

## THE THINGS THAT DO NOT EXIST

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Lindley G. DeGarmo  
Towson Presbyterian Church  
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Genesis 12:1-9  
Romans 4:13-25

In the fourth chapter of his letter to the Romans, the apostle Paul points to the biblical patriarch, Abraham, as the paragon of faith in God. To have faith like Abraham, Paul says, is trust completely in a God who is willing and capable of doing what God promises—namely, “the God who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.”<sup>1</sup>

“What are some things that do not exist? Peace does not exist where there is war. Growth does not exist where there is decay. Faith does not exist where there is disbelief. Love does not exist where there is hate. [And, of course,] life does not exist where there is death. Death is the great nothing, the ultimate negation.

“Try as we may, we cannot bring life out of death. When the legendary American baseball player Ted Williams died [a few years ago], the nation celebrated his career and mourned his death—until we found out that his head had been frozen in a can and his body suspended in a tank at the Alcor Life Extension Foundation. Biostasis, they call it.<sup>2</sup> At that point Ted Williams became a joke; but which of us can come any closer to preserving life when death comes to pay its call? As Shakespeare’s Hamlet says, ‘This fell sergeant, death, is strict in his arrest.’<sup>3</sup>

“Death is the great stalker of us all... That is the human story. Life out of death is not the human story. Life out of death is the *divine* story. It is *God* who gives life to the dead and calls into being the things that do not exist.

“We’re confused about this. We use analogies to suggest life out of death, like that of the brown tulip bulb that emerges in the spring as a brilliant flower, or the green shoot that pokes out of the apparently dead tree stump. These natural processes are wonders, of course, that bring genuine refreshment to our hearts; but they only *point to* life out of death; they are not the thing itself. In the natural world, there is no resurrection of the dead. The bulb, the tree, the butterfly—all will some day die.

“Now, in our text this morning, the apostle Paul is talking about Abraham... [Paul] wants us to understand that Abraham is the father of us all, the ‘father of all who believe,’ [not because Abraham sired us all biologically, but because we can share his faith.<sup>4</sup>] ... The reason for this *stands against* reason: Abraham is called the progenitor of all people not because of his strength but because of his *impotence*. Abraham’s place in the story of

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<sup>1</sup> Romans 4:17b.

<sup>2</sup> “Ted Williams Frozen In Two Pieces: Meant To Be Frozen In Time; Head Decapitated, Cracked, DNA Missing,” CBS News, August 12, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> *Hamlet*, 5.2.288-289.

<sup>4</sup> David L. Bartlett, *Romans* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 44.

salvation depends not upon Abraham's sufficiency, but upon his *lack*...[I]n an age when talk about 'human potential' is everywhere, we who are biblical people need to remind ourselves of Abraham's distinguishing feature: *he had no human potential*. His human potential *did not exist*.

“Remember God's promise to Abraham. In the book of Genesis God promises on at least four different occasions that Abraham's descendants would be innumerable. Yet, as Paul emphasizes in Romans 4, Abraham's body 'was as good as dead because he was about a hundred years old' and he had a wife who was almost as old and had never conceived any children. In the passage from Genesis that especially impressed Paul, God brings Abraham outside his tent at night time. We need to imagine the night sky as it must have been four or five thousand years ago—no city lights, no pollution. If you've ever been out in the desert at night you'll have some idea of what Abraham saw:

[God] brought [Abraham] outside and said, 'Look toward heaven, and count the stars, if you are able to count them.' Then he said to him, 'So shall your descendants be.' And [Abraham] believed the Lord, and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.<sup>5</sup>

“[Consider carefully] that word *reckon*, as Paul did. *Logizomai*. What a universe of meaning is there in this 'unromantic word'!<sup>6</sup> The root is *logos*, [Greek for 'word']. Abraham was not righteous in himself. God reckoned, 'worded,' spoke him into righteousness. [That is the power of the] *logos*, the Word of God. [Remember, too, as Paul did, the very beginning of the Bible:] Genesis, chapter one: 'And God said, 'let there be light.' Someone said, the entire Christian enterprise depends on [those] three words, ' . . . and God said.'<sup>7</sup> 'And God said, let there be light'; *and there was light*.' Creation by the Word! God spoke; *and it was so*...

