

This message was prepared by Rev. Pamela Graf Short for the Tontogany Presbyterian Church for the second Sunday of Lent in the year of our LORD 2018. It rests chiefly on Romans 4:17b and is supported by Genesis 17 and Mark 8:31-38.

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

17:1 When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said to him, "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless.

17:2 And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous."

17:3 Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him,

17:4 "As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations.

17:5 No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations.

17:6 I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you.

17:7 I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.

17:15 God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name.

17:16 I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her."

Romans 4:13-17

4:13 For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith.

4:14 If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void.

4:15 For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation.

4:16 For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us,

4:17 as it is written, "I have made you the father of many nations") --in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.

Mark 8:31-38

8:31 Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.

8:32 He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

8:33 But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

8:34 He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

8:35 For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.

8:36 For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?

8:37 Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?

8:38 Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

Our Bible stories for today reflect a profound and prevailing truth about who God is:

God is the One who gives life to the dead and calls into existence things that do not exist.

Many here accept this truth as it relates to Genesis 1:1

"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth".

Many of you accept this truth as it relates to everlasting life:

meeting Jesus in glory and having all eternity to worship and serve God;

to chatter with grandpa and cousins and neighbors while building together one more mansion;

to live surrounded by the beauty of a new heaven and a new earth with its crystal sea

and its trees with fruit and shade and healing leaves.

Yes, we say!

God is the One who gives life to the dead and calls into existence things that do not exist.

It gets a little harder to accept this truth

when we see our friends dying, suffering, waiting, withering...

It gets a little harder to accept this truth

when we watch children running out of school buildings away from flying bullets;

when we witness our grandchild's decline from opiate addiction;

when we see a young mother wilt from anorexia until her face is gaunt and her hair falls out;

when we salute yet another flag draped coffin being rolled out of an airplane;

when we tune into a channel showing little toddlers lying in dust with no spark of life in their eyes;

when we hear of places of worship who close their doors for lack of support;

when our spouses never change

and our sisters avoid our calls

and our children greet us with grunts of indifference;

when we notice the sadness in the eyes of a couple who have waited and waited and waited for a child and no child is born.

It is hard—is it not—to remember the truth that

??God is the One who gives life to the dead and calls into existence things that do not exist??

Part of my problem with remembering truth is that I want to access it on my own terms.

Maybe that's what Sarah and Abraham were doing when they used Hagar as a sex slave to bear them a child.

Maybe that is what Peter was trying to do when he took Jesus aside to rebuke him after Jesus began talking about this thing of a trial and an execution.

I don't particularly like the idea of having to do through death in order to get to glory,

or of having to carry a cross in order to follow God.

I am not fond of losing something in order to save it.

It kind of annoys me.
It challenges my desire for control;
It offends my sense of duty;
after all, since when is losing something responsible?
Since when is dying living?
Since when is having a baby at the age of 90 not utterly laughable?
Well, I guess ever since God established this truth:
God is the One who gives life to the dead and calls into existence things that do not exist.

God calls into existence things that do not exist...
What does that look like for you?
What is it you are waiting for God to call into existence?
A new knee?
A sober daughter?
A brother that stops gambling? Stops lying?
A mentally ill neighbor to be made whole?
A shield against the growth of a tumor?
A boss that understands and appreciates your skill?
What does that look like for you personally?
Like God giving you joyful heart with a non-anxious spirit?
Or a friend with whom you can have a good belly laugh with one moment and a sincere cry with the next?
Like God making a home for every homeless child in Toledo?
Or filling downtown Tontogany where not one building or two, but where every building is filled with a vibrant, joyful business?

I have something I have been waiting for God to bring into existence.
I have been waiting 21 years.
In order to get the gist of this, you need to know that I grew up in a church where
all the pastors
and all the elders
and all the denominational leaders
and all the people who presided at communion
and all the people who served the LORD's supper were, and still are, all males.
There has never been a woman who lifted the bread or poured the cup;
never been a woman who said "Take. Eat. Do this in remembrance of me."
Never been a woman who had the opportunity to carry with thanksgiving the round tray with its tiny rattling glasses passing it to those she worshipped with; to those she prayed for;
to those she gave to generously of her money and time and talents.
In the course of a communion service some 21 years ago, I believe that God promised me that I would take communion from a woman at that particular church before I died.
At the time, I shared this promise with a friend who laughed out loud and said, "that will take 20 years!"
Well, 21 years later, I am still waiting and I think it is fair to say the church is further from it now than when I received the promise.
I could let go of this.
I could simply shake the dust off my feet and say it doesn't matter anymore.
But you see,
it does matter a great deal to the Kingdom of God.
It matters when half of the image of God is left unrepresented at the Table of Christ.
It matters when little girls and little boys are not given true representations of who God is and who God calls.
It matters when old women like
my mother
and my aunts

and my Sunday School teachers

go to their graves without the opportunity to exercise their responsibility to bless the elements that nourish the church and fortify the body of Christ.

And so I am leaving you with these instructions:

When they finally call a woman elder, should I be on my death bed,

I expect you to roll me into that church on a gurney so that I may receive the promise!

For you see

God is the One who gives life to the dead and calls into existence things that do not exist.

When Abraham received the news of God's plan,

he laughed out loud at such an unbelievable and ridiculous promise.

When Sarah and Abraham held their child in their arms they named him "Isaac" which means "laughter", this time laughing with joy and celebrating El Shaddai,

The God who gives life to the dead and calls into existence things that do not exist.

Now may our God who gives life to the dead
and calls into existence things that do not exist

Lift up your bodies in compassion

Restore your minds in grace

And revive your hopes

with the truthful presence of our LORD Jesus Christ in

Love

Honor

Faithfulness

and

Peace

Now and for all eternity.