

The God Who Calls into Existence the Things That Do Not Exist

We gather today in the presence of God, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.

That line comes from our Epistle reading for today of course. But it is a theme that runs through all our scripture readings for this day, and our celebration of this Eucharist, and indeed our entire Lenten observance. Today we are called to find ourselves in the presence of the God who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.

That, Paul says, is where Abraham found himself. God appeared to Abraham and said “walk before me, and be blameless; and I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous.” Now this wasn’t the first time Abraham had heard this. Nearly twenty-five years before, when Abram—he was called Abram then—was seventy-five years old, God had called him and his wife Sarai to leave their city, to leave their family, to leave behind everything they knew, and to follow God wherever God would lead them. And in that initial calling God promised Abram and Sarai three things: God promised them a land to dwell in, God promised them descendants to dwell in their land after them, and God promised them blessing, blessing for themselves and blessing for their descendants, blessing through which all the families of the earth would be blessed. God’s promise to Abram was not just for Abram, but in the long run was for the entire world. And Abram and Sarai believed God, they trusted in God’s promise, and they left behind their former lives and they followed God. And they kept on following God, trusting in the promise and waiting for a child, for nearly twenty-five years, until Abram was ninety-nine, and Sarai was well past child-bearing age, and it was hard to imagine how the promise was ever going to come true. And it is precisely then, in that moment, that God appears to Abram, and God says “I will make you exceedingly numerous”—and this time, God makes it not just a *promise* but a *covenant*. In the ancient world, a covenant was like a contract or a treaty; but a covenant was special because it bound the parties into a relationship that was more than just a business arrangement or a quid pro quo; a covenant was a relationship that was supposed to *change* the parties by making them a part of each other’s lives. Now think about that for a minute: God made a covenant with Abram. God, the God of gods, the Creator of the universe, the One who made all life and destroyed it in a flood and saved it through Noah (as we heard last week), *God* made a *covenant* with *Abram*, God bound himself to Abram, God changed himself by becoming part of Abram’s life and letting Abram become part of his life. God made himself responsible to Abram, responsible for bringing about the blessing of progeny God had promised. That is a huge change in the metaphysical constitution of things, a huge new thing God is doing; and to signal that new thing, God gives his covenant couple new names: Abraham, father of a multitude, and Sarah, princess who will be mother of kings. And God makes good on the covenant: about a year later, Abraham, even though he’s as good as dead, and Sarah, even though she’s always been barren, about a year later they finally, impossibly, conceive, and Isaac is born, the child who could not possibly exist is called into existence, the child of promise becomes a living blessing. So Abraham and Sarah become the parents of Isaac; but more than that, in their faithfulness they become the parents of all the faithful—he is the father of all of us, Paul writes—because Abraham and Sarah stand in the presence of the God who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.

We see something very much like that happening in the Gospel reading today, too. Jesus calls his disciples together and tells them his mission has reached a turning point, that he’s done what he can do in Galilee, and that it’s time for him to go to Jerusalem, and confront the Temple authorities, and confront the Roman overlords, and be rejected, and be humiliated, and be tortured, and be executed—and, on the third day, be raised to new life. He says all this quite plainly. But the disciples don’t seem to hear that bit about the third day; the disciples get stuck on all that stuff about being rejected and killed; and they are not at all ready to hear what Jesus has really said. Peter especially—Peter who often goes ahead and blurts out what the other disciples are thinking but don’t dare say out loud—Peter especially takes Jesus away quietly and tells him he shouldn’t talk that way, it’s bad for morale, it’s not what people want to hear, it’s going to make it really difficult to market the message. But Jesus tells Peter he’s thinking about it the wrong way, he’s thinking too small, he doesn’t see a big enough picture, he’s not taking into account what God can do—his mind is fixed on earthly things, not heavenly things. Jesus stands in the presence of God who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist—and so Jesus can see through the threat of Crucifixion to the promise of Resurrection. Peter doesn’t see

that yet, none of the disciples see that yet—and the only way the disciples can see that is to learn to stand there themselves, to take up their cross, to lose themselves into the Gospel so that they may find themselves in God, so that they may find themselves with new life given to their deadness, with new things in them called into existence that had never existed in them before. That’s the vision Jesus has, and that’s the vision he invites his disciples to share.

And that’s the vision we are invited to share today, too. We are called today to find ourselves in the presence of the God who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.

I just got back from the annual conference of the Consortium of Endowed Episcopal Parishes, and in that gathering we talked a lot about new life rising up from death, about new things being called into existence. We met in New Orleans, so we talked a lot about that city, about its devastation in Katrina and the painfully slow pace of much of its recovery. We took a bus tour to see many neighborhoods that were hardest hit by the flooding and the neglect, and still look to be in ruins. But we didn’t go there to see ruins: we went there to see places where the Episcopal Church is leading the way in rebuilding houses, and not just rebuilding houses but rebuilding neighborhoods, recreating relationships, striving for justice in places that have long been mired in prejudice and exclusion. We talked a lot about the current financial crisis and how it’s affecting all our churches, how endowment values are down, how some congregations are having to cut staffs and programs and ministries, how a sense of anxiety seems to be permeating much of what our churches do these days. But we didn’t go there to talk about anxiety; we went there to talk about hope, about how even in the midst of financial stresses, even in a time of dilemma, churches and individuals are finding courage to do more with less, finding creative ways of maintaining ministries and even expanding ministries, finding forms of generosity they didn’t even know were there before. We talked a lot about the cultural challenges our church faces, when “non-religious” is the fastest growing demographic among people surveyed about religion in our country, and when Episcopalians seem to be the butt of many jokes about how churches and Christians are ineffective, out of touch, and unimportant in the *real* world. But we didn’t go there to witness the decline and fall of the Episcopal Church; we went there to witness a vital and vibrant faith that knows how to use resources and wealth and beautiful buildings and traditions of prayer to change lives and lift up souls and be faithful to Christ and help make the world a better place. At that conference I was reminded again, and reminded powerfully, that our Episcopal Church, our Trinity Church, is a place to come stand in the presence of God, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.

And that vision for the church can be a vision for each of us. In our church life, Lent can be a time for us to be especially mindful of standing in God’s presence in that way. Lent makes us face our limitations, our mortality, that’s how we began Lent on Ash Wednesday; but Lent makes us face those things precisely so that we can come to know how in the midst of our mortality God gives us life, how God empowers us to transcend limitations and bring new things into being. Fasting and abstinence make us face our appetites and cravings and desires; and in so doing they open us up to see how God provides for what we truly need—not always what we crave, but what we truly need. Self-examination and repentance make us face our sin, the deadness of our hearts, our failure to love as God loves us; and in so doing they open us up to see that God loves us back to life and always already is inspiring us to love. Almsgiving makes us face our own love of money and our tendency to want to hoard what we regard as ours; and in so doing it opens us up to God’s grace to hold lightly what we have, and to share the resources that will help others live in well-being, and to bring into existence possibilities for material good that do not yet exist. The practices of Lent help us learn to see what Jesus wants his disciples to see, to see through Crucifixion to Resurrection, to set our minds on divine things for the raising up of earthly life. The practices of Lent help us be mindful of how we also, like Abraham and Sarah and Peter and the disciples and Jesus, we also stand in the presence of God, who gives life to the dead, and calls into existence the things that do not exist.

That is the promise, that is the *covenant*, the life-changing relationship, proclaimed to us today in our scriptures, our season, our Eucharist. Let it be our prayer that we may live that covenant, and stand in God’s presence, and bring into existence what God calls forth in us, in this holy season of Lent, and for all our days. Amen.