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37 The hand of the LORD was upon me, and he brought me out in the Spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of the valley; it was full of bones. ² And he led me around among them, and behold, there were very many on the surface of the valley, and behold, they were very dry. ³ And he said to me, "Son of man, can these bones live?" And I answered, "O Lord GOD, you know." ⁴ Then he said to me, "Prophecy over these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. ⁵ Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. ⁶ And I will lay sinews upon 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 was commanded. And as I prophesied, there was a sound, and behold, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. ⁸ And I looked, and behold, 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, son of man, and say to the breath, Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live." ¹⁰ So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army.

¹¹ Then he said to me, "Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. Behold, they say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are indeed cut off.' ¹² Therefore prophecy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I will open your graves and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will bring you into the land of Israel. ¹³ And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people. ¹⁴ And I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I am the LORD; I have spoken, and I will do it, declares the LORD."

English Standard Version, Ezekiel 37.

A Gold Cross for Jesus?

I attended Catholic schools through 12th grade. When I was in grammar school, the kids often raised money for school materials and equipment. On the first day of school when I was in fourth grade, the sisters announced that we would spend the school year raising money to get air conditioning for the school. In each class, a giant paper thermometer went up. Each week the sisters incrementally raised the red line on the thermometers, as they tracked our progress toward the total amount of money needed for the a/c. We went door to door selling plastic crosses, string rosaries, and holy cards. It became a competition to see which class could raise the most money.

Then, near the end of the academic year, our Principle, Sister Adele, came on the intercom to tell us the good news: We had raised the money. We all knew we would have our air conditioning. There was cheering throughout the school.

But then there was a moment of silence. Sister Adele, in a soft voice, told us she had something else to tell us. She tried hard to sound upbeat, but there was no denying the disappointment in her voice. She said that the Monsignor of the parish had decided that the money would be better spent another way: to cover up the gold paint on the cross on the steeple of the church with real gold

flake. The school fell silent. We didn't know what that meant. She explained that rather than the cross merely being painted gold, it would have real gold on it. She wished us a good day and signed off.

We were stunned. We knew that this meant that we would not have our air conditioning, and that instead, when people looked up at the cross at the top of the church, they would see real gold. I tried to picture this and imagined a brilliant, almost blinding gold cross that would draw everyone's attention.

In the days to come, a crew put scaffolding around the steeple and covered the gold paint on the cross with real gold flake. The school was across a small street from the church, and so during recess and lunch, we stood on the playground and watched the gold go up. To be honest, after the job was done, I couldn't tell the difference. The gold flake looked just like the gold paint. I remember being puzzled. Instead of having air conditioning in the school, were we going to have a cross that didn't look any different?

I'm going to get back to the saga of the real gold cross.

Our Bible passage today is much of a chapter from Ezekiel. The passage is rather long and I hope it wasn't too tedious to listen to. I also hope you noticed how vivid the passage is.

The book of Ezekiel is named after its author. He was an Old Testament prophet and the book is written in the first person, with Ezekiel telling the story of his three-decade long ministry. The book was written around 570 or so B.C. As a young married man, Ezekiel was living in Jerusalem. But history was moving against his planned life of orderly temple ministry.

The life of Ezekiel coincided with the height of Babylonian power over a vast area. The Babylonians had recently wrested control over Mesopotamia from the Assyrians. The Babylonians were sending their armies out to expand their power base south and west to include much of the Levant, a large area bordering the Mediterranean Sea on the East from Turkey to Egypt. This area included the land of the Israelites, which at this time consisted of two areas known as Israel and Judah. This very aggressive expansion led the Babylonians to wars against Egypt and Phoenicia - with the land including the holy city of Jerusalem caught in the middle.

The mighty Babylonian army of Nebuchadnezzar besieged and captured Jerusalem. But at one point, Egypt came close to beating back the Babylonians. This caused the Israelites to think that perhaps they could rebel against

Babylonian control and gain their independence from this giant colonial power. However, they failed and there was a brutal crackdown.

Ezekiel had been training to be a temple priest in Jerusalem. Now, though, in retaliation, the Babylonian army sacked Jerusalem and robbed the temple of its treasures. And to weaken the upstart Israelites further, many of the educated and skilled, along with the rulers of Israel and Judah, and leaders of the army, were forcibly moved about 700 miles away to the heart of the Babylonian empire. This forced deportation happened in multiple waves, and the wave in which Ezekiel was caught up included about 8,000 people.

