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Ezekiel 12:1-7
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Ezekiel saw the wheel way up in the middle of the air. Ezekiel saw a valley of dry bones and God persuaded him to believe that those bones could rise again. Ezekiel saw the wheel. Ezekiel packed a bag...I preached last Sunday up in New Jersey, and one woman came out of the back and said, "I just love to hear a Southern drawl." Do I have a Southern drawl? I guess in New Jersey I do. I preached in New Jersey and when I showed up on Sunday morning, there was a van parked outside and it had red pain splattered all over it, saying preaching stuff. It said stuff like, "Repent. The ways to sin is death." "Only the King James Bible." I don't know what that was about. It had all these preaching words, and it reminded me how much that preaching is just the spewing of words. Ezekiel was not a spewer of words. In fact, his most eloquent sermons were not words at all. God told him to do things, to engage in symbolic acts in front of people. God told him one time to grow his beard really long and then to shave in public and do all these amazing things with the hair as he gradually clipped it off. I thought about trying that with you guys sometime.

Ezekiel was told by God to pack a bag, and he packed a bag and he said, "Dig a hole in the city wall because this is what is going to happen to the people. They are going to become exiles." It is a symbolic act. Pack a bag. Dig your way through the city wall. We might find ourselves annoyed if we saw symbolic acts today...You know, if I shaved in front of you, or, I think of that funny moment in Pat Conroy's novel, *The Prince of Tides*, where the narrator says, "I grew up loathing Good Friday." The reason that he loathed Good Friday is what he called his grandfather's over-enthusiastic commemoration of Good Friday; what he had done ever since he was a young man. When he was a young man, he fashioned this 90-pound wood cross and every year on Good Friday he would carry it through the city and people would mock and they would laugh, and then as he got older it was hard to carry the 90-pound cross so he eventually attached a little wheel to it and as he would carry it, the little wheel would squeak and people would laugh at this. He complained. He said, "You know, Jesus carried the thing and he was 30 years old and I am 60 now, and it is heavy." The narrator said that he wished the grandfather would take his act to Charleston or to Columbia, instead of right there in their home town. The funniest comment that Pat Conroy adds to the story is that he said the grandmother, who found it very difficult indeed to be married to a saint, when he would begin this Good Friday walk, she would retreat to her bedroom with a bottle of Beefeater gin, and as Conroy put it, at 3 o'clock, when the walk was finished, so was the bottle. It is a symbolic act.

Ezekiel packs a bag, and we know actually what these bags would look like because archeologists have found them. They have found drawings of them and some traces of actual bags. If you think about it, the Babylonians came and conquered the city of Jerusalem, so the citizens had to leave their homes. They had things that they were attached to, just as you do, but they were sent off into exile. They had to march hundreds of miles to Babylon. All they were allowed to carry, all they could carry was one bag, and in that bag there would be a bowl, there would be a mat, and there would be, if you were lucky, a skin with some water in it. Those were all the possessions that you had: A bowl, a mat and, if you were lucky, a skin with some water in it, and that is what the exiles carried away. I had not thought about that until this week, you know. Kevin (Wright) and Ellen (Robison), my colleagues, they are good Bible scholars. They would have thought about this before this week. I am 53. It has never occurred to me that Jesus, everywhere he went, carried a wool bag. If you have ever

known any homeless people, they always carry a bag. All their worldly possessions, they've got them right on them. They carry a bag. Jesus carried a bag because Jesus was homeless. What did the Gospel say? Foxes have holes, the birds of the air have nests, and the son of man has no place to lay his head. Jesus carried a bag and probably what was in that bag, there would have been a bowl, there would have been a mat, and if he was lucky, there would have been a skin with some water in it. Jesus was poor. It is a symbolic action. It is a sign. We look for signs, don't we?

