

December 10, 2017
Ezekiel 37:1-14
Advent 2

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“Hope in the Valley of Dry Bones”

A piece of art by Paul Klee hangs in our study at home. It is a drawing of a goofy looking angel with curly hair like unraveling scrolls of paper, googly melancholy eyes that glance sideways, and wings that are outstretched but aerodynamically hopeless. The angel appears to be levitating in mid-air. It is one of those pieces which makes you privately question to yourself: is this the work of a four-year old or . . . am I missing something? The title of the piece is “Angelus Novus” (New Angel) and it became famous among European intellectuals after the German-Jewish critic and philosopher, Walter Benjamin purchased the piece in 1921 and later commented on it in his 1940 essay, “Theses on the Philosophy of History.” In his ninth thesis, Benjamin wrote:

“A Klee painting named Angelus Novus shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.”

Benjamin relates the drawing of Klee’s angel to what he calls the “angel of history.” With his face turned toward the past, the angel of history simply sees one great wreckage, the catastrophe of human history. Benjamin points out that what the angel sees as a single catastrophe, modern people see as a “chain of events” on the way to something, marching forward, upward, skyward, even if unevenly, toward God; modern people, Benjamin surmises, look back at the past and see a process of historical development, history is understood as a movement progressively pushing us forward. Even the angel of history, the angel that beholds and attends to the destruction that comes in the wake of development and progress, remains helpless before its irresistible forward-moving pull. And, so, the pile of debris grows skyward as history marches on.

Admittedly, it is a dark piece of art, and perhaps an even more pessimistic interpretation. The piece hangs beside the Isenheim Altarpiece in our study, that medieval portrait of Jesus Christ crucified, disease-ridden, skin discolored, and body disfigured, and on his left side stands John the Baptist with his massive index finger outstretched pointing to the one hanging on the cross. Inscribed above his outstretched hand are the words: “He must increase; I must decrease.” I have these two pieces of art next to each other in my study for a reason. They serve to daily remind me that the past is never merely past

and that the road to the present has not been a divinely-ordained movement of “progress.” They also serve to remind me that the promise of the Gospel is that the future of the earth belongs not to the mighty but to the burdened, persecuted, and heavy-laden, to the meek and the merciful, to the poor in spirit and to those who mourn, to the pure in heart and to those who make peace, and to those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Or, in the words of the Jesuit priest and theologian, Ignacio Ellacuria, the future belongs to the “crucified peoples” of the earth.

Walter Benjamin wrote his reflections on Klee’s *Angel Novus* in 1940 just before attempting to escape from France, at a time when French collaborationist government officials were handing over Jewish refugees like Benjamin to the Nazi Gestapo. Later that year, fearing capture by the Gestapo again, this time in Spain, Benjamin would take his own life. Benjamin’s perspective on history was forged out of his experiences living as a Jew in Nazi Germany. It stands as a critique of modern progressivist concepts of history. It poses the question: can one think of history as a movement of progress after Nazi Germany? In our own context, we must ask the question: can one think of history as a movement of progress *after* settler colonial genocide and the theft of Turtle Island, and *after* the slave auction block? And if we, with Benjamin, find it continually difficult to think of history as a progressive movement, on what do we place our hope for change?

Our scripture passage for today is from the Book of Ezekiel. Ezekiel, the prophet, has a vision in which he sees the hand of the Lord coming to him and by the Spirit he is set down in the middle of a valley. The valley is full of bones. The Lord led Ezekiel “all around” these bones and there were “very many” and they were “very dry.” This is a stark image, it is a scene of death; these are images of catastrophe, not unlike Benjamin’s image of the wreckage, the debris of history, which piles up to the sky. Then, the Lord said to Ezekiel, “Mortal, can these bones live?” Ezekiel responds with, “O Lord God, you know,” as if to say, “Lord, you know the catastrophe that has happened here, the relics of which lie here in the valley, you know the finality of death.” “Mortal, can these bones live?” Is redemption from the wreckage of history even possible? Can the victims of history live again? In her book *Ghostly Matters*, the sociologist Avery Gordon asks what it might mean for us to attend to the “ghosts” of our collective history that remain with us in the present. These ghosts make present the unspeakable suffering and violence that continues to live on inside our bodies and in our communities. These ghosts communicate the unspeakable truths of the past, but they do more than this. They push us to recognize that something must be done in the present. The ghostly presence of the past challenges us to ask what might it mean for these bones to live? It challenges us to ask ultimate questions about justice and redemption?