Ezekiel found himself living on a barren plain, deep in Babylonian territory, near the Kebar River. Interestingly, the Babylonians allowed the exiled Israelites to set up their own independent faith-based government and farm the land. They allowed them to put up buildings and to have families. They lived somewhat independently, but they were separated from the land God had granted them.

A handful of years later, when Ezekiel was around thirty, he transitioned from being a priest to being a prophet. The call came from the voice of God himself.

Ezekiel came into conflict with the leaders of his community. He fought to wrested control from a secular ruling class of Israelites that had emerged back in Jerusalem. Although he was exiled from the land, he proposed that Israel form a strong theocracy that would strictly follow the covenant that Moses had made between God and the Israelites. His vision was that of complete religious observance, regardless of whether or not the Israelites were politically independent. Whether they were free or under the thumb of an invading empire, they would live strictly by God's law – or so Ezekiel prophesized.

Who exactly were prophets like Ezekiel? What did they do? The prophets served as intermediaries between God and God's chosen people. The prophets warned the people when they strayed from the life God commanded them to live. The prophets also gave the people hope when their spirits were broken. This was a particularly important role during the time when the Israelites were separated from their land and their temple in Jerusalem.

Ezekiel was perhaps the most bizarre of all the Old Testament prophets – and some scholars have suggested that he was severely mentally ill, suffering from wild delusions and hallucinations. To the exiled people of God, however, what Ezekiel experienced were dramatic visions from God. He went into trances,

was struck mute for months at a time, and was mentally transported over great distances. He even returned to Jerusalem in a vision.

The book of Ezekiel is powerful in its first-person narrative and the book exhibits much evidence of its original oral, non-written form. The book is more visceral than most of the rest of the Old Testament.

Ezekiel's first vision, one that we are not focusing on today, was indicative of his entire ministry as a prophet. In it, he saw a giant cloud surrounded by a massive lightning storm. In the center of the storm was fire. What emerged were four living creatures that served as a chariot of sorts. The chariot held a divine throne. Each of these creatures, by the way, had four different faces, a human, an eagle, a lion, and an ox. Humans, of course, represented the likeness of God. Eagles were prized at the time for their speed and stateliness. The lion was known for its courage and strength. The oxen were sacrificed in the temple. In this complex and wild vision, Ezekiel saw God go forth on a fiery chariot in the sky.

What this initial vision of Ezekiel's shows is that God had not abandoned his people. God was still there and still all powerful. This vision foretold much of the rest of Ezekiel's career as a prophet.

Today's reading contains a vision that is perhaps the most written about of Ezekiel's many visions from God. It comes much later in the Book of Ezekiel. In it, Ezekiel sees a valley filled with the dead people of God. These people didn't die natural deaths – they had been slain. And they are indeed, very dead. Their skin and their flesh are gone. The bones have been separated from each other and cast into heaps. The bones are dry and brittle. All life has long been drained from slain people of God.

Then, Ezekiel's vision becomes sci-fi-ish. The bones begin to rattle together. They rise up and begin reassembling into their original skeletons. Then tendons begin attaching muscle to the bones. Then skin covers the muscles. Then God empowers Ezekiel to breathe life into the reassembled people of God. What rises up from the valley of dry bones is a mighty army of God.

Then God tells Ezekiel what Ezekiel is to pass on to the people: the people right now, in exile, are like dried and separated bones. They are cut off from their land and their temple – and they have lost their hope. But God is opening the graves of his people. God is bringing them back to life and will bring them back to their land. Just as the dried bones turned into a vast army, the broken Israelites will rise again in their own land under the hand of their God.

Ezekiel's vision of a valley of bones is a lesson of hope. It is a promise that God never abandons those who believe, no matter how horrible the circumstances. The vision is a dramatic communication from God, something so powerful and vivid that it leaves no doubt that God is indeed there for the people of God.

We don't really believe in visions from God anymore. Today, someone who acted like Ezekiel would simply be taken as being mentally ill. He might be hospitalized against his will and prescribed powerful medication to calm him down.

