

**Who Gives Life to the Dead
and Calls into Existence Things That Do Not Exist
Romans 4:13-25; Genesis 17:1-9, 15-16; Mark 8:31-37
Lent 2**

Mark 8:31-37

³¹Then Jesus began to teach the disciples 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. ³²He said all this quite openly.

And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

³³But 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.”

³⁴He 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. ³⁵For 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. ³⁶For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? ³⁷Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?”

Genesis 17:1-9, 15-17

^{7:1} 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. ²And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous.”

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

⁴“As for me, this is my covenant with you:
You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations.
⁵No longer shall your name be Abram,

but your name shall be Abraham;
for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations.
⁶I will make you exceedingly fruitful;
and I will make nations of you,
and kings shall come from you.

⁷I 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.

⁸And I will give to you, and to your offspring after you, the land where
you are now an alien, all the land of Canaan, for a perpetual holding; and
I will be their God.”

⁹God said to Abraham,

“As for you, you shall keep my covenant,
you and your offspring after you throughout their generations.”

¹⁵God said to Abraham,

“As for Sarai your wife,
you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name.

¹⁶I 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.”

Introduction to the Reading from Romans

A word about the setting of Paul’s letter to the Church in Rome:

It was a church where there were Jewish people who had become
Christians and non-Jewish people who had become Christians, and there

was some uneasiness between the two groups, which stemmed from their different histories.

The Jews were the people of the Law: their common ancestry had made them a race, and God's gift to them of the Law had taught them how to be a people.

So there was a question in the Roman church: since God had chosen the Jews to be God's Covenant People, and they were defined by the gift of the Law that God had given them, shouldn't that mean that the eternal kingdom of God that Jesus promised is really just for the Jewish Christians?

So, Paul is making his case to keep the Jewish Christians and the non-Jewish Christians united in the church in Rome, starting with the idea that it isn't adherence to the Law that counts as righteousness; it's their faith, and always has been: both for the Jews in the wilderness and the Gentiles who only came to believe in God much later.

So, Paul says, beginning at verse 4:13:

Romans 4:13-25

¹³The promise that he would inherit the world
didn't come to Abraham or to his descendants
through the *law*,
but through the righteousness of *faith*.

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

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

¹⁶For 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,
¹⁷as 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.

¹⁸Hoping against hope, Abraham believed
 that he would become “the father of *many* nations,”
 according to what was said,
 “So numerous shall your descendants be.”

...²⁰No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God,
 but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God,
²¹being fully convinced that God was able
 to do what he had promised.

²²Therefore Abraham’s *faith* “was reckoned to him
 as righteousness.”

²³Now the words, “it was reckoned to him”
 were written not for his sake alone,
²⁴but for ours also.

It will be *reckoned* to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord
 from the dead,
²⁵who was handed over to death for *our* trespasses
 and was raised for *our* justification.

The Sermon

It's probably not on our front burner to worry about the issue of the Jewish Christians in First Century Rome getting back together with the non-Jewish Christians in First Century Rome.

But it's possible that the case that Paul made to them all
 speaks an urgent word for you and me today.
 And the case that he made speaks, in part, to this reality:
 that, I think, for most or all of us,
 at times it feels like something we once knew is dying.

It may be a sense of civility, integrity, magnanimity;
 a certain disposition toward peaceful coexistence;

It may be a way of life,
 an understanding of the way the world works,
 a set of governing assumptions
 that it used to feel like there had been consensus about;

It may be a family member, or a generation,
 or a generation's icons—
 A minister friend of mine has always loved a line from a Simon &
 Garfunkel song that goes,
 "Where have you gone, Joe DiMaggio?
 A nation turns its lonely eyes to you."ⁱ

And when it feels like something we have known is dying,
 it can also feel like something within us is dying.

I think of Peter taking Jesus aside and rebuking Jesus for "quite openly"
 trying to teach the disciples that "the Son of Man must undergo great
 suffering, and be rejected..., and be killed, and after three days rise
 again."

Maybe somewhere deep inside Peter's psyche or his soul, he had a sense that to allow Jesus to be killed would mean that something fundamental in Peter would be crucified, too.

I also think of the thousand little deaths we suffer, and the little deaths we inflict, sometimes at the same time and sometimes without even knowing or realizing it.

Years ago, I was pastoring, in a small-town/rural part of North Carolina, a very small Presbyterian church. It was one of four very small Presbyterian churches within about a five-mile radius of each other, and exploratory conversations had started among the four about seeing whether it might be the Spirit's will that we combine into one congregation to make our ministries more feasible.

During the year of discernment that followed, one of our church's members who worked the hardest, did the most, sacrificed as much as anyone, lived, breathed, slept and ate "church," was enjoying a visit with a friend who lived in the area but was not part of our church. When told that these more or less struggling small churches were talking about merging together for greater strength, all the friend could absorb was the idea of the four churches closing.

She said. "Oh, no! That's a terrible idea. You just need to *work harder*."

I imagine the idea of closing the doors of a small church building—even to join up with three other churches who couldn't always make ends meet as they were—just sounded like a death to this other person, who wasn't part of any of those churches and had no concept how much the faithful servant to whom she was speaking worked and did and gave.

Maybe she was afraid that if she didn't say anything to stop the merger, she herself would die a little bit inside.

What I know for sure is that her thoughtless jab had deeply wounded something inside of our faithful church member.

I recently heard from some people who grew up in poverty and now work in ministries that address poverty. They were sharing images of what it feels like to live right on the poverty line, surviving, but barely, some weeks just making it and other weeks not quite; and despite what people who have never had to live like that may think, there's no way to get out of that track.