I wrote a book last year on the will of God and I said, "We are people who look for signs." Our problem is we look for self-indulgent signs. We look for the kind of sign that says, "It must be a sign from God for me to take this job that pays double what I am making now. It must be a sign from God that I have the opportunity to buy the mansion of a house that I have always wanted. It must be a sign from God that God wants me to vacation in Hawaii." We always think of self-indulgent kinds of signs. We rarely look for signs that say, "God wants me to sacrifice for the good of the Kingdom of God." We rarely look for signs that say, "God wants me to reorder my existence totally to be part of what God is about. God wants me. This is a sign from God to become very uncomfortable because of what I am trying to do for God." We look for self-indulgent signs. Let me suggest to you that the sign for us today is the bag. It is Ezekiel's bag. The bag of the exile. The bag of perhaps the homeless person – you see the homeless person and they are always carrying a bag, but what do you do? You turn aside your gaze or you look at the person and you pity them, or you look at that person and you blame them because they are in such a state and they just have this little bag, but it was Jesus who became homeless, who became poor, who is our sign. Why is this? Isn't it interesting...Jesus dwelled in the splendor of Heaven. He had everything, but he gave it up and came down to earth and became a poor person carrying a little bag with a bowl and a mat and a skin of water. Why did he do this? He did this so that we would see ourselves mirrored back to ourselves in him, that when we see the poverty of Jesus, we would discover the poverty in our own souls. Jesus depended upon the good of others, and he did that so that we might become good. We get confused about this. We do not see the poverty in our soul. We don't get the sign of the bag. In fact, bags do matter to us if we get the wrong bag, don't we? The bag that we think matters is going to be the fullness of life...We have a shopping bag. We binge at the mall. We have purchased some shiny things, and (we think) this will be the fullness of life for us. Because we had our shopping bag very, very full, we are not like that homeless person who has got a bag with nothing but a bowl and a mat and a skin of water. It is deceptive. It is a lie. God did not send us down here so that we could accumulate things. We think that that will work for us, but of course that doesn't actually solve much for us at all.

What kind of bag are we carrying? You know my wife is out of town this morning, so I can talk about her with some immunity. She has a different kind of bag that is part of a project that she is about. It is not the shopping bag of accumulating things. She has different bags. When my wife goes to Harris Teeter there is a bag guy, right, and he says, "Paper or plastic?" When my wife goes, they do not say paper or plastic because she is green. She has her own green bags that she takes to and from the store. I think the bag guy looks down on me a little because I do not have my own green bags that I take. She has a project, which is not that we will accumulate. Her project is, We are going to save the earth. We always have projects, but they are projects that can never satisfy. They are projects that can never fulfill.

Now why am I preaching this sermon? This sounds like a sermon of judgment, doesn't it? I know that you did not get up this morning, get out of bed and think, "I hope Howell has a strongly judgmental sermon." You didn't think that. You thought, "He wasn't there last week. He will come back. He will have missed us, and he will have a sermon like God is so sweet and God loves you." I

know you wanted that kind of sermon. But the fact is we are going through the Bible and there is a lot of judgment in the Bible. The Prophet Ezekiel has got a lot of judgment, and let me suggest to you that you and I had better hope there is such a thing as judgment. If there is no such thing as judgment then there is no such thing as right and wrong. If there is no such thing as judgment, then evil at the end of the day has the last word. You and I had better hope that there is such a thing as judgment.

If you want to look at the bag, and what is wrong about us, I want us to think about the death of Walter Cronkite and the anniversary of Neil Armstrong walking on the moon. This gave me pause. We were watching TV, Walter Cronkite has died, and you know after 10 days of Michael Jackson has died, we got one day of Walter Cronkite has died. As I am listening to the coverage, am I the only person who thought, "They have missed the boat entirely in what they are saying about Walter Cronkite?" What everybody was saying about him was, "He was so trustworthy. He was the most trusted man in America. He just gave us the news. Will there ever be another Walter Cronkite?" I think it is totally beside the point. I think the qualities of Walter Cronkite have nothing to do with it. We will never again in our lifetime see another Walter Cronkite and it has got nothing to do with the fact that there is not some trustworthy newsman out there. The reason we will never see another Walter Cronkite is that you and I are not much interested in the facts of what is really going on in the world. What you and I are interested in is ideology. We are interested in ideology. If there are a few facts that happen to support our ideology then that is a good thing, but we've got our liberal ideology or we've got our conservative ideology and we want to turn something on the TV that will baptize our pet notions about what the world is like. Walter Cronkite could never make it today because he was not advocating some ideology. We want some ideology – that is what we are after. We want to be entertained. You know, when Walter Cronkite died, we were watching the TV and I said to Lisa, I said, "He is a little bit odd-looking." We thought about that. It is such a familiar face. You don't think about him being odd-looking. It is interesting, isn't it, that you would not count Walter Cronkite as dashing or handsome or cool or super athletic. He wasn't tan, if you will. Now, if you're not cool, handsome, athletic, tan, you have no chance to be on television at all, because what you and I are interested in is entertainment. We are interested in what is cool. We are interested in what is good-looking. It is the same as the bag that we carry around. We want shiny things. We think that shiny things will be the fullness of life, but Jesus came down to be poor, to teach us our poverty of spirit. See, about the same time – I hate to go on a rant, I don't mind going on a rant about this at all actually. The rant is that about the same time Walter Cronkite died, we hit the 40th anniversary of Neil Armstrong walking on the moon, and this is so interesting because I was with some neighbors and we were talking about it, and we were all reminiscing when we were little boys and Neil Armstrong first went to the moon and we were so excited about it. Everybody was so excited about this. It was courageous. It was our nation doing something great and Neil Armstrong made it to the moon safely and everyone was so proud and we just beamed with joy and delight over this noble achievement, and you know what one of my neighbors asked? He said, "What is the equivalent today for young people?" We thought and we thought, and there is no equivalent today for young people because we are not the kind of people who care a lot about noble achievement. We are not the kind of people who thing a lot about courage. We are not the kind of people who will put aside our own greed and gain and pleasure for the sake of some bigger cause. We have had our souls burrowed out and it is why we need this message from Ezekiel who carried around the bag of an exile and bored a hole in the wall of the city. It is the same thing that Jesus did. Jesus left the splendor of Heaven and came down to show us our poverty; not to make us feel bad about ourselves, but to see what really matters. What do you really have to carry with you to have the fullness of life? Is it the shiny stuff that you buy in the mall? Is it the slick people that you see on TV? I don't think so. I think it is recovering a sense of nobility,

