

*Lord, make these words to be your Word, that our hearts might become your Heart.*

Like many people of a certain persuasion, I was a big fan of the TV show  
*The West Wing*, about a fictional White House staff.

I remember one episode in which the President, Josiah Bartlett,  
managed to convene Middle East peace talks at Camp David.  
And all through the episode people told him it couldn't be done.  
First, they said he wouldn't get the parties back to the table; second, he would  
never get them to agree on anything, third, it would blow up at the end.  
And in the end, something scuttled the whole process – but it went so much  
further than all the “experts” said it would, and did begin to create trust,  
because Josiah Bartlett had a vision for what could be.

We cannot achieve peace anywhere if we don't believe it is possible.  
We can't really achieve much of anything, if we can't envision it.

To believe in what we cannot yet see is called faith.

Hebrews 11 tells us: *Now faith is conviction of things hoped for  
and assurance about what we do not see.*

Once we see it, it's not faith anymore!

We are called to believe in what we cannot yet see.

This morning we heard the story of Abram and God's promise to him –  
at the age of ninety – that this childless man would become the  
father of many nations, multitudes. Abram had already left everything he knew  
to go to this new land God commanded him to find – a God he could not see,  
a “one God” among a people who believed in many Gods. But Abram went.  
Abram – now Abraham – is a model of believing in what you cannot see – yet.  
The phrase St. Paul used is this: “Calling into being the things that do not exist” –  
I love that phrase: Calling into being the things that are not.” That's what God  
did in creation! That's what God is still doing, what God calls us to do in his name.  
Listen to what Paul wrote to the churches in Rome:

*For 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, as 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. Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become 'the father of many nations', according to what was said, 'So numerous shall your descendants be.' He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. Therefore his faith 'was reckoned to him as righteousness.'*

What does that last sentence mean? It's accounting-speak. What made Abraham righteous wasn't good behavior – he would have failed on that account – but simply this act: of believing in what he could not yet see because God said so. His faith was accounted to him as righteousness.

That's what God wants from us – the willingness to believe that God's promises are true, God's power is real, God's love is stronger than death, than disease, than despair, than discord, than anything that comes against us.

This is what Jesus wanted from Peter. When Jesus told his disciples what was going to happen to him when they got to Jerusalem, Peter said, "No! Not you! You're the most powerful man we've ever met. Look at what you can do." Peter and the others had left a lot to become Jesus' disciples – in part because they thought all that power was going to achieve victory over the occupying Romans. Peter didn't want to hear Jesus predict his own arrest, torture and death. But Jesus says in no uncertain terms, "Peter, you're thinking for the other side. You need to learn to think God-wise if you want to be a God-follower." And then he turned to them all and said, "You need to put aside your own wants, your desire for self-protection, security, wealth, to always be right – chasing all that is going to lead to nothing. You want real life, abundant life, forever life? Start chasing God's dreams for you, and for this world." And then he said, "Take up your cross and follow me!"

Those words must have chilled them – a cross was not a pretty thing you wear around your neck, but an instrument of brutal execution. For Jesus, the cross was a literal part of his mission. But what does that word mean for us? Some people interpret taking up your cross as embracing suffering. God is not in the business of encouraging suffering. Suffering happens in a world of free will, and God promises to be with us in it, but it's not God's thing.

No, what Jesus means by taking up our cross is take on this way of seeing that Abraham exemplified, and St. Paul, and probably your grandmother – the willingness to live by faith, to believe beyond what our eyes can show us; to join the God who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that are not, to become people who live by faith and not by our own talents and bank accounts and worldly advantages, not even by our children. To take up your cross is to take up God's mission, your ministry, to allow that to define you, to become your focus.

This Lent we are focusing on what it means to become peacemakers. The work of peacemaking is really a dimension of the ministry of healing. Healing relies on the healer's ability to believe in an outcome not suggested by the evidence in front of one. It is to invite God to give you a different vision. A few times when I have prayed for people with tumors, I've had a visual image of tissue liquefying and passing out of a person. I have no idea if that's what happened physiologically – but the tumors have been gone. Before surgery. If someone is immobilized, invite them to see themselves in God's light as moving. If someone is ill and weak, invite them to see themselves in God's light as well. If someone is depressed, invite them to see themselves in God's light as dancing. That is calling into being things that are not... yet. That's what Jesus did for us on the cross; that's what we do in his name.

It comes down to this: Our faith in what we cannot see needs to be stronger than our doubt in what we can. That's what it means to set our mind on divine things. Jesus told Nicodemus, "You're not going to receive God's kingdom by thinking your way in. Only spirit can discern Spirit." Our human senses can only tell us so much of the story. In fact, much of the "evidence" they pick up tell us what we're praying for is impossible. But we worship the God of the impossible! We need to learn to believe it.

We look at the world, at our country today, and peace seems an impossible dream. But peace is God's dream for us; peace is what Jesus died for, taking on the world's hostility and killing it with him on the cross. What impossible conflict are you being called to believe can be healed? What enemy are you being invited to get to know? What thing that does not exist are you being called to bring into being?

Take up your cross of faith and follow the God who brings life to dead things.

*Amen.*

### **Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16**

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. And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous." Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, "As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. I 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.

God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. I 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."

### **Mark 8:31-38**

Jesus began to teach his 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. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But 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."

He 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. For 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. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."