

Welcome

How often have you said the phrase "that's just how I am"? It's something we've all said at some point - usually when we're confronted with a particularly ugly aspect of ourselves. I've heard it about a bad temper. I've heard it about some bad habits. I've said it about myself when it comes to my self-image (more about that later).

When we pop off at someone, or when we indulge that bad behavior and we know it's wrong, but we apologize for it by saying, "That's just how I am", what we're really saying is "Deep down, I don't think I can change."

This is a particularly religious issue: can we really change? Not just superficially, but at a deep, core level? If I have a bad temper, is the best I can do to try really hard not to *show* that temper, or is it maybe possible to be transformed, to receive an entirely new temperament? If I desire things I shouldn't, is the best I can do to try really hard not to indulge that desire, or is it possible to transform those desires? If, like me, you struggle to feel worthy of love, is the best for us to pretend, to keep those feelings of self-doubt buried? Or is it possible that we might learn to see ourselves differently?

In other words, today we're going to talk about conversion and resurrection. We're going to insist that "That's just the way I am" isn't good enough for us. We're going to ask God to transform us from the inside out, to change us at the deepest possible level.

As we sing today, consider the deep places in your life that you have felt are "just the way you are". What are the spaces that you think are beyond help, beyond hope? Where, if you could, would you ask for God's impossible transformative power?

Message

For me, the deep, bedrock identity stuff that feels impossible to change, the "just the way I am" stuff is insecurity. I don't know when it started, but for long time growing up, I felt genuinely unlovable. I was confident that, at the end of the day, I wasn't worthy of love. I was just a loser. That's just who I was.

My conviction colored every relationship I had - looking back I had a number of great friends in school, but I couldn't embrace them as friends because I didn't see myself as worthy of friendship. It colored my religion - I was legalistic because I couldn't imagine that God would actually just love me - how could he? Obviously God would only like me if I did things to make God happy.

[Core Beliefs] Psychologists and counselors call these bedrock things "core beliefs" because they're deep down in the very core of who we are. They're like our personality DNA. They're so deep within us they're difficult to recognize, let alone change. That's why we prefer simply to say, "That just how I am."

But friends, this is the season of Lent. It is the time of the year we face our Sin head on, drag it into the light of God's truth that it can shrivel and die. Our series this year is called "Lent is for Losers", and we're exploring the failures of God's people throughout the years. In their failures, we find our own reflected, and we see how God takes our failures on himself. It's only by admitting we're losers that we can embrace God's rescue. Or as Jesus said: only the sick need a doctor.

[Map so Far] We began this series in the Garden of Eden, with the first sin, where we saw that we tend to believe God is holding out on us, not that God wants the best for us. Then we met Abram, who showed us that what God requires is not credentials, but faithful response. Then we thirsted with Israel in the desert. We saw that faith goes beyond our feelings to be grounded in God's character. Last week, we met Samuel, who warned us that our tendency to assume our own perspective is right is a deadly pride.

[Bones come to life] Today we're going to talk about core beliefs. We're going to see that "That's just the way I am" is sin, that God wants to transform us from the bones to the skin, but until we admit that we *need* that transformation, until we begin to *believe* it's possible, we cannot be healed.

[Scripture Slide] So today, we're going to hear from the prophet Ezekiel... turn to Ezekiel 37 with me. Ezekiel lived during one of the most traumatic events in Israel's history, an event we now call the Exile. At the time of the Exile, the two giant superpowers of the world were Babylon and Egypt - and Israel was stuck right between them.

Israel often found itself caught in the machinations between Egypt and Babylon. The king of Babylon would march his army to Judah and threaten them with destruction unless Judah paid them off (which they would, mostly). But of course God's people got tired of this arrangement, so they started looking to some of the other nations around them to form alliances.

The prophets warned them not to do this. They said, "put your faith in God, not in the nations around you (and their gods)." But God's people didn't listen.

Instead of staying faithful to the covenant God made with them clear back at Sinai, they allied themselves with the gods and nations around them - including Egypt.

