

2-28-2021 2nd Lent

Greetings, friends. Blessings on this second Sunday of Lent.

We begin in the name of God, our Creator, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Lord be with you. Let us pray.

Stretch your arms wide, O God, to embrace all that we need to assure us of your comforting presence. Speak within our hearts this morning that we might discern the path before us, and your boundless grace. We pray in Christ's name. Amen.

Some very rich lessons for us today, first from **Genesis, chapter 17**. [17: 1-7, 15-17]

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, God appeared to him and said, 'I am El Shaddai. Live in my presence, mature, and I shall grant covenant between myself and you, and make you very numerous.' And Abram bowed low to the ground. God spoke to him as follows, 'For My part, this is My covenant with you. You, Abram, will become the father of many nations, and you are no longer to be called Abram. Your name now is to be Abraham, for I am making you a father of many nations. I shall make you exceedingly fertile. I shall make you into nations, and your issue will be kings, and I shall maintain My covenant between Myself and you, and you and your descendants after you, generation after generation, as a covenant in perpetuity to be your God, and the God of your descendants after you. Furthermore, as regards your wife Sarai, you must not call her Sarai, but Sarah. I shall bless her, and moreover give you a son by her. I shall bless her and she will become nations, kings of peoples will issue from her. Abraham bowed low to the ground and he laughed, thinking to himself,

*'Is a child to be born to a man one hundred years old,
and will Sarah have a child at the age of ninety?'*

The second lesson for today is from **Romans, chapter 4**. [4: 13-14, 16-25]

For the promise to Abraham and Sarah and their descendants that they should inherit the world was not through the Law, but through the uprightness of their faith. For if it is those who live by the Law who will gain inheritance, faith is worthless and the promise is without impact. That is why the promise is to faith, so that it comes to us as a free gift and is secure for all the descendants. Not only

those who rely on the Law, but all those others who rely on the faith of Abraham and Sarah, the ancestors of us all. Abraham is our father in the eyes of God in whom he put his faith. And it is God who brings the dead to life and calls into existence what does not yet exist.

Though there seemed no hope, Abraham hoped and believed that he was to become father of many nations in fulfillment of the promise: just so will your descendants be. Even the thought that his body was as good as dead--he was about a hundred years old--and that Sarah's womb was dead, too--she was 90--that could not shake their faith. Counting on the promises of God, they did not doubt or disbelieve, but drew strength from faith and gave glory to God, fully convinced that whatever God promised, God has the power to perform. This is the faith that was reckoned to him as righteousness. And the word 'reckoned' in scripture applies not only to Abraham and Sarah, it is there for our sake too--for we too will be 'reckoned' righteous, because we believe in the one who raised from the dead our Lord Jesus Christ, who has raised us up from the dead to give us a life of justification.

[Gary prays and sings "The Time Has Come"]

The Gospel is from **Mark, chapter 8**. This is the pivot point in the gospel of Mark. [8: 31-38]

After Peter had proclaimed Jesus the Messiah, Jesus began to teach the disciples that the Son of Man (the Bar Enasha) was destined to suffer grievously, to be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and he would be put to death and after three days rise again, and Jesus said this to the disciples quite openly.

Then, taking him aside, Peter tried to rebuke Jesus. But turning and seeing all his disciples, Jesus rebuked Peter and said to him, 'Get behind me Satan! You are thinking not as God thinks, but as humans think.'

Jesus called the other people and disciples together and said, 'If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, renounce yourself, and take up your cross and follow me. Anyone who wants to save their life, will lose it. Anyone who loses their life for my sake and for the sake of the Gospel, will save it. What gain then is it for anyone to win the whole world and forfeit your life? And indeed what can anyone offer in

exchange for their life? For if anyone in this sinful and idolatrous generation is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will also be ashamed of you when he comes in glory with God and all the holy angels.'

The word of God. Praise to you, O God.

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In the name of God, Creator, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Law and the Promise--this is what Lutheran seminarians study for 4 years in seminary--the Law and the Promise. The Law invites us to measure up, but when we try and do that, no matter how hard, no matter how deep our dedication, and we try to prove ourselves, and improve ourselves and justify ourselves, it becomes endlessly boring and impossible to accomplish.

Perhaps you know people like this. Perhaps you're one of them who's tried going on and on and on and on and on and on, and self-improvement doing, everything possible in every workshop and changing your diet and getting higher consciousness--ugh, it never stops.