One said: imagine being repeatedly pushed off a cliff and pulled back, over and over.ⁱⁱ We can talk about causes, and people will have different opinions, but to millions of people in this country, that's what it feels like.

Another person said: the image I have is of people standing in line, weekly, “getting doses and doses of hopelessness pumped into them—and we'll see you next week for the same dose of hopelessness.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Abram was 99 when God made the covenant that describes the fundamental nature of God's interaction with humanity—and with specifically you, and specifically me, and specifically each human being.

“As for me, I will be God to you and to your offspring after you.

“As for you, you shall keep my covenant,
you and your offspring after you.”

“As for Sarai your wife,
I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations;
kings of peoples shall come from her.”

At this point, Abram was nearly a century old and Sarai was 90, and while I don't claim to have an encyclopedic knowledge of scientific

history, I'm reasonably confident that natural conception and childbirth were the only options on the table at this stage.

Their bodies were the bodies of people who had lived for the better part of 100 years in the harsh realities of the most unforgiving environments in Palestine—Paul, with something less than tactful eloquence, says that Abram was already “as good as dead” by the time God gave them the promise of the covenant.^{iv}

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

The astrobiologist Robert M. Hazen has written, “In the beginning, all space and energy and matter came into existence from an unknowable void: nothing, then something.”

“Our universe did not suddenly appear where there was only vacuum before,” he clarifies; “for before the Big Bang, there was no volume and no time. Our concept of nothing implies emptiness. Before the Big Bang, there was nothing to be empty in.”^v

“That moment of creation,” he wrote, “remains the most elusive, incomprehensible defining event in the history of the universe. It was a singularity, a transformation from nothing to something that remains beyond the purview of modern science or the logic of mathematics...”^{vi}

The Biblical way to say it is that darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light.^{vii}

The promise of God rests on God's free gift of grace,
and is guaranteed to all who share the faith of Abraham
in the presence of God,
who gives life to the dead
and calls into existence the things that do not exist.

It's completely understandable if you sometimes feel like something is dying.

When you see images of bloodied children in Syria,
and bodies fatally or grievously harmed
in our high schools, our middle schools,
our elementary schools;

when you're buffeted all day, every day
by confrontational voices blaring from all media;

when your relationships falter
and friendships tear at the seams;

when it seems like the scale of the world's problems
is insurmountable—
climate change, systemic injustices,
aggressive geopolitics and nuclear sabres rattling;

We remember that we have a God
who gives life to the dead
and calls into existence the things that do not exist.

In the words of G.K. Chesterton,
"Christianity has died many times and risen again;
for it had a God who knew the way out of the grave."^{viii}

Easter is about the Christ who calls a dead person from a tomb
and says, "Unbind him, and let him go" (John 11:44).

It's about the rabbi who said,
"Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies,
it remains just a single grain;
but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (John 12:24).

It's about the one who said,
 "Those who lose their life for my sake,
 and for the sake of the Good News,
 will save it."

His message, *our* message,
is that if you want your life to be saved, entrust it all—
 your money, your station, your promise;
 your love, your skills,
 your passion, your capabilities, your dreams—
to the only One who can really do anything with it that matters.

It's about the God who gives life to the dead
 and calls into existence the things that do not exist
 making new life from death.

At the beginning of each Lent, Jesus warns all of his disciples to be careful about how public they make their prayers, their fasting, their contributions to good causes.

Our faithfulness is part public testimony, part secret journey.

We play it out and hopefully grow into it constantly,
 throughout our lifetimes,
And we live it out in the presence and under the ultimate protection
 of the Creator God, who makes something out of nothing.

I did not remember until this week that on Ruth Graham's tombstone is an epitaph that she had seen once on one of those orange highway signs. Underneath her precious name and those sacred dates, it says, "End of construction. Thank you for your patience."

For all those who come here today in the shadow of mortality and vulnerability, or who bring a certain sense of loss, an awareness that something is not as it used to be and probably never will be again,

a blessing of courage written by John O'Donohue:

When the light around you lessens
And your thoughts darken until
Your body feels fear turn
Cold as a stone inside,

When you find yourself bereft
Of any belief in yourself
And all you unknowingly
Leaned on has fallen,

When one voice commands
Your whole heart,
And it is raven dark,

Steady yourself and see
That it is your own thinking
That darkens your world,

Search and you will find
A diamond-thought of light,

Know that you are not alone
And that this darkness has purpose;
Gradually it will school your eyes
To find the one gift your life requires
Hidden within this night-corner.

Invoke the learning
Of every suffering

You have suffered.

Close your eyes.
 Gather all the kindling
 About your heart
 To create one spark.
 That is all you need
 To nourish the flame
 That will cleanse the dark
 Of its weight of festered fear.^{ix}

May the God who gives life to the dead
 remind you now and always that a light shines in the darkness,
 and the darkness did not overcome it.

And may the God who calls into existence the things that do not exist
 bring to life within you
 a surging world of beauty and truth and love
 to see you through this Lenten discipline
 to an Easter of unending joy.

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ⁱ Paul Simon, "Mrs. Robinson" (Publishing info)

ⁱⁱ Stacy Brumgardt, featured in the online video course Seeking Shalom
 (<https://luptoncenter.understoryonline.com/courses/75>)

ⁱⁱⁱ Keynon Akers in Seeking Shalom

^{iv} Romans 4:19, NRSV

^v Robert M. Hazen, *The Story of Earth: The First 4.5 Billion Years* (New York: Viking, 2012), 7

^{vi} Hazen, *Earth*, 7.

^{vii} Genesis 1:2.

^{viii} Quoted in Kenda C. Dean, *Almost Christian* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010)

^{ix} John O'Donohue, "For Courage," in O'Donohue, *To Bless the Space Between Us* (New York: Doubleday, 2008), 107-108.