You can imagine how well that sat with Babylon. So in 586 BC, Babylon marched to Jerusalem and destroyed the whole city. They tore down the walls and sent the cultural elites - the politicians and the priests and the economic leaders as slaves back to Babylon. Then, they destroyed the Jewish Temple, God's house. They looted it and shipped it all back to Babylon, leaving behind only rubble. Thousands died and God's people were left in ruins - personally, culturally, physically.

And the thing is, they all understood this was *their* fault. This was the consequence of their sin. They had wanted a life without God as their god. They had refused again and again to follow God, to be faithful to the covenant, to live as God's people, so finally, God gave them what they wanted. God left. And destruction was their reward.

Ezekiel lived through this. He was one of the prophets warning Israel to remain faithful to God. And after the Exile, he is the prophet who promises God isn't done with them. Chapter 37 is a powerful vision of hope and renewal. But it begins in loss, hopelessness and death. Let's read, beginning in verse 1:

The LORD took hold of me, and I was carried away by the Spirit of the LORD to a valley filled with bones. He led me all around among the bones that covered the valley floor. They were scattered everywhere across the ground and were completely dried out. Then he asked me, "Son of man, can these bones become living people again?"

"O Sovereign LORD," I replied, "you alone know the answer to that."

Ezekiel sees a valley filled with bones that are "completely dried out". They're old bones, bleached in the sun, devoid of life. I want to skip a few verses just for a moment because God tells Ezekiel what these bones are:

Then he said to me, "Son of man, these bones represent the people of Israel. They are saying, 'We have become old, dry bones—all hope is gone. Our nation is finished.'

These are the bones of the exiles. They are the people of God who died because of their faithlessness. But they're also the people of Israel who are still alive, those living with the consequences of the Exile. The people who have seen their whole world torn apart as a result of their own sinfulness.

They feel as though their faithlessness is too deep in their bones to be healed or changed. You can imagine asking them what's next for them and them just shrugging. "It's not like tomorrow

will be any different. We *can't* be faithful. We tried over and over and nothing changes. Faithlessness is just in our bones. It's hardwired into our DNA."

Have you ever felt that way? Like Sin is just in your DNA, like there's nothing you can do about it?

So God brings the prophet to Israel's boneyard. He sees the sin spread out before him, death as far as his eye can see. And God asks a simple question:

"Can these bones become living people again?"

Can these bones live again?

Is there life here? Hope here? Or is this "just the way they are"?

The prophet replies as we do when confronted with all those core beliefs we carry deep in our bones: "Uh... only God knows."

How half-hearted is that response? It's like we *know* the answer is no, we can't really change, there's no hope, this is just the way I am, all that's left is these bleached bones of my sin, but we can't quite admit that when God says, "Do you think I can bring life here?"

So we just shrug and say, "You know."

So for all of us who live in the desert valley, among the bleached bones, for all of us who feel like this is "just the way we are", let's read on:

Then he said to me, "Speak a prophetic message to these bones and say, 'Dry bones, listen to the word of the LORD! This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Look! I am going to put breath into you and make you live again! I will put flesh and muscles on you and cover you with skin. I will put breath into you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the LORD.' "

God promises that not only will these bodies be resurrected to life, but they "will know that I am the LORD." Not only is God restoring life, God is restoring vocation. They will know God, know their relationship to God, know their place in the world.

This is a healing of all the wounds of the Exile. God is wiping away the last vestiges of their sin. Let's read on:

So I spoke this message, just as he told me. Suddenly as I spoke, there was a rattling noise all across the valley. The bones of each body came together and attached themselves as complete skeletons. Then as I watched, muscles and flesh formed over the bones. Then skin formed to cover their bodies, but they still had no breath in them.

Then he said to me, "Speak a prophetic message to the winds, son of man. Speak a prophetic message and say, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Come, O breath, from the four winds! Breathe into these dead bodies so they may live again.' "

So I spoke the message as he commanded me, and breath came into their bodies. They all came to life and stood up on their feet—a great army.

