

Proclaiming The Lords Death: As Good As Dead

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

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Romans 4:16-21

I want to structure this sermon around two phrases from our text. As I studied this passage and prayed over it this week, two phrases stood out to me and they convey the substance of what Paul wants to say. The first of these is the words Paul uses to describe both Abraham and Sarah. “His body was as good as dead.”

Back in 2008, Linda and I took our family on a western trip. We drove from Grand Rapids down through the heart of this beautiful country. We first stopped in Colorado to visit Mesa Verde and from there we drove south and west into Arizona toward the Grand Canyon. I remember that trip well. Instead of taking the interstate, we drove on route 160, a two-lane highway through the desert. The scenery was spectacular. All along the road there were huge outcroppings of rock, high mesas, fields peppered with sagebrush, and all of it laid out under the blessing of a wide blue sky. Our drive took us through quirky little towns with great names like Rare Metals, Mexican Water, and Tuba City. That whole stretch is considered a desert of course, and the landscape is certainly dry and forbidding, especially compared to a green place like Michigan.

But I distinctly remember that when we got past Tuba City and came to the place where you turned off Highway 160 and took Highway 89 down toward the canyon, the desert suddenly changed. All along the way it had been dry, but there had always been plant life. Sagebrush in the fields, little desert flowers growing beside dried streambeds. And tufts of grass beside the roadbed. But suddenly we came to a place where there was nothing. There was no life that we could see. No sagebrush, no grass. Not one blade of any sort of plant anywhere. No towns, no homes or roads. No animals grazing. It was just red rock, black asphalt and heat. It was barren. Utterly barren. And it went on for miles. I don't mind telling you that I found the place unnerving. I don't think I'd ever been in a place that lifeless. A landscape that barren felt threatening and hopeless. Like something out of a Cormac McCarthy novel.

I found myself remembering that barren place as I studied Romans 4 this week. It came to mind because that's about the same level of barrenness Paul sees in Abraham and Sarah. Sarah: the barren women. That's what Paul calls her in Galatians 4:27. Not a very nice way to describe a woman who's struggled to have children, but it's the word people used. Paul actually goes even further in our passage. He says her womb was dead. He's not much nicer to Abraham. He says Abraham was as good as dead. He paints a picture of two decrepit, dilapidated, dried-up people.

Why does he describe these people in such severe terms? He's making a point about faith. He wants to show us how God works in this world and he wants to show us what salvation looks like. And if you are going to faith you've got to talk about Abraham and Sarah. "Look to the rock from which you were hewn!" proclaims the prophet Isaiah in chapter 51, "Look to Abraham, your Father, and to Sarah who gave you birth." For his listeners, Abraham and Sarah would have been considered heroes of the faith. When they taught their children what faith looked like, they would have pointed to Sarah and Abraham. 'Ok,' says Paul. 'If Abraham and Sarah are our models of faith, let's talk about them. There they are standing in the dust at the opening of their tent. Abraham is almost 100. He's leaning on his cane. Sarah is in her late eighties. She's stooped over. Do these two people have anything to contribute to the fulfillment of the promise. Do these two people have any ability to produce the promised covenant child?! 'No chance!' says Paul. 'They were as good as dead. They were decrepit, dried up people. They're not a picture of hope. Humanly speaking, they are a picture of disappointment.'

As good as dead. In the last month we've all come to realize how shaky human power really is. In the past month we've realized that the things that we are used to trusting in, the institutions we thought were strong, are actually pretty frail. We are justifiably proud of our great American economy. It's been growing consistently for 10 years. The stock market was at record highs, the unemployment numbers were at record lows. At the end of January American 401K's had a record value. Everything was going so well. If some bearded prophet had come to you at the beginning of March and said to you: Before this month is out 3 million people will file for unemployment, and economists will be predicting 20 percent unemployment, and the market will be down 30 percent, and economists at Goldman Sachs will be predicting a 24% contraction in second quarter GDP, you would have said, "No way! Not possible! That couldn't happen! Our economy is stronger than that! Our institutions are stronger than that." *And yet, here we are.* A month ago, all these institutions seems rock solid. Unshakeable. Eternal. Now they are all tottering. Suddenly everything seems shaky. Now we realize that so many of our businesses and institutions actually run with very thin margins. Every day they walk close to the edge. Our businesses, our jobs, our 401K's, our health care system, our educational institutions-it's all suddenly shaky.

I don't know about you, but speaking personally, these last weeks have made me realize how much I've put my trust in these human things. How much of my own personal sense of security was tied up in the firmness of my 401K, the wisdom of my investment plans, the security of my job. Without really realizing it, I've learned to lean on those things. A big part of my sense of well-being and safety comes from those things. Maybe that's true for you too

Jeremiah's words about idols come to mind. Here's what he says in Jeremiah 10. *[The people] cut a tree out of the forest, and a craftsman shapes it with his chisel. They adorn it with silver and gold; they fasten it with hammer*

and nails so it will not totter. Like a scarecrow in a cucumber field, their idols cannot speak; they must be carried because they cannot walk.