Among the images of death, of dry bones, we also find images of life and the source of life in this passage. In the vision, the Lord commands Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones and to say to the bones that the Lord will cause breath to enter you, lay sinews on you, cause flesh to come on you, and put breath in you. O, dry bones hear the word of the Lord. The Hebrew word *ruach* occurs ten times in this passage (translated variously as ‘spirit,’ ‘breath,’ or ‘wind’). It is perhaps the most significant theological motif in the passage, even more important than the images of death. Notice how *ruach* is linked with the emergence of new life; wherever the text mentions these terms, with the exception of verse 1, it follows with the phrase, “you shall live” (vv. 5, 6, 14), or “they may live” (v. 9), or “they lived” (v. 10). The source of this new life and hope is the Spirit of God. Even when the bones come together, bone to its

bone, even when the bones are joined by sinews, flesh, and skin, there is still, up to this point in the vision, no life, no breath, no spirit -- though we do hear the rattling of the bones, or as one scholar describes it, the “grand rattle of recreation.” These bodies are still just empty shells of flesh, until the breath or spirit of life enters in.

On Wednesday night our middle and high school youth spent some time reading the creation stories in Genesis; one of our youth, I think it was Noelle, observed how Genesis 1 portrays God as an ultimate power, God as one who brings forth life by God’s Word alone. We see the same thing happening in Ezekiel. It is as if we are witnessing another creation story. Just as God breathed life into the bodies of the first human beings, so too, Ezekiel prophesies about a time in which God will be the cause of new life, new breath in dry bones. And he announces his prophecy in the middle of the valley, among the dry bones, in the aftermath of destruction. So this is a scene of creation, but it is a scene of creation *as* resurrection, which is confirmed by the images of graves (vv. 12-13). It is a scene that reminds us that God is present in and among the graves of history; God is present in and among these graves not from the mountaintop looking down, but in the the lowest of low valleys, in those places where there is no hope, where a deep darkness has set in, in those places of God abandonment.

When I was traveling to DC last week with Asamblea advocating for a new Clean Dream Act alongside 50 people, most of whom were undocumented, I was keenly aware of the presence of the ghosts of history. Seeing the triumphalist monuments, I was keenly aware of the absence of bones and debris, the absence of the wreckage that “progress” has left in its wake. I mean, I felt their presence, the haunting of the past, but the monuments did not permit them to become visible or audible. On our last day in DC, we toured the Martin Luther King memorial. Some of us spoke on the significance of King for the current struggle for justice. What struck me most was the leadership of the older Latina women, women whose wisdom was deep and perspective long, and whose backs have been forced to endure and bear the brunt of “American progress” and “economic development.” These women told stories of fleeing violence and oppression, of arrest and imprisonment, and moving northward with dreams of securing a better life for themselves and their children. They encouraged the youth, the Dreamers, to recognize their struggle and their humanity and to refuse to buy into the lies of the politicians who would call their parents illegals and criminals. Two of the leaders of Asamblea invited the youth to the front of the King statue; they placed handcuffs and chains made from PVC pipe onto their wrists. The message was clear: *you* are not free; though you may not be in physical chains yet, you remain enslaved to an unjust system. You are not free, because you are not regarded as belonging in this place, you have no rights, and the system wants to imprison you and rip you away from your family, your friends, and your home. Our visit to the King memorial was a reminder not of the triumph of history, but of the debris and wreckage that remains in the present and continues to imprison and enslave people. It was a reminder that freedom is a constant struggle, and that those who believe that God’s Spirit has the power to open graves must never forget the wreckage.

One of the most powerful experiences I had on this trip was praying and singing with my brothers and sisters, and eating and laughing and dancing together. Outside of the doors of politicians, in the hallways, in the streets, on the bus, we prayed together and sang songs of freedom. To sing songs of freedom in the middle of the valley of death is a sign of new life, a sign of the Spirit, a sign that God is not done with us

yet and that God is not done with life. Praying and singing songs of freedom is, we might say, a prophesying activity in the spirit of Ezekiel; an activity that stares directly into the eye of the power of Death in the middle of the valley refusing to believe that death is the final word, and instead lives into the joy and freedom of the promised future.

God is present in and among “crucified peoples” as the One who himself went “down into the valley,” who, as Paul puts it in Philippians, “though he was in the form of God, he did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death -- even death on a cross” (Philippians 2:6-8). God is present as the Crucified One, whose bones were crushed in the valley of death. The Spirit of God is the new life, the *ruach*, that breathes into the body and the flesh of these bones, it is the same Spirit of God that breathed into the nostrils of the first human beings in the Genesis story, it is the same Spirit of God that breathed new life into Mary and Joseph’s crying baby, it is the same Spirit of God that raised the entombed body of Jesus to new life, and it is the same Spirit of God upon which all of our hopes and expectations for a new heaven and new earth rest. Such hope does not entail the denial of history and its victims; it is rather the belief that things can be *radically otherwise* than they are and have been; reality is not fixed and the future is not predetermined nor must it be merely the extension of the past. No, the Gospel news is the truth that the future belongs *to God* and to all those whom God calls blessed. The Spirit of God is the Spirit of Life, a life that conquers the power of death. It is the Spirit of the Resurrection. “Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves.” In other words, “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” (1 Cor 15:55).