

SERMON TITLE- "Claiming The Territory"

TEXT- Joshua 24:14-15

PREACHED AT- Neighbourhood Church

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We began this sermon series with a very strange vision of the prophet Ezekiel's-

The hand of the LORD was upon 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. Ezekiel 37:1-2

It's the valley of the dry bones and the inspiration of the old spiritual that we sang as children. But this is not just a strange and wonderful sight it is a very specific metaphor that is immediately explained to Ezekiel.

Then he said to me: "Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, `Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.'" Ezekiel 37:11

It is the metaphor of the household of Israel. It is in big trouble. But God has a command to give Ezekiel-

Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones and say to them, `Dry bones, hear the word of the LORD!'" Ezekiel 37:4

So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I was prophesying, there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone to bone. Ezekiel 37:7

We live in a world of brokenness- a brokenness that reaches deep into the souls of everything around us. Where does one even start? But the Bible is clear- we are people who have a hope. There is life to be had.

So far we have looked at the various pieces that God wants us to begin connecting together- bone by bone.

1. First get our relationship with God set right.
2. Second get our relationship with our neighbours in order.
3. Make a plan/count the cost

There are very specific things we need to do to get this entity back together in the proper order but a big part of the assignment is understanding the rules of how this body called the "household of God" operates. With a bit of that understanding things actually can begin to make sense and we can do our assignments with confidence and hope.

Today's sermon is also as much about understanding as it is instruction.

It begins by going back to the picture of the household and remembering that it is based on the concept of the house as a building. A household represents a building with walls, doors and windows.

It is about a very specific space and the space has boundaries.

It needs these boundaries to protect those inside

- from the elements
- from the dangers of society- ie thieves
- from spiritual danger

But it is about more than just protecting us- it is also about who we are and defining ourselves. It is why we spend time painting the walls and hanging pictures and arranging the furniture.

When God rebuilds the household, part of the process is about designing it to who we are.

This means that-

#1. We Need To Chose What Type Of Household We Will Have

This is a fundamental aspect of the household of God and the choice is put before God's people repeatedly. One of the most famous stories of the choice is in the book of Joshua. It comes at the very end of the people of taking over the land of Israel.

In some ways it seems like an odd time to ask that choice question. It's like asking a person what kind of house they would like to have after the house has already been built.

But that is how it happened. At the very end of his life- after the majority of the building assignment is complete- Joshua The House Builder calls the people together and preaches a sermon. Its conclusion is this-

Now fear the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your forefathers worshiped beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. Joshua 24:14-15a

That is the challenge to the people- who will you serve? The Israelite had come from a land of idols and were now living in the “house” that God had provided for them.

The question that they were now being reminded of is “what kind of furniture are you going to bring into the house?”

It is a reminder that the outward structure is only one part of the house. It is obviously important but the inside defines it just as fundamentally.

We need to choose what we bring in.

Now you would think that this decision was made a long time ago. In some ways it was and in some ways it was not. God put the household together. The old one, in Egypt was not working very well so choosing to move to a new house wasn't much of a choice. The new house was a place “flowing with milk and honey.” Everyone signed up for the move to the new house.

But at another level the choice of what kind of furniture to bring along is a separate question.

So what kind of furniture are you going to bring into this new household? Joshua asks the people to carefully think about the decoration. This is not fluff- it is very important!

The furniture you put into your house defines its character.

Joshua reminds the Israelites that the furniture of Egypt does not belong in this household. It is the furniture of idols and all that accompanied them.

The furniture that belongs to this household is to grow out of our twin commands- love the Lord our God and love our neighbour as ourselves.

And what does that furniture look like? It is the fruit of the Spirit-

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Galatians 5:22-23

Who wouldn't want to be part of a household that was decorated like that. Put the right furniture in to begin with, furniture that grows out of a right relationship with God and His commands.

It is clear from the context of Joshua's challenge that some of the Israelites had brought some of the old furniture along.

“Get rid of that stuff!” Joshua tells them. “It doesn't belong in this new household.”

Somehow, that old furniture found its way into the new household- probably because it was all the people had. New house- old furniture. It doesn't fit together.

But in this example, Joshua reminds the people that the comfortable old furniture need to be replaced and God actually provides new stuff.

Take this new household seriously- start it right.

But there is another reason for Joshua to put out the challenge. I think everyone will understand-

#2. Every Household Needs Cleaning Periodically

No matter how well we start off- every household begins to accumulate junk. Some of it is purely junk that fills up our storage closets and eventually spills over into our living areas. From time to time we need to go into those closets and get rid of those things that are just not needed any more.