When I was a boy, though, I very much believed that God did magical things, that God spoke directly to us and often did so in very dramatic ways.

So, what about the a/c for my grammar school?

My school was in southern California. Normally, the winds blew in from the ocean, gentle and wet and cool. But inland, east of the heavily populated region of southern California is a mountain range. Occasionally, powerful winds come down out of the mountains, sweeping in the opposite direction, westward toward the coast. These winds are hot and dry and powerful. They are called Santa Ana winds.

A few days – just a few days – after the Monsignor put real gold on the cross on the steeple of the church, we were all out at recess. We were playing on the hot, sticky blacktop when a Santa Ana wind kicked up. It blew hard and strong, and kids stopped playing tetherball, kickball, and hopscotch. I'm sure that the sisters were about to blow their whistles and call us in from recess as they always did when the Santa Anas kicked up. They didn't want any of us being blown over or hit in the face by flying debris.

But suddenly, the sky became filled with highly reflective bits of material. It started off lightly, then grew heavy. As it fell, we all began chasing this stuff around, catching it, scooping it up from the ground. It was the gold flake from the cross from the steeple across the street. It was all coming off.

We children went wild. The sisters began calling out for us to collect the gold flake up and bring it to them. I'm sure they didn't know what they were going to do with it, but the stuff was presumably still valuable. From our perspective, we simply saw this as the most fun we'd ever had. We laughed and jumped and shoved the stuff in our pockets, and periodically ran it over to the sisters, who stuffed it in the deep pockets of their long black habits.

They didn't even bother to ring the bell to bring us in from recess. The rest of the school day was shot. By the time we made it back into the school, we were far too wired to do any work. And there were only bits of gold left on the cross.

But for me, it was far more than just a lot of fun. I knew perfectly well what had happened. It had been a vision from God. God filled the sky with the gold flake that the Monsignor had bought with the money we raised for air conditioning for our school.

In this vision God was telling us that the Monsignor was wrong. Jesus did not need or want a real gold cross. He'd been sacrificed on a wooden cross, and probably nothing like the neatly crafted crosses we use today to depict his death. The Romans didn't use skilled carpenters to make these crosses. Usually, they were hammered together out of rough wood by the Roman soldiers themselves.

Jesus didn't die on a cross of gold and he didn't want to be honored with one either – at least not at the cost of the a/c for the children's classrooms. I knew that God had spoken.

This incident is a standout moment in my life and in my personal faith journey. It was God talking to me. It was dramatic reassurance from God that although we thought we were down and beaten, we were not. We had seemingly

lost our air conditioning and wasted all that time spent raising money. Yet God had not abandoned us children.

The people who improperly put that gold flake on the cross gave the parish back their money. And this time, the sisters did not let the monsignor spend it on a gold cross for Jesus. We got our air conditioning.

We live in a materialistic world today, especially in the greater Denver/Boulder area, where people spend their money on the latest technological gadgets, on cell phones and cable TV - rather than giving their money to the hungry or to the homeless. We want to own, to buy, to possess.

We're constantly gluing gold flake on the cross of Jesus, confusing the power of faith with the power of money.

Ezekiel prophesied during one of the lowest points of the Israelites' history. He battled the despondency of his people. In a way, his visions were dramatic stunts that served to draw the attention of his people away from the dark days in which they lived. Ezekiel's visions offered the truth of God and the prospect of a life lived under the protection of God.

Remember what Ezekiel saw in the vision we've looked at today. It's dramatic and vivid. But the message is actually very simple.

Then he said to me, "Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. Behold, they say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are indeed cut off.' ¹² Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: Behold, I will open your graves and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will bring you into the land of Israel. ¹³

I believe that today, God is trying again to get our attention. The desire to live lives of successful consumers leads to a coldness, a sense of purposelessness. Faith is being forgotten. God is being dismissed as non-existent. Now, more than ever, we are erecting crosses of real gold in the name of a savior who died on a rough wooden cross.

But we can rise again from the bones of our past. Our faith can be revived.

As you go out into the world this week, be open to the voice of God. Be open to God's message. Don't miss God telling you to have hope, to know that you have not been abandoned. Be listening. Be watching.

Thank you, and may God bless you, your family, and all those whom you love.