“[That is the power of God, ] the Word that 'gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist'—creation *ex nihilo*, 'creation out of nothing,' [the theologians call it. T]his is the Word that 'reckons' life where there is no potential for life, and righteousness where there is no human capacity for it. This is the Word that calls forth faith in God's promise when there is no earthly indicator that it will come true.

“[I wonder, sometimes, whether] we [really] want to believe that God can create something out of nothing. [It's so tempting always] to reserve some of the credit for ourselves. [It's an old problem. Back in the early 5th Century, there was a big dispute going on between the great St. Augustine and a British monk named Pelagius. Pelagius thought Augustine was encouraging lax morality by preaching—as Saint Paul had—that human beings can do nothing to extricate themselves from sin, that salvation is entirely dependent upon God's grace. Pelagius argued that the corruption of the human race is not inborn, but is due to bad example and habit; therefore, human beings can choose voluntarily to lead lives of righteousness and thereby merit heaven by their own efforts.] Pelagius wrote that we need God in order to help us 'more easily to resist the evil spirit.' Augustine [said] (I'm paraphrasing): What's with this 'more easily'? Why not just say simply, we need the help of God to overcome evil? What does that 'more easily' add? It

<sup>5</sup> Genesis 15:5-6.

<sup>6</sup> Karl Barth in *Romans*.

<sup>7</sup> William H. Willimon, *Conversations with Barth about Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2006).

adds human potential. We can beat evil on our own, Pelagius would have us think, but we appreciate God's help so we can do it more easily. [Baloney!]<sup>8</sup>

“[Pelagius was ultimately condemned as a heretic, but Pelagianism continues to crop up wherever Christians imagine human free will and moral striving can somehow stamp out sin and clear the way for God's reign on earth as it is in heaven. Paul disagreed completely. Paul picked up themes that had been sounded long before by the Old Testament prophet Isaiah. Isaiah wrote during the dark days of Israel's exile in Babylon, when it seemed that Israel had come to the end of the road, that it had no future except slavery in a far off land. When it appeared that there was no hope, Isaiah proclaimed that God was promising] to do a completely new thing, [to create] something out of nothing:

Behold . . . new things I now declare; before they spring forth I tell you of them.<sup>9</sup>

From this time forth I make you hear new things, hidden things which you have not known. . . before today you have never heard of them.<sup>10</sup>

“See how the prophet emphasizes that God's new thing is completely out of our power. We cannot even imagine it, let alone create it. It is declared, spoken, announced by God alone without our cooperation.

“Paul links this creation out of nothing with the promise made to Abraham. What does he promise? What is the essence of the nonexistent thing that God will call into existence? It is a new creation, with a new humanity as its crown and glory.

“A new humanity. The old humanity is named Adam and it is imprisoned by Sin and Death. [Adam is humanity, all of us,] locked into our human cycles of destruction. [Distrust. Broken relationships. Violence. War. Terrorism. And what is to be done? I imagine most of us would love to see Osama bin Laden brought to justice. But if he were killed or locked tightly away in Guantánamo forever], would that make any difference? Not really. Terror is abroad in the world. We need a God who can create peace where peace does not exist.

“There was a time when people believed *we* could make a new humanity happen. Some people still seem to believe that. Americans are known to be incurably optimistic about human nature and about our own nature in particular. [We like to think of ourselves as] good, compassionate people. Christian faith says not so. The Christian view of humanity is tragic. The Christian view of humanity means that we are horrified but not surprised [when ordinary people] do terrible things to [their neighbors], and who can say that you and I would not do the [horrible, hateful things] under certain circumstances?...

“[*The New York Times* carried a story a while back about a] Cambodian man named Youk Chhang [who] somehow managed to survive the Khmer Rouge genocide, which killed two million Cambodians, many of them intellectuals, professionals, and educators. Youk Chhang has committed his life to collecting testimonies from Khmer Rouge killers. The article describes his interview of one of them, who was a boy of 14 at the time and became a killer for fear of his own life. Youk Chhang (the interviewer) concluded that he and the man he interviewed could quite easily have changed places.