But there is another aspect to household cleaning that is more serious. No matter how careful we are in starting things off right things that are actually bad can start to take up residence in the household. Those people who have pets know that if things are left alone- fleas can quickly find your home a very pleasant habitat. They turn a great home into a very unpleasant place.

Taking the home metaphor and applying it to our lives- a similar thing can easily take place. We start our lives off with the best of intentions but somehow the “fleas” have a way of taking up residence.

Even with a clear desire to put God first in our lives- the old way of doing things is so natural and so easy to fall back into that it soon becomes part of the “new” household. This

furniture is the “Egyptian” counterpart of the furniture that is to rise out of Godly foundations. This list is given as well.

The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. Galatians 5:19-21

It is a pretty grim looking list and we might be tempted to think, “Well at least I’m not that bad. Look at it- **idolatry, witchcraft, orgies.** That’s not me- thank goodness!”

But just a second- the list does have some extreme pieces but that is not all. It also contains- **discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy.** We might not see every one of these in their full blown glory but I doubt that there is anyone who doesn’t recognize some of this furniture and know that it is part of the furniture of their household.

This stuff needs cleaning from time to time. The Israelites needed their house cleaning and we need our household cleaned up.

But there is a phenomenon that we need to be aware of whenever we see this. It is sobering but very real.

When an evil spirit comes out of a man, it goes through arid places seeking rest and does not find it. Then it says, “I will return to the house I left.” When it arrives, it finds the house swept clean and put in order. Then it goes and takes seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there. And the final condition of that man is worse than the first. Luke 11:24-26

Everyone knows that the house needs cleaning and serious cleaning at times. It is not just Christians who know this and do clean-ups.

But everyone who has been around for a while also knows what Jesus is getting at here. Just a cleaning without an eye to the future can just be part of a vicious cycle.

Years ago I spent some time working in bush camps. In one of these camps there were a group of men who spent their non-working lives in Vancouver’s Skid Row. In fact one of them

was my partner and enjoyed talking about his lifestyle. He was very frank about it. “You can’t keep it up, down there. You need to dry out from time to time. Working in a dry bush camp is perfect. I can make money and my body can recover- then I can go back and enjoy myself again.”

It’s not hard to see that in this case the condition of the man was clearly on a degenerating downward spiral.

At less dramatic levels however we can all understand it however. We know what it is like to make great plans for better ways of doing things- only to fail and give up.

In this example the “clean-up” program really doesn’t do what it is supposed to.

So what is the solution?

In the Joshua story a solution is given and it comes in one of the most famous phrases of the OT. Once Joshua has laid out the challenge to the people he declared-

But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD. Joshua 24:15b

This really is one of the great sayings in the Bible and over 1000s of years it has been made into plaques and hung on countless walls.

But in the context of what we have been saying what is Joshua doing? He is “certifying” his position.

And this leads to the last point today.

#3. The Household Needs Certification

Once the character of the household is established and even when it has received a significant renovation- a certification is a very valuable thing to happen.

What is certification? It is a public statement of position. Doctors have certification papers on their walls to tell you that they actually did go to medical school. Valuable pieces of art have certifications that go along with them.

A lot of things that have an important status attached to them come with documents or other indications of authenticity.

Now I need to add a disclaimer at the very beginning- certification without substance is not worth very much. People soon discovered that putting an alarm company sticker on your window might scare a thief off without having to go through the expense of actually paying for the monitoring.

Certification needs to be a representation of substance.

So why does the household of God need it?

1. For Protection

Just as the alarm sticker on the window should warn the thief that the house is protected and not even to bother with a forced entry- a certification send a signal to those who would undermine the household that this is a place that is under protection.

The most dramatic symbol of protection in the Bible was the Passover blood that was to be painted on the doorposts of the homes of the Israelites. When the angel of death came by- it “passed over” the houses that were certified.

This has a mysterious spiritual side to it- but the Bible talks about it in several places.

2. For Help

Many of us are members of BCAA. This is an organization that helps motorists in trouble. When you are in trouble and need help, you need to show your certification number. If you are a member- you will be helped.

We need to make sure that we are clear about who we are to those that are supposed to help us.

3. For Ourselves

The nature of our minds is that they easily circle back on themselves.

When Joshua gave his speech to the people they were all very impressed and as a mass agreed with his declaration. The problem was that their declaration didn’t stick. In no time at all the emotion of the moment faded away and they went back to the old style of living- the style of the idols that they had supposedly left behind.

The problem of falling back to old ways is complex and easy to do but one of the reasons to have a clear certification is for the sake of our own identities. When we begin to confuse ourselves by our own actions we can at least go back to our certification papers and read them again.

Yes, we are children of God.

Indeed, the state of our house doesn’t reflect that very well and a new cleaning needs to happen. But that cleaning has a standard is clear and we will begin.