Then he said to me, "Son of man, these bones represent the people of Israel. They are saying, 'We have become old, dry bones—all hope is gone. Our nation is finished.' Therefore, prophesy to them and say, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: O my people, I will open your graves of exile and cause you to rise again. Then I will bring you back to the land of Israel. When this happens, O my people, you will know that I am the LORD. I will put my Spirit in you, and you will live again and return home to your own land. Then you will know that I, the LORD, have spoken, and I have done what I said. Yes, the LORD has spoken!' " -- Ezekiel 37:1-14

God comes to our valley of dry bones and asks, "Can these bones live?" And the prophet speaks words of life over the bones, and the bones come to life. And then, the prophet offers the Breath of God, the Spirit of God, the very life of creation itself so that the bones are no longer dead, dry and bleached, but are once again a whole, healthy people.

Friends, God wants to transform us at the deepest level. God wants to reach into the very bones of us, to the sin that's been formed in us since we were very small. Sin that perhaps we can't even see because "it's just the way we are."

My insecurity was that sort of sin. It was a failure to believe God, that I am made in God's image, that I am loved unconditionally, that God has called me to play a part in God's world. I could believe none of these things because I saw myself as fundamentally unworthy of any of this.

It was around the time I graduated high school and looked toward college I could begin to see that my bones were dry, bleached and dead. When I could hear God's voice asking, "Can these bones live?" I began to believe that I was worthy of love, and I found a new confidence to be myself. By my second year of college, I was a totally different person than I had been. I was a

better friend, I was less legalistic (because I was more confident in my relationship with God). Some of my high school friends barely recognized me.

I know what you're thinking... "Oh that's it? It's that easy?"

Well, no. Even a year is a long process of change. And it was a process of continually opening myself to the healing power of God's Spirit, presenting my dry bones to God and asking for God to breathe life into me.

And while I can point to that first year of college as the major point of healing for me, I still to this day find pockets of those old dry bones in my spirit. That old insecurity will come creeping back into my life, whispering that I'm a fraud, that I'm unlovable, that everyone can tell I'm a big phony. And when that happens, I have to grab those dry bones and bring them before God.

I have to wait for God to speak, to ask, "Can these bones live?"

And then I ask God to breathe life into these bones again.

This is why Spiritual practices are so important. These practices help us open our lives to the work of the Spirit. God's work of resurrection is ongoing. The Spirit is always breathing new life into us. That's why seasons like Lent are so vital. This is like Spring Cleaning for our spirits. We open up all the closets and cupboards and forgotten old wardrobes looking for those dry, dead bones so that we can pull them out into God's light.

God comes to us, sitting with our bones, and asks, "Can these bones live?"

What God is really asking is, "Will you let me give these bones life?" Will we open our lives to God's life-giving Spirit, that we might be knit back together and restored to our vocation?

Examen + Confession + Communion

This hope of resurrection is what brings us to the Communion table...

On the Cross, Jesus entered into the valley of dry bones with us. Jesus embraced the pain of death that we might know God's Spirit breathes life even into the grave. You don't have to be a member of Catalyst to receive communion. If you are willing to let God breathe new life into you, then you're welcome to come forward.

Examen

1. Where have you experienced God's life this week?
2. What are the dry bones in your life?
3. How might you be tempted this week to settle for "That's just how I am"?
4. How can you invite God to breath life into you this week?

Confession:

Leader: Our bones are dry and dead. We have said, "That's just the way we are". But you have asked, "Can these bones live?"

People: Lord, breathe new life into us.

Leader: We have ignored your voice, calling us to the responsibility of living in your freedom.

People: Lord, open our ears.

Leader: We have stained our souls by our action and inaction.

People: Cleanse us, Lord.

Leader: We are broken by disease, bruised by the sins of others, weakened and unable to repair ourselves.

People: Heal us, Lord.

Leader: We ignore your call to center our lives in you, and so are deaf to the hopes and cries of the poor, the sick, the needy, and the earth.

People: Ground us, Lord!

Leader: When we confess our sinful ways, God abundantly pardons. In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven.

People: In the name of Jesus Christ, we are all forgiven

Prayer

Assignment + Blessing

Psalm 130