that humans can be bright, that we can achieve something, that we can do some good, that there is hope.

God came down to this earth. A grave could not contain him. Jesus broke through the wall of the grave and he did not do that so that we could sit around and be mindlessly entertained and collect shiny things at the mall in our bag. How shall we say it? Jesus came to us as a sign of God and he is our hope.

A little footnote to the sermon. Ezekiel engages in a symbolic act, and I think we are all of us called to engage in symbolic acts. Something that we as a staff and many of us as church members are trying to do is, we are trying to save the world. Kevin and Ellen and I, we come to work every day and we are trying to save the world. And I have decided now that we have two more weeks to get it done. I've been working on it a long time, and I am getting a little impatient. We have not saved the world yet. We have made a little headway. We have done a few good things, but two weeks, that is all I am giving us. We have got to go ahead and save the world. That's ridiculous, right – to say that you're going to save the world in two weeks? You can't save the world in two weeks. You can't save the world in two years. You can't save the world in two lifetimes and we know this. But God does call us to engage in symbolic acts. We may not save the world in the next two weeks, but we can save somebody, and if you save one, it is a symbolic act of God's desire in God's heart to save everybody. Sometimes we just save one, but that is OK because I am one, you are one, every hungry child out there is just one, and it may just be symbolic to save that one, but that is what God calls us to do.

I've told some of you this story before. Mother Teresa was once invited to speak at a hunger conference in Bombay. That's pretty good. You're having a hunger conference – Mother Teresa as your guest speaker. So Mother Teresa typically got lost and arrived at the building late. Everybody was already inside with their work clothes. They are in there waiting for Mother Teresa to come and talk about hunger. They were in there and they had charts about strategies and population trends and food supply trends, and Mother Teresa arrived late and as she was climbing the steps to go in the building, there was a hungry person on the steps outside. She had a choice. Do I go inside and talk about hunger and trends and population movement? Do I do this, or do I take care of this one hungry person on the step? Of course, she is Mother Teresa. Easy call. Instead of going in, she just stopped, picked up the hungry person, fed him. She saved one. She said it is just a drop in the ocean, but what is the ocean but so many drops. It is just a symbolic act, but God calls each one of us to a symbolic action. To symbolize in our lives what really matters to save one, and one, and one. This is what God calls us to.

What are we carrying? Do we see the one, Jesus, who had a bag with nothing but a bowl and a mat and a skin for water? Are we carrying about the Santa bag, wanting so much stuff, thinking that that will be a fullness of life? Do we have to come to those kinds of points when people finally wake up and realize that we have been burdened down with too much junk that we have been carrying that doesn't matter? It tends to happen when we have lost our job or when our health falls apart or when our marriage falls apart. Then we have these clarifying moments that make us ask, "What really matters? What am I really carrying? Does this really matter?" Do we have to wait until that point or can we hear this word from Ezekiel that was not a word at all? It was simply him walking through the city carrying a bag. A bag. What are we carrying? What do we really need to get through? What is in your bag?