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<sup>8</sup> Augustine, *A Treatise on the Grace of Christ, and On Original Sin*, Book 1, ch. 28, xxvii.

<sup>9</sup> Isaiah 42:9.

<sup>10</sup> Isaiah 48:6-7).

‘They are us, and we are them. [The killers] are the evil side of us. Crimes are committed by human beings, by people just like us.’<sup>11</sup>...

We need a new humanity. But where is it to come from? The message of the Bible is that it is to come from God[, God at work in Abraham and in all of Abraham’s spiritual descendants, empowering a righteousness that is not their own. To be sure,] the new humanity, the new creation of God exists at present only in the form of promise. Signs of it in this life are only signs; they are not the thing itself. Yet signs are what you and I are here to give. Our lives as Christians are signs, pointers to the promise, purpose, and power of God...<sup>12</sup>

“Helmuth James von Moltke is not as well known as Dietrich Bonhoeffer, but he should be. He was a young German aristocrat, a member of the ancient Prussian nobility, tall, strikingly handsome, a brilliant lawyer. Unlike most people, very early in the 1930s he saw that the rise of Nazi power would be a catastrophe. He was appalled by the Nazi-controlled Olympic Games and horrified by the enthusiasm of the general population. He worked tirelessly during those years to save the lives of prisoners of war held by the Germans and to help Jews to get out of Europe. He became the leader of a resistance group who met at his country estate, Kreisau (the group became known as ‘the Kreisauers’). Ultimately, like Bonhoeffer, he was executed for his resistance.

“[Now what distinguished Moltke from the millions of Germans—not evil incarnate, mind you, but ordinary men and women, who went about their ordinary business and collectively made possible the Nazi terror of World War II?] Moltke was a deeply committed Christian who read the Bible regularly and devotionally and loved to sing hymns. He believed that the German churches could be mobilized against the Nazis and was in contact with church leaders throughout Europe. [Many years after Moltke’s execution,] George Kennan, the celebrated American diplomat, wrote that Moltke was”<sup>13</sup>

the greatest person, morally, and the largest and most enlightened... that I met on either side of the battle lines in World War II... The image of this lonely, struggling man, one of the few genuine Protestant-Christian martyrs of our time, has remained for me over the years a pillar of moral conscience and an unfailing source of political and intellectual inspiration.<sup>14</sup>

[C]ourageous deeds do not in themselves bring in the new creation. Only God can do that. Nor do people who perform such deeds usher in the new humanity. Not yet. However, such deeds and such people are signs; and because they are signs of what the Word of God has promised, their deeds are ‘reckoned’ by God as ‘the power that raises the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist’...

“Full reconciliation, lasting peace, universal liberation: at the present time these things are present to us only in the mode of promise. The Resurrection of the dead does

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<sup>11</sup> Seth Mydans, ‘Survivor Gently Adds Voices to Cambodia’s Dark Tale,’ *The New York Times*, September 16, 2006.

<sup>12</sup> Fleming Rutledge, *Not Ashamed of the Gospel* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 133-139.

<sup>13</sup> Fleming Rutledge, “‘Unresting Death’ Meets Its Master,” Sermon preached at Washington National Cathedral, March 9, 2008.

<sup>14</sup> George F. Kennan, *Memoirs 1925–1950* (Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown, & Co. 1967).

not yet exist. If the human race were capable of restoring life by ‘biostasis’ or any other means, it would just be the same old life—more Sin, more Death. We cannot create the things that do not exist. But we are not speaking humanly. We are speaking of the God who created us without our cooperation and spoke to us before we could imagine him. We are speaking of the God who is able to raise the dead, and who promises to raise the dead, and who makes this promise powerful in us even now through the accomplished Resurrection of Jesus Christ, our hope of glory.”<sup>15</sup>

Now to the One  
who by the power at work within us  
is able to do far more abundantly  
than all we can ask or imagine,  
to God be glory in the church  
and in Christ Jesus  
to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Rutledge, *Not Ashamed of the Gospel* 139-141.

<sup>16</sup> Ephesians 3:20-21.