

## Vision of New Life

### Ezekiel 37:1-14

December 10, 2017- Second Sunday in Advent

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It was a cold December morning when a tiny baby boy, just days old, was baptized and welcomed into the Church family. He, like Skye, fresh from God, was unaware of what was happening to him, yet vulnerable and open to God's mystery moving within and around him. The year was 1770 and the baby was Ludwig van Beethoven, baptized 247 years ago next week. As we witnessed with Skye moments ago, when Beethoven took on the identity of Christian, he was securely wrapped in a blanket God's steadfast love and grace that would comfort him his entire life.

Almost thirty years after that cold December day, Beethoven would cling to his blanket of God's love and grace as he felt his life crumbling around him. The unthinkable was happening. The phenomenal musician and composer was losing his ability to hear. He was twenty-eight years old. After a gradual loss, Beethoven was completely deaf by his 45th birthday. One who breathed, created and devoured music lost his ability to hear it. Life as he knew it was dying and there wasn't anything he could do about it.

In today's passage, we find the prophet Ezekiel in a rocky, desert valley surrounded by death. Before him and behind him and next to him are tons of dry bones, bones bleached white from the absence of marrow and traces of life.

This vision, as disconcerting and odd as it may be, is not far from Ezekiel's reality in exile. The priest fled his homeland along with many others in 593 BCE, after the first of two Babylonian invasions. He spoke the word of God to the exiled men, women and children as an exile himself. And he watched as their once vibrant lives become parched by living without a home. As one commentator describes, "Ezekiel witnesses the soul of his people gradually wither and die, becoming as lifeless as a valley of dry bones." (Wallace 2010 125)

While a valley of dry bones is a unique Biblical image, the image of bones to express times of lament is not, as we find in the Psalms: "O Lord, heal me, for my bones are shaking with terror. My soul is also struck with terror..." (Psalm 6: 2-3a) and "Do not be far from me, for trouble is near and there is no one to help...I am poured out like water and all of my bones are out of joint..." (Psalm 22: 11, 14a)

Lament psalms describing acute pain and grave uncertainty — to be scared to the bone; for your body's essential frame and protective skeleton to be out of joint — depict ultimate despair. This is where we find Ezekiel and his exiled community in Babylon, a place of ultimate despair. As God explains to Ezekiel in his vision: "Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.'" (Ezekiel 37: 5)

Beethoven lost hope for a life with friends and in community as his hearing deteriorated and living became more and more difficult. Beethoven's deafness cut him off from his

entire world. He wrote to a friend: “My poor hearing haunted me everywhere like a ghost; and I have avoided all human society.” (Rothman 2015)

In his 56 years, Beethoven lived two lives, a life of sounds and a life of silence, a life in the lush landscape of conversation, music and laughter, and another in the desert exile of quiet. But always he was one person, claimed and loved by God in both the life and the exile, both the living and the dying.

Ezekiel had seen his fair share of living and dying during his time as prophet and his time as a priest before that. But even still, the vision of collected death in the valley of bones is beyond the dying even Ezekiel has known. It’s hard to imagine resurrection in the valley of bones. Not even a whisper of life anywhere around, other than Ezekiel, who was a trespasser in the sea of remains. As Ezekiel marvels at the death surrounding him, God asks: “Mortal, can these bones live?” With tentativeness Ezekiel offers the vague answer: “O Lord God, You know.” Ezekiel certainly didn’t know! How can bones live? How can there be life in exile?

“O Lord God, You know.” I certainly don’t know. Since October of this year, 40 men in high profile positions have been fired or resigned for sexual misconduct, including — new this week — three congressmen. The list is getting longer every day. As women and men are using their voices to tell their painful stories, we move further into a dry, desert time in our country. A time when the moral high ground seems to be merely sea level. Our country finds itself in a desert of hurt and shame. Can we live, truly live, in this time of exile? When we need to take to heart, these words, said by God to those white, very dead bones: “O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord.” (v.5)

Hear the word of the Lord. Hear the word of life. Hear the word of hope. Hear the word of peace. Hear the word of the Lord: “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.” (Luke 2: 10-12)

This is the word; this is the miracle we are preparing to celebrate in three weeks’ time. In a filthy manger, filled with straw surrounded by animals and dust and dirt, a newborn baby lay; Jesus came to us *as us* — bones, sinews, skin and all — God *with us*. A birth made possible by God’s grace, by God’s breath of life.

