing. We are in Ezekiel, and Ezekiel brings the message that God is about to act. He lets God's people in on the plan. There's more kings and destruction, but the doom comes with a word of hope... A word of hope that most of the prophets spoke! So let's briefly walk back through the words of doom and see the revival that God has in store.

Remember, we have been studying The Story because we want to understand and be shaped by this overarching story of God. We want to be able to talk about how Jesus has always been at work and how he is at work today. The Story is certifiably true. The Bible records world history and is proven true through archaeological study. These kings really happened, and this is the history of Israel, the history of God's people. So I encourage you to take this story in with willingness to be changed and with the intention to show others how Jesus is at work. I hope you're practicing telling these stories in your LifeGroups and around your dinner tables. So here we go. We are in Ezekiel, in the middle of a downpour and looking for the rainbow.

Read Text: Ezekiel 36:22-23

Therefore say to the house of Israel, "This is what the Sovereign LORD says: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am going to do these things, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations where you have gone. I will show the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, the name you have profaned among them. Then the nations will know that I am the LORD, declares the Sovereign LORD, when I show myself holy through you before their eyes."

God is on a mission to make his name known in the world. Ezekiel is currently in exile when he writes this message—that is, he is away from Jerusalem in the hands of an enemy nation. These two verses remind us why they are there. Three times

God says his people have, "profaned God's name among the nations." This is now the 4th week we've been reading about all the horrible things God's people did to profane his name. There's a timeline in your bulletin that will give you the actual dates from the last month and help you follow the big story. For the last month, I'd say the story boils down to this: God keeps his promises. And the people don't.

Three weeks ago with Pastor Mark we were at the point in history when Israel was divided into the two kingdoms: Israel to the north and Judah to the south. That's like the floor of the sanctuary and the balcony dividing into two countries. (931BC Division of Kingdom). We studied last week that the North was destroyed because none of their kings followed God, and God brought upon them all the curses that he said he would if they didn't follow him (722 BC Destruction of Israel).

This week is a reprise of that same unfortunate story happening again in the southern kingdom of Judah. Judah was unique because it had Jerusalem— the city where the king's palace was and more importantly, where God's temple was. His presence had filled that temple back at the beginning of our timeline when Solomon was king (God fills temple). But here 200 years later it's a different story. Chapter 17 in The Story started this week with Manasseh, an evil king who Fall of Judah, "was worse than all the idolatrous nations" (697BC Manasseh). After a brief reprieve with Manasseh's grandson, Josiah, we're back down the path to the demise and exile of Judah.

Eventually King Nebuchadnezzar from Babylon moves in to Judah. The government King Neb sets up rebels against him, and Neb sends in his bodyguard and some thugs to burn down Jerusalem. The destruction that God had been warning about through the prophets finally happens. That's the destruction of Jerusalem. (586BC Destruction of Jerusalem)

Now God's been promising his presence to this people, these 12 tribes, and this particular Promised Land since Genesis. And he promised through them that all the nations of the earth would be blessed (Genesis 12: 1-3). He promised that a descendant of David would sit on the throne forever. How's God going to make good on his promises with Jerusalem destroyed? That's what we're looking at today in Ezekiel. While Ezekiel is in exile, God gives him visions of what's happening in Jerusalem and why it's happening. So let's ask God to show us his hope.

Our passage today says that God is going to act because of "the holiness of my great name." You'll see that in verse 22 and repeated in verse 23 (a sign that this is very important). God's action is about God being known as holy. All the nations of the earth aren't blessed and don't know God because God's people failed to follow him. See what's at stake! All the people of all the world from this point in history forward are at the threat of eternal separation from God. People can't know who God really is if the people who say they're following him mess up the message. So, verse 22 says, God is moving in "to do these things" "for the sake of his holy name" ... "then the nations will know that I am the Lord."

It seemed to me the first time I read that God in verse 22 was going to do "these things," I thought it was saying that the nations would know who he is through the violent judgment that's about to be poured out on Jerusalem. (I was not excited to preach that message.) But that's not the case at all!

The action God is going to take to show himself holy isn't all the destruction that he brings upon Jerusalem, though he will bring it. He wants Ezekiel to give the message that the action that's going to prove his holiness is going to come after the destruction, the rainbow if you will. God is concerned that the whole world know who he is. The proof that God is who he is comes when he revives the Kingdom of God. And it's not just Jerusalem that's going to be rebuilt. God's going to fulfill all his promises, and God is going to make good on the ones that we couldn't keep. Let's listen in to what God has in mind to make himself known.