Two famous people in history who did this were St. Paul, trying desperately to become perfect, and Martin Luther. Yes, he was not about to be a failure before God, and these two gentlemen pushed themselves so hard and so far, they came to the breaking point, until they were then broken open to the promise of grace. You are loved for who you are. This is Christ's gift. Even if you don't believe it, Christ does. And In God's presence, you are loved and cherished forever. Can you ever get enough of that?

Quit trying to pretend. Drop all the self-improvement games. Focus on the grace of God, trusting first deeply that we are loved and beloved, and when that sinks in, we begin to know that so is everyone else. Let's try and live that way.

Abraham received the promise we hear in the Genesis story today. There are various names for God in the Hebrew scriptures, and here we know that he was addressed by El Shaddai, which means the 'God of the wastelands'. Isn't that powerful? The God of the wastelands, who's come to you, and invites you to receive the Promise--a new destiny. In your future are endless generations, kings

and queens shall flow through your bloodline. Because Abraham deserved it? No, because the promise of grace had come to him. Now this promise was so preposterous that Abraham laughed. A hundred years old--what are you talking about? Sarah? She, too, laughs. Nothing...what? The womb has been barren for how long? What are you talking about?

And yet and yet and yet. God's future breaks through.

Paul uses--in this text from *Romans* today--that God is the One who brings into existence what has not yet existed. The whole of creation is the first gift, but our faith is that second gift, of trusting that the newness of life, that even what has not existed, may come into being. Not as some form of magic, but that trusting in the One who loves and cherishes us, that that One relentlessly is for us, will never give up on us, will never use anything destructive that we have done against us. God is always for us, always for us. That's the promise. That's what Christ gives his life for.

And so Jesus makes crystal clear today in the Gospel text what is his path, and how it fulfills the promise to make it real for all of us. He comes as the liberator--without violence. We spoke about that last week. Jesus takes on himself the rejection of others. He practices a mercy from which no one is excluded. Jesus trusts in the capacity of all people, including us, to keep opening ourselves, and accepting the truth that we are the beloved sons and daughters of God. Because if people can't be reached by love, Jesus knows that we will be embraced by forgiveness.

But then he calls us to a way of life that seems to contradict everything we know, at least everything that seems normal. Jesus says, "*Follow me. Practice what I live. Lose your life, at least what you think your life is. Renounce yourself. Take up your cross. Follow me.*"

Let me move towards conclusion with a reminder of a story shared a time or two before, but which is timeless.

About half a dozen years ago, Tshenu and Mudzunga Farisani in South Africa

invited the people who had tortured him in prison to come to lunch. What an invitation! Seven of those nine people were able to attend. One of them was a Lutheran. One of them was a woman. All of their children begged their fathers or mother to please go to this lunch for their sake, to heal them. They sat down together. And before they broke bread, Tshenu said "I have only one question. I would like to know why--why did you torture me?"

With initial reluctance, understandably, eventually the conversation went on for a good 25-30 minutes. And finally the group acknowledged together, "We don't know. We don't know why we tortured you. We were told it's your job. We heard you were a terrorist. We thought you would destroy us. All of that. All of that was dismissed. We don't know. We don't know."

Tshenu said, "Very well. I thank you for that honesty, and I forgive you. Now let's have lunch." And so they ate together, and in that process new friendships formed, and all of them asked how they could participate in supporting the church locally there in Venda, South Africa. In fact, a couple years later, one of those people became the treasurer of the congregation.

God is the one who brings into existence what has not yet existed. The way of the Cross, the path of contradiction, is about turning us from a way of death that does not understand what we are doing here, and how we are living. Turning us--
Lose your lives. Renounce yourself. Follow me--that you may have the genuine, generous blessing God intends for everyone. So may it be.
Thanks be to God.

The peace which surpasses all human understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

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Today, let us remember friends around the world in their struggles for life and justice and peace.

We pray for the people in Burma, Myanmar, who long for democracy, for those in Hong Kong struggling to protect the democracy that we know they love.

We pray for the Muslim Uighurs in concentration camps in China.

We pray for the Sikh and Punjabi farmers in India longing for justice.
We pray for all who are afflicted by COVIS around the world, who equally desire
with us access to the vaccines.
We pray that democracy may come to Russia.
We pray for the people of the Ukraine, the people of Brazil.
We pray that our hearts might be open to pray for all your beloved children,
O God, and that by your grace we may understand ourselves as brothers and
sisters in the communion of life
With all whom you have created and loved.
We pray in Christ's name.

Glory be to God, Abba Imma, Son, and Holy Spirit,
and upon us weak and wounded, upon us amazing and beautiful creatures
may mercy and compassion be shared [shed] in both worlds now forever. Amen.

[Video of congregation singing "River of Glory".]