

“Why am I a Christian?”

Sermon by Dan Harrison, pastor at Church of the Covenant, Lynchburg, VA 10/25/20

Ezekiel 37:1-14

I have been asked more than once, “Why are you a Christian?” Often times it comes up when I am with my friends from other faith traditions or when people find out I am a member of the Choctaw Tribe or people see how loving I am to people of other faiths without any intention of converting them. Then, especially when people hear me say, “Jesus wasn’t even a Christian. He was a Jew,” they like to ask me, “Then why are you?” I have answered in many ways over the years. Often I ignore the question altogether because in all honesty I hadn’t spent a lot of time contemplating it. I was born and raised in a Christian family. My Choctaw family became Christian in the mid 1800s; the Choctaw were not necessarily tied up with religion so it made conversion easy and most certainly advantageous. My Jewish family (and yes I also descend from Jewish settlers in Ohio who then came to Oklahoma) became Christian in the early 1800s after a generation in the New World. My English ancestors (how do you think I got the name Harrison?) seemed to have always been Christian well no one remembers when that conversion might have happened. So, yes, I was born a Christian, and even more importantly a Baptist. My Grandma Gotcher, a full blood Choctaw, was a prominent Baptist leader among the women Baptists of the Indian Territory, even naming the regional Baptist Girls’ camp Nunny-Chaha, which means “high hill,” and raised her kids to be the same, faithful Baptists. So, I was born into it and had little choice in that regard, evening being a fourth generation student at Oklahoma Baptist University. Then the question becomes, Why are you still a Christian?

Many who know me know that I feel my relationship to God to be an intimate one, and my love for Jesus is genuine. But anyone who knows me probably knows that I feel like if Jesus were here today he would not be a Christian. He would probably feel more at home in a synagogue or even some sort of Sufi gathering than a Christian church. So, why as a faithful follower, do I feel it important to claim Christianity as my own, the religion that in many ways has destroyed tribes like my own, removing our culture and language, our traditions and dances. I am not angry with Christianity in its historic and modern forms as much as I am disappointed. Rabbi John and Shaykh Rashid, two amazing friends and mentors, have both asked me how I can stick with it, raising that internal question again, Why are you a Christian? I think in many ways we each have to ask ourselves that question, don’t we? And let us not be afraid of the answers that may cross our lips. Don’t be afraid to speak your truth.

I didn’t really understand why I choose Christianity until about two years ago when Don Golden, the Christian author, former pastor, and then director of Red Letter Christians, an organization focused on calling Christians back to a focus on Jesus’ teachings in this highly politicized climate. In that time Trump was in his first year and Charlottesville had just happened and Don, Shane Claiborne, and Tony Campolo wanted desperately to make a stand against what Jerry Falwell Jr. had been preaching at the time. They wanted in effect to call Christians back to a Christ-centered view instead of what they saw as racist politics. I was happy to help Don, and we spent quite a bit of time together in preparation for the revival meeting. I introduced him to local evangelical leaders that I had met. I took him to one of the pastoral

groups that I occasionally attended, the Baptist Ministers group, and I was amazed at how well he navigated their judgmental stares and faint interest. He told them that he hoped to call all Christians, both progressives and conservatives to a closer walk with God. He said, “conservatives need to be reminded of God’s mercy and compassion and progressives need to remember the power of resurrection, old bones becoming new.” I was amazed at how he spoke about our political split among Christians today. I was convicted about his use of the word “resurrection.” Had I been negligent in my understanding and embracing of “new life”? Later in another meeting, this time with Jonathan Falwell, Jerry’s brother and the pastor at Thomas Road Baptist, and here Don organically talked about this dichotomy between conservatives and progressives, and our need to embrace the “power of the resurrection” again. This time I was convicted for sure, especially when he again referred to “dry bones” of Ezekiel’s prophecy:

The hand of the Lord was on me, and G-d brought me out by the Spirit of the Lord and set me in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. G-d 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. G-d asked me, “Son of man, can these bones live?” I said, “Sovereign Lord, you alone know.” Then G-d said to me, “Prophesy 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; 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 the bones came together, bone to bone. I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them, but there was no breath in them. Then G-d said to me, “Prophesy to the breath; prophesy, 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 G-d commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet—a vast army. Then G-d 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 prophesy 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 and restore you. Then you, my people, will know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves and bring you up from them. I will put my Spirit in you and you will live...”

This is why I am a Christian. I believe in the resurrection of old and the resurrection of new. And whether you believe Jesus raised his friend Lazarus from death to life or you believe in the resurrected Christ, I do believe in the power of resurrection. I believe God is calling us to newness. I believe in this power of newness we find hope, when there utterly seems to be no hope to be found. This is why I’m a Christian. I believe.

Shalom