Read text: Ezekiel 36:24-28

For I will take you out of the nations; I will gather you from all the countries and bring you back to your own land. I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. You will live in the land I gave your forefathers; you will be my people, and I will be your God.

The fall of the kingdom of Judah leads to the hope of a revived kingdom. And God's Kingdom requires two revivals: a revival of a people and a revival of a place. At this point, Ezekiel is looking at a sin-sick people and an about-to-be destroyed land. Pretty doomy and gloomy... so to show himself holy, God's going to give new life—revival—to his people and to his place.

First, God's going to revive a people. What happened to the people Israel? They were exiled. So look at what we just read. God is going to get this scattered group of people back together. Who is he talking about bringing in? Look at verse 24! People from all the nations! The descendants of the 12 tribes are spread out in exile, so he's going to gather them back. But God is also going to gather back people from every nation and tribe and tongue—all the people that Israel was intended to bless with the witness of who God is. If you're in Bible Study Fellowship you just saw the picture of this promise in Revelation 7 when all the nations are gathered together for eternity. God's going to revive a kingdom by gathering a people.

But it's not enough of a revival to bring all these people back together. They'll just go back to idols, syncretizing all their religions to form a confusing non-religion where no god is the holy God. So the next step is, verse 25, that God is going to "sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean." Is it because they're dusty from their journey back together? No, God is talking about their hearts.

Keep reading: "I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you." Pastor Larry talked last week about how we can't trust our hearts because the Bible says they are deceitful. Without God, my heart says things like, "You deserve it. Eat the rest of that chocolate." Or on the other end of the spectrum my heart says, "Don't sit down and read tonight. You haven't done enough. There are still dishes in the sink." My heart is indulgent; it's a slave driver and a harsh judge. Allie Hymas posted a picture this week saying, "My heart is a liar."

It's our sin-sick hearts that lead us from simple self-indulgence, to lies, to full on slavery... that eventually lead whole cultures to idolatry. It was sin-sick hearts that led to the fall of Israel and the fall of Judah. It's the lying heart that says, "Maybe I'd be richer with a different government. Maybe their God is more powerful than mine. God's law isn't good for me. I'll tweak it to suit my passions." And so God offers his solution to our sin-sick-hearts: revival. God will give us new hearts.

Verses 26 and 27 read, "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws."

Our good Father knows that we cannot choose life with our sinful, stony hearts. So God says he's going to move us to choose life. Our new hearts are not just so we can choose better things, but new hearts so that we can be the dwelling place for God's Spirit!

If you want to know what it looks like to be revived by God, look up when you get home Ezekiel 37, the very next passage, and the end of chapter 17. God shows Ezekiel what it looks like when God revives people. God gathers us together and gives us heart transplants. He wants his name to be known in all the world, so he begins the revival of his kingdom by reviving a people.

And now as for the revival of a place where the people will dwell, let's look back at verse 28 "You will live in the land I gave your forefathers; you will be my people, and I will be your God." Then through verse 35, God describes the revived land with a beautiful city, fruitful gardens. It's a replanted and prosperous place.

It's tempting to think this promise was fulfilled when Jerusalem's wall is rebuilt and the temple completed in 349BC. That was certainly a partial fulfillment of God's promise to have Jews back living in the land of Jerusalem. But do you think the city described here is the way Jerusalem was when Rome ruled over the Jews right at the turn of first century? Or by the tyrannical Nero?

How about Jerusalem as we see it today with that all the fighting between Israel and Palestine? Did God fulfill his promise to rebuild a place for his kingdom to be a place of war? No!

The fulfillment of Ezekiel 36 is still to come. The city described here is the eternal city—the city of the new heavens and the new earth, the city of Revelation 21 and 22. God is making for us that city. A city like no city we have seen before. This is the place that Jesus calls, “the kingdom of God.” 600 years after Ezekiel, Jesus would come and proclaim that the kingdom of God has come and is at the same time yet to come. Remember the promises of the prophets? Ezekiel’s, Jeremiah’s, Isaiah’s from last week? Of these Jesus said, “Today this has been fulfilled in your hearing.” If that’s the case, then why does this world not look very revived? Because Jesus initiated the work of reviving the kingdom, promised he would come back to finish it personally, and in the meantime gave us His Spirit for the mission to make it known to the world. In crude terms, Jesus gave us the heart transplant and put us to the work of physical therapy with him!

God is making himself known by reviving his kingdom. He is reviving a people and reviving a place for them. Your invitation is to get busy building the Kingdom with him! How do we do that?

