

Advent – Joy comes from experiencing God’s grace December 22, 2019

Overarching theme: Living a year in God’s presence through the practice of following Jesus.

Instructions: When using this material as teacher, feel free to pick and choose the point you want to emphasize in the lesson. The format of the curriculum is designed to have an abundance of information in which to refer as desired.

Core Point: In this Advent season, we see how Jesus was sent from the Father to bring onto earth the start of the Kingdom of God. Jesus was sent, and in that example, Jesus sends his disciples out into the world to deliver the Kingdom of God by what is presented, said, and done.

Book of Ezekiel: The book of Ezekiel is about a prophet who receives 4 visions from God. At the core of these visions, is a message of how Israel’s sin brought them to destruction through government take over and how God will someday restore them as a nation again. Ezekiel himself was from a priestly class and was dispersed into exile by the Babylonians. His prophetic ministry started sometime after 597 B.C., when Babylon was the ruling authority over the Jewish territory. He probably saw these visions while in exile. Exile, was a common practice of the Babylonians when they conquered a nation. They would disperse the smartest and wealthiest out of their home into another territory of Babylon. Exile would result in a weakened conquered nation that would come under authority of Babylon.

Reflect on this Scripture:

Ezekiel 37:1-14 (NRSV)

³⁷ The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. ² He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. ³ He said to me, “Mortal, can these bones live?” I answered, “O Lord God, you know.” ⁴ Then he said to me, “Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. ⁵ Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. ⁶ I will lay sinews on 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.” ⁷ So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. ⁸ I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. ⁹ Then he said to me, “Prophecy to the breath, prophecy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord

God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.”¹⁰ I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.¹¹ Then he said to me, “Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.’¹² Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel.¹³ And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people.¹⁴ I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act, says the Lord.”

Questions to Ponder:

- What jumps out at you from this passage?
- What is the valley of dry bones?
- What do you think the Breath is?
- What does the Breath do?
- What is the meaning of this powerful story in the O.T.?

Commentary:

The imagery of the valley of dry bones is symbolic of the exile of the Israelites. This is the third vision of Ezekiel out of a total of four. The valley in which the vision happens is the same valley of his commissioning to prophesy in Ezekiel 3:22-23: “²²Then the hand of the Lord was upon me there; and he said to me, Rise up, go out into the valley, and there I will speak with you. ²³So I rose up and went out into the valley; and the glory of the Lord stood there, like the glory that I had seen by the river Chebar; and I fell on my face.” We do not know what valley is specifically identified.

The Israelites’ territory was taken over by the Babylonians in 597 B.C. The Babylonians, under the rule of King Nebuchadnezzar, dispersed the wealthy and educated into other areas of the Babylonian kingdom. This dispersion left the territory poor and powerless. The result of the exile for the Israelites was paralyzing and left them as if they were dead/lifeless as a nation of God. The hope came in the story when God breathed the spirit into the Israelite army. That breath of life started to bring them together, bone by bone, joint by joint, and sinew by sinew. You might be able to image the angels singing, “the arm bone is connected to the shoulder bone, the ankle bone is connected to the foot bone...” With God’s spirit, the Israelite nation will be restored and at full force again, someday.

For us, this is an illustration of how God’s spirit can renew us when we are in a state of spiritual dryness. God’s Spirit stirring in us can restore hope in the future

and result in a life of joy. A joy that comes from realizing that God cares for us and will work in our lives. This too will pass and a new day will come.

Questions to Ponder for accountability in the group:

What do you get out of this vision of Ezekiel for your life?

When do you find yourself in spiritual dryness? What is it like?

How do you get out of your valley of dry bones?

What does being joyful mean to you?

What can you do to help others find joy?

Activity of for the life of a disciple:

1. Remember to find encouragement for the day by reading the daily devotional from FUMC.
2. Focus on this scripture this week: Psalm 28:7 (NRSV)
“The Lord is my strength and my shield; in him my heart trusts; so I am helped, and my heart exults, and with my song I give thanks to him.”
3. How can you bring joy into your heart and into the hearts of others this week?
4. **No Learning classes Dec 29, 2019. Only one service at 9:30 am on Dec 29, 2019 in the Ministry Center.**