I wonder if God is using this terrible thing to shake some idols out of my hands. And maybe yours too. Hear me correctly: I'm not saying that God sent coronavirus to punish our idolatry. Some people are saying that; I'm more inclined to see the coronavirus as an evil result of the fall. Frankly, only God knows the why of this thing. But I do know that God has used this to shake some of the idols out of my hands. He's made me realize how much of my sense of security has come from the size of my 401K the security of my job and the health of the economy. I wonder if some of these things have become something like idols to me. And maybe to you too. Of course, none of these things are bad things. They are good things! That's why they become idols. An idol is a good thing, a God created thing, that we lean on too hard. We start using it as a foothold. We start to lean on it with heart, soul, mind and strength. But none of these good things can sustain the weight of our soul, none of these created things can bear the weight of our eternal hopes. They're too shaky. They can go from firm to tottering in less than two weeks.

Which finally brings us to our second phrase, the most important of the three. If you forget everything else I've said today, remember the words of verse 17: *"The God who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that are not."* Over the last two weeks we've been sending you daily video devotions. I hope you've enjoyed them. I hope you've noticed that every single one of these devotions starts with the same words: "People of LaGrave, where does our help come from? Our help is in the name of the Lord who made the heavens and the earth. Our help is in Jesus Christ who is the same yesterday, today and forever." We choose the same words every single day because we want to underline an essential fact of life: There is only one foundation that does not change. There is only one rock upon which you can securely place your feet. There is only one place one place that can bear the weight of your hope without shaking. That's in the God who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that are not.

I was watching CBS morning news this week Wednesday and they had a story about two men who recovered from the coronavirus. One was a relatively healthy young man in his 40's, the other was a man in his 80's. Both of them were put in ICU by the disease, and both of them were brought to the very edge of their life. Both of them had their life shaken, shaken to the point where their power was completely gone, shaken to the point where they were as good as dead, and they came back from the brink. Both these men gave glory to God. The older man testified, *"It is only by the grace of God that I am here."* The younger man said, *"I was running out of breath and just when I was slipping it was like God breathed into my lungs and turned me around. He gave me my life back."* You might say that the shaking helped them figure out where their hope lies. When you are shaken that hard, it has a clarifying effect. When you are shaken that hard you know what's wobbly and what's firm. When you

are shaken that hard, you realize that the only unshakeable source of hope is Jesus. Our only hope is in the God who brings life from the dead and calls into being things that are not.

Paul points to what God does for Abraham as an example of how God can bring life to people who are as good as dead, he could have just as easily have pointed to the cross. When you look at the cross of Jesus, it's like God has deliberately orchestrated his salvation to show the barrenness of human power. On Good Friday human beings contribute nothing. On Good Friday human power is deader than Sarah and Abraham. The religious powers, the priests and the Levites, the people like me who are supposed to keep faith alive, they sentence Jesus to death. The Political powers, the one who are supposed to make sure justice is done, they execute an innocent man. The disciples who promised to follow Jesus wherever he went-they abandon him and flee. Even the creation seems to become unstable - the sun goes dark and the ground shakes. On that hill outside of Jerusalem there is no faith, no justice, no commitment. The place is utterly barren of human hope. And yet in this dead place God sows everlasting life. He shows that salvation is completely a God thing. *He is the God who bring life from the dead and calls into being things that are not.*

This is our good God. I don't know the state of your heart right now. I don't know the state of your hope. The staff has been making phone calls to members so we know that many of you are okay. But if you're a person who's spent your whole life building a business and suddenly find the who thing threatened, or if you've been laid off, or if you are a person working on the front lines of this pandemic, you're probably shaking. Let me remind all of us of our true foundation. Let us turn together toward the one hope in your life that can never move: Jesus Christ who is the same yesterday, today and forever, and His Father, the God who gives life form the dead and calls into being things that are not. And then rooted in that firm place let me invite you to move forward into your week with the three things Paul is always holding up to us: Faith, Hope and Love. At the start of our day, let's open our hands in faith. Root yourself in your Lord and let His love fill you. Root yourself in that unshakeable place. Then let's lift up our head in hope. Look past the bad news and the dire predictions-which are all based on human capacities and human institutions-and fix your eyes on the one who actually holds the future. And then let's step out into our day in love. Love people fiercely and deeply. Be light in the darkness. Be a sign of life in the midst of death. Show the world that you belong to the God who brings life form the dead and calls into being things that are not.

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