First, allow God to revive your heart. Cry out for rescue! Begin by admitting the ways in which your heart is sin-sick. Confess (and I have to do this daily) the ways your heart lies to you and the way you act on those promptings.

Then, ask God to revive your vision of what his kingdom looks like, and get to work as a builder of the kingdom! By the power of God’s Spirit in you, gather with him the people from all nations who will follow him. Who in your life needs to know that God is in the reviving business? That he has given us the choice of life or death? Who have you told what it looks like to have life?

Larry shared with you my story last week when I experienced God’s reviving power when I was at the end of my rope last Thursday night. I told friends that Saturday morning how that Thursday night went—but only all the bad stuff... the diaper blow-out, the emotional low. After Larry preached Kim told me, “I hadn’t heard the end of the story.” Forgive me! I’m so quick to meet people in the low points and fail to testify to the reviving power of Jesus! The IF:Gathering posted this picture on Instagram, Monday: “It’s not your story of struggle. it’s his story of rescue.” Don’t make a big deal of your story of sin. Don’t sensationalize your story with all you’ve done wrong. Don’t give them more of the rain. Point them to the promised hope—the rainbow—of God! Let people know you’ve been revived! Make God your big story!

God also invites you to be a part of reviving the place of his kingdom— this world. We get to revive God’s world whenever we follow God’s blueprint for his Kingdom. Remember all the things Jesus says about the Kingdom— the hungry are fed. The orphan finds a home. Justice is rendered. As people revived with new hearts, people with the Spirit of God living in you, you get to do eternal work every day—to make God’s name known by reviving his kingdom! And it’s so much simpler than I think we give it credit for.

We see a beautiful, renewed land in God's kingdom. So Monday, when I saw a woman clearing out all the dead leaves off plants, creating a beautiful landscape for when Safeway (finally) returns, she was building the kingdom, taking this little corner of land God has on loan to her care and making it beautiful. Jesus says people are comforted in his kingdom. So my friend did some serious Kingdom building when she spent 2 days this week just spending time with her friend who has cancer. The kingdom of God has ethical standards, so one of our elders experiences the kingdom every week when he meets with his LifeGroup of business colleagues up in Southcenter. They talk about Jesus in the context of their work. Sound too ordinary to be the business of the Kingdom?

Listen to how another friend of mine has built the Kingdom. He grew up woodworking with his dad, making beautiful things out of the wood God gave them to work with. He spent a lot of time studying about God under local teachers. He went fishing with his friends, experiencing the kingdom through the wind and waves and feeding a lot of hungry people with what they caught. He built the kingdom around dinner tables where he made space for people others didn't like, and he told friends who were politicians and prostitutes that God's kingdom is for them.

Does that still sound mundane, just a little too ordinary? That was Jesus' life. And he lived that ordinary life so that it might be possible that we could exchange our sin-sick hearts for revived places where God can dwell.

Jesus did what the kings of Judah were incapable of doing: as both man and God, Jesus stayed in unbroken relationship with God. He lived a sinless life— there was no need to cleanse Jesus; so he can cleanse us. He followed God's law perfectly; so when he died on the cross, his death was the sufficient sacrifice to cover our sins. Jesus' death enables us to have the heart transplant we so desperately need. And he was raised from the dead and appeared to people in order to give us the message that the kingdom Ezekiel describes is the kingdom he's coming back to establish. The throne that was ashes in Jerusalem is now filled by Jesus on the throne. God is reviving his kingdom. God is gathering and reviving a people, and he's reviving a place for God's kingdom—our world. He's doing it through us using the same strategies that he lived out when he was here: working, creating, studying, fishing, healing, hospitality.

It's our ordinary life—in our going if you remember—that bears witness to who God is. Dallas Willard says it this way, "The obviously well-kept secret of the "ordinary" is that it is made to be a receptacle of the divine, a place where the life of God flows." Go through the world not just doing good, but bringing the revival of Jesus in the way that you live so that "the nations will know The LORD"; that's what God is after.

You have two invitations through Jesus that fulfill this passage of Ezekiel, that turn the Fall of Judah into the Rise of God's kingdom and make his name known: receive God's revived heart; and build God's revived kingdom.

God's promise to us here in Ezekiel is: "You will be my people, and I will be your God." Verse 36, "I the LORD have spoken, and I will do it." That's God's sure promise to you. Will you invite him in? Will you make his name known? Jesus is coming back. Let us get a kingdom ready with him and for him.