A birth that happened in a desert time in which Roman Emperor Caesar exploited his people to living desert lives so that he and his fellow leaders secured success, power, money and ultimate control. Into this desert was born a baby, a baby whose cries rang out as peals of hope and joy for people yearning for God and needing peace. With new life comes new hope.

New life that comes from death. Suddenly, the air surrounding Ezekiel is filled with the most unlikely of sounds — a clattering of moving bones! Bones coming together, bone to bone. And the sinews began to attach the bones to one another, creating a skeleton. Flesh then came over the bones and skin appeared.

What were once strewn-about human bones became complete human bodies — not the ones from before the death but bodies made new although suspended in stillness, without the breath of life. Then God tells Ezekiel: “Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and

say to the breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may have life." Ezekiel did as he was told and "breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude." From really, really dead to really, really alive. Resurrection. Life from death. Life from exile. Life possible only by God's grace, by God's breath of life.

By God's grace and his sheer determination, Beethoven continued to compose when he was deaf, at times "by clenching a stick in his teeth and holding it against the keyboard of his piano so he could discern faint sounds." (Rothman 2015) When applause burst out at the first performance of his Ninth Symphony in 1824, Beethoven did not hear it and had to be turned around toward the audience. Back in 1932 *Time Magazine* described the scene vividly:

*Beethoven, a homely, dumpy, shaggy-headed little figure, stood in the orchestra, eyes fixed on his score, awkwardly beating time. He was not the official conductor. The players had been instructed to pay him no attention. He was so deaf by that time that he could hear nothing of the great, surging music called for by the puny, almost illegible little notes he had made. He did not sense the applause which came afterwards until one of the soloists, a Fraulein Caroline Unger, turned him around so that his eyes could take it in. The music passed into the background then. The demonstration took a sudden, emotional turn as the people started shouting, beating their palms together still harder in an effort to assure the fierce-looking little man of their sympathy, their appreciation.* (Rothman 2015)

In those moments of potentially life-ending, excruciating despair, Ludwig van Beethoven breathed in God's breath of life — breath that awakened his muscles, his bones, his senses and enabled him to move forward, to remain alive. To be resurrected from a dying moment to a time of living. Easy living? No. Hard living, filled with frustration, lament and fatigue. But filled also with beauty and hope and peace. Beauty in creating music, hope in helping make the world better through melodies, and deep peace in knowing that he made the right choice, the choice to live.

Life did not magically change after Jesus was born, or after he died, for that matter. Taxes were too high, wages were not enough, few had enough and many were hungry. But new hope had come to earth, *God with us*. And with that hope came a peace missing before: "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid." (John 14:27) Through the movement of the Holy Spirit, the breath of God, Jesus gave this peace to his disciples, he gave it to Beethoven in the stillness of the night, he gave it to Skye as she was baptized and anointed as a child of God, he gives it to each of us and all of us today, and every day.

Jesus *gives* this peace to us. Like God's grace, God's peace is nothing that we can earn. There is nothing we can do to get it; there is no way to hoard it. God's love for us is so great that we are given that which we need to live without even asking for it. Grace. Hope. Peace. Joy. Love. It is these gifts that nourish us in the exiles and flowing times of life, and it is these gifts for which we give thanks in this season of Advent. A season of waiting to celebrate the birth of Jesus, yes, but also a season to reflect on how we embody those gifts in our lives and so shine the light of God into a dark time. This is a season to prepare ourselves to be this bright light once again as we look toward the new year, not with fear but with hope, and filled with God's gift of peace.

This is a season to acknowledge our places of dry bones, to sit in the space, to be open to God's movement and to breathe in God's breath of new life.

Skye Drummond, a mere eight weeks old, is God's miracle of new life for us this day! But so is Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, almost two hundred years old. And so too is Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus our Christ, born over two thousand years ago yet miraculously giving peace to us this day. Thanks be to God. Amen.

#### Works Cited

- Baldwin, James A. 2010 "Ezekiel 37: 1-14" Homiletical Perspective, *Feasting on the Word* Year A, Volume 2: Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press. pp123, 125, 127.
- Rothman, Lily. 2015. "Here's What Beethoven Did When He Lost His Hearing" in *Time* Magazine. Accessed Online 12.7.17: <http://time.com/4152023/beethoven-birthday/>.