

February 25, 2018
The Second Sunday in Lent
“We Can’t, but God Can!”
Genesis 17:1-7, 15-17a ~ Romans 4:13-25 ~ Mark 8:31-38

When Abraham and Sarah were in their nineties, God made them a promise. They would have a baby. Not only that, they would have so many descendants through this baby that no one would be able to count them all. Not only that, they would become a mighty nation. Not only that, some of their descendants would be Kings. Not only that, they would be given a land, a place to call their own. Not only that, God would bless the whole world through them. Our God is BIG and makes BIG promises.

According to the book of Genesis, when God promised all this to Abraham and Sarah, they responded in an odd way. They laughed. Abraham fell on his face laughing. Sarah giggled from behind the tent flap where she was eavesdropping. It wasn't that they didn't believe God, but they were in their nineties, for heaven's sake. They had to laugh at the preposterous promises of God! The voice of reason spoke sternly in their heads ... the very idea ... as if ... a scientific impossibility ... no way ...huh-uh. The next day, Sarah had morning sickness.

Abraham and Sarah had already staked a lot on following this God. They were no spring chickens when they left their home behind and followed God to a land that was not their own. They left behind the myths and the idols of their ancestors to answer this God's call to get up and go. All this, because God promised descendants, land, and blessing (Rom 12:1-3). Years later they didn't have much to show for their sacrifice and it was getting late ... too late for Abraham and Sarah in the twilight of their lives. Everything told them it was too late. By now their dreams, like their bodies, had withered away. They were tired and old. They were pretty much finished. But God wasn't finished.

I don't know why God waited so late to keep the promise and fulfill their dreams, but God's timing is always right. Perhaps the ancient rabbis were correct in their opinion that God was testing Abraham's faith ... only I think the test was not so much an expression of God's doubt ... as a refining of Abraham and Sarah's faith. It's so typical of God to take us to that place at the end of our resources where we know we can't ... but God can ... where we realize if it's going to happen it has to happen by grace alone ... and not by our strength or wits or common sense or plain old hard work. It was preposterous, unreasonable, impossible ... but they trusted in God anyway.

Twenty centuries later the apostle Paul, one of Abraham's more notable descendants, said that Abraham's faith was akin to the Christian resurrection faith:

... 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. Hoping against hope, (Abraham) believed that he would become "the father of many nations," according to what was said.... He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. No distrust made

him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, being fully convinced that God was able to do what (God) had promised. (Rom 4:17-21).

In other words, Paul discerns in the story of Abraham the great story we are remembering in this season, “the greatest story ever told” ... the gospel story ... the story of Christ’s death and resurrection ... and our death and resurrection in him. It is a theme written by God into nature itself, which is why the fertility symbols of Spring were taken up by the church in its celebrations of Easter. Flowers blossoming on bare branches ... butterflies breaking out of cocoon coffins ... sprouts breaking out from seeds planted in the earth to reach towards the skies ... “the heavens declare the glory of God” and all nature tells the story of death and resurrection.

So does history. It’s a common theme in all the stories of the Bible. Can God erase an earth damaged beyond recognition by human sin and start a new creation? **Yes!** Can God free a people dead in slavery and form them into a “kingdom of priests and a holy nation?” **Yes!** Can God liberate a people dead in exile, breathe life into a valley of dried bones, to use Ezekiel’s vision, and return them to a new beginning in the land they had lost? **Yes!** Can God heal a man who has lost everything, his wealth, his family, and finally his health until he questions God’s faithfulness and his friends urge him to curse God and die? **Yes!**

It is a common theme in all the stories of the church. Can God call out twelve ordinary fellows ... all of them inept and one of them a traitor ... and send them out with a gospel that will turn the world upside down and storm the gates of hell? **Yes!** Can God empower a church that is dead under the persecution of the Roman Empire and make it the official religion of the capital city itself? **Yes!** Can God take hold of a church that is dead under its own corruption and reform it into a new community that preaches a gospel of grace? **Yes!** Can God break through a tomb of church hierarchy and state enforced religion to raise a people who follow Christ freely in the priesthood of the believers? **Yes!** Can God overcome the soul-killing powers of nations and religions and poverty and famine and spiritual darkness of all kinds spreading the gospel to every corner of the world ... to raise living communities of faith that endure every hardship with courage and assert life against death again and again? **Yes!** Can God love a church so much because it welcomes people of all races and ordains women and treats gays and lesbians as God’s beloved children and reaches out to the least of these so that every time it’s knocked down God raises it to new life again? **Yes!**

It is a common theme in our own stories. Can God find a person whose life is ruined by addiction and raise her to new life as a disciple of Christ? **Yes!** Can God visit a person who is in prison and free him to new life as a servant of the church? **Yes!** Can God touch the life of a person who is staggered by the loss of a dear love and raise him to new life as a lover of people? **Yes!** Can God reach a person whose life is reduced by illness and raise him to life as a preacher of the gospel? **Yes!** Can God call a person who has been rejected by society and his own family and ordain him as a minister to God’s people? **Yes!** Can God bury us in baptism and raise us to walk in newness of life? **Yes! Yes! Yes!**

Amazing things happen when we trust ourselves to a God who gives life to the dead ... and calls into existence the things that do not exist. Incredible dreams come true ... preposterous promises are fulfilled ... miracles materialize if we “grow strong in our faith as we give glory to God ...

being fully convinced that God is able to do what (God) has promised.” Paul says Abraham “hoped against hope.” All his experience and the voice of reason told him that what God was promising was impossible. As Paul Tillich suggests, “These hopes, in both Testaments, have to struggle with continuous attacks of hopelessness ... attacks against the faith in a meaning of life and against the hope for life's fulfillment.”

The gospel of Jesus Christ is death and resurrection. This is our story. Do we believe it? This is our God. Do we trust this God? It's not an easy story because it's not just triumph all the time ... not an easy God because while we pray “Thy will be done,” we don't always know precisely what God's will be. We better love each other. We better encourage each other. We better be strong for each other, because the resurrection doesn't come before the dying. No cross ... no glory. But when we are enduring the cross ... when we are knee deep in the death-grip of loss ... we can still rejoice because by faith we know how the story is going to end. It's in God's hands. Before long, we'll be laughing and saying to each other, “Isn't God good?”

When things are difficult for me, I mean really, really difficult, it seems so much easier for me to listen to the voice of reason and give up. But I can't help myself. I believe in a God “who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.” I believe in the God of resurrection. I know we can't ... but God can. The hard part for me is not knowing exactly how or when God will intervene ... how much dying we have to do before resurrection will come. It's so hard to know when to dig deep and try harder ... and when to let go and let God, and of course, we have to do both at the same time. But I can say this: whatever sorrow or loss or struggle you are facing today ... whatever death you are dealing with ... whatever challenges we face as a church ... we can't, but God can. To prove it, let me offer a simple story. As the ancient liturgy for the Lord's Supper puts it so eloquently,
Christ has died.
Christ is risen.
Christ will come again.

That's our God. That's our story. Let us remember it today, and then let us go and live into it. May we pray?

What a beautiful story you have given us, Lord. But it's a scary script sometimes. We have to submit to dying before we can rise. We have to risk everything in trust before we can gain everything you promise. We have to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow Jesus. Today, hoping against hope we turn again in trust to you. Lord, we believe; help our unbelief. Amen.