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### **Ezekiel 37:1–14, ESV, abbreviated**

**37** *The LORD brought me out in the middle of the valley; it was full of bones. God said to me, “Can these bones live?” And I answered, “O Lord GOD, you know.”<sup>4</sup> Then he said to me, “Prophesy over these bones, and say: Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live.<sup>6</sup> 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.”*

<sup>7</sup> *So I prophesied as I was commanded. There was a sound, and behold, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> Then he said to me, “Prophesy to the breath; Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live.”<sup>10</sup> 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.*

<sup>11</sup> *Then God said to me, “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.’<sup>12</sup> Therefore prophesy, and say to them: I will open your graves and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will bring you into the land of Israel.<sup>13</sup> And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people.<sup>14</sup> I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land.”*

### **Haggai 1:7-11, ESV**

<sup>7</sup> *“Thus says the LORD of hosts: Consider your ways.<sup>8</sup> Go up to the hills and bring wood and build the house, that I may take pleasure in it and that I may be glorified, says the LORD.<sup>9</sup> You looked for much, and behold, it came to little. And when you brought it home, I blew it away. Why? declares the LORD of hosts. Because of my house that lies in ruins, while each of you busies himself with his own house.<sup>10</sup> Therefore the heavens above you have withheld the dew, and the earth has*

*withheld its produce. <sup>11</sup> And I have called for a drought on the land and the hills, on the grain, the new wine, the oil, on what the ground brings forth, on man and beast, and on all their labors.”*

### **A gold cross for Jesus?**

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 Monsignor wanted the entire town to know that our church, the monsignor's church, was the most beautiful church in town. We all knew that the Monsignor, the senior priest in the parish, was widely regarded as being extremely vain. 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 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. But after the job was done, I couldn't tell the difference. The gold flake looked just like the gold paint. Instead of having air conditioning in the school, we had a cross that didn't look any different from one that was painted gold. I'll get back to the saga of the real gold cross.

Our first Bible passage today is from Ezekiel. Ezekiel 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 land that surrounded 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 region including the holy city of Jerusalem, in Judah, 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, destroyed the temple, 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 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.

Ezekiel fought to wrest control from a secular ruling class of Israelites that had emerged back in Jerusalem. Although he was exiled from the land, he proposed that the Israelites in exile should live strictly by God's laws. Remember, that as a prophet, Ezekiel spoke for God. It was God's will that God's people return to a life of holiness, a life dedicated to God. 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. In our reading today, Ezekiel is describing a bizarre, wild vision from God. In it, Ezekiel sees a valley filled with the dead people of God. These people didn't die natural deaths – they had been slain. 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.

I'd like to get back the gold cross at my childhood church. 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 mighty. 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 on the top of the steeple across the street.

The reason I used the prophecy of Ezekiel today is because, as a child, what happened with the gold flake on my church cross struck me as a vision from God, one as wild and incredible as the vision that Ezekiel had of a valley of dried bones rising up and becoming the army of the Israelites. I was sure that I had experienced a vision from God, just like the visions of the prophets. This incident with the cross impacted me hugely. I knew that something magnificent had happened. God had spoken. God had told us all that Jesus did not want a gold cross on his church. He was crucified on rough wood, hewn together probably by

a Roman guard, not a carpenter. The last thing Jesus wanted was us to erect a gold cross in his name.

Our second passage is from the short book of Haggai. Haggai prophesized during the period when the Israelites had been allowed to return to the Promised Land. Persia had defeated the Babylonians, and the Persian king let the Israelites go home. Haggai was probably one of the Israelites who had been captive and then went home. Haggai's book only covers three months. He didn't talk about justice or righteousness in the eyes of God, as the prophets tend to do. He had a very focused message. The temple had been nearly destroyed by the Babylonians so long before. His goal was to urge his people to rebuild the temple. Haggai speaks for God when he tells his people this: *my house lies in ruins, while each of you busies himself with his own house.* <sup>10</sup> *Therefore the heavens above you have withheld the dew, and the earth has withheld its produce.* <sup>11</sup> *And I have called for a drought on the land and the hills, on the grain, the new wine, the oil, on what the ground brings forth, on man and beast, and on all their labors.* Haggai is saying that until the temple is rebuilt, and the people focus on God's house and not their own houses, God will not bless them. Superficially, this seems to be the opposite of the lesson of the gold cross. Does God really need a magnificent temple? There's a difference, and this is the point I am trying to make today. You see, God

wants us to focus on honoring God, not honoring ourselves. Haggai wants the people to rebuild the gold-trimmed temple, not for Haggai, but for God. The temple is a symbol of the relationship between the people and God, and that symbol will help bring the people back to God. But the gold cross wasn't for God. It was for the monsignor, who seemed to think he was some kind of prophet.

Ezekiel prophesized about the incredible power and devotion of God, not about the glory of humans. And Haggai prophesized about the need to come together in God's name, not about the need to leave something that would stand as a colossal accomplishment of Haggai. That is what a true prophet is: a servant and spokesperson of God, not someone with an insatiable ego. This is why I love being in this church. It is beautiful, but not pretentious. It is not ornate. It is not a tribute to the people who built it. It is a tribute to God, and we come here together to remind each other what it means to live in the Kingdom of God.

By the way, 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. In the end, the vision from God that I experienced served to remind the people of God that we are here to worship God, not ourselves. Amen.