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Trinity Lutheran Church
Decatur, Illinois
2nd Sunday In Lent
February 28th, 2021

“GOD SHOWED UP”

In the Name of Jesus, Amen.

Hear the Word of God from Genesis 17,

“When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to him and said, “I am God Almighty; walk before me faithfully and be blameless. ²I will make my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers.” ³Abram fell facedown, and God said to him, ⁴“...This is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations. ⁵No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. ⁶I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. ⁷I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you, and your descendants after you, to be your God, and the God of your descendants.....and God also said to Abraham, “As for Sarai. your wife, you are no longer to call her Sarai; her name will be Sarah. ¹⁶I will bless her, and I will surely give you a son by her.....
¹⁷Abraham fell facedown; he laughed and said to himself, “Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?”.... ¹⁹Then God said, “Yes, your wife Sarah WILL bear you a son, and you will call him Isaac. And I will establish my covenant with him, as an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him.”

DEAR FRIENDS IN CHRIST,

Undaunted Courage is a book by Stephan Ambrose. Ambrose writes about the Lewis and Clark expedition that took place in the early 1800s. After facing massive challenges— hunger, fatigue, desertion, illness, and Indians—Lewis and Clark (near Three Forks, Montana) finally reached the headwaters of the Missouri River.

All of their advance information led Merriweather Lewis and William Clark to believe that once they had reached the continental divide—just one-hundred miles west of Three Forks—they would face a half-day portage, reach the waters of the Columbia River, and then float to the Pacific Ocean. The hard part of the journey was behind them. It was time to celebrate. *Or so they thought!*

Meriwether Lewis climbed the bluffs near the Continental Divide, expecting to see the Columbia River. Imagine what he felt, when, instead of seeing the Columbia River, he was the first non-native American to see the Rocky Mountains. They couldn't go back, and there was no clear way forward. We have a word for that—It's called: "*trapped*"!

You know that feeling? In some way, shape, or form, we all know the feeling of being "*trapped*". Maybe you conquered a bad habit, only to suffer a relapse. Maybe you feel stuck in a dead-end job, a dead-end marriage, a dead-end family, a dead-end life—or ALL of the above. And like Lewis and Clark, you can't go back; and, also, like Lewis and Clark, there is no clear way forward. We have a word for that—It's called: "*trapped*"!

Welcome to the world of Abraham and Sarah. Their story begins in Genesis 11. Abram—as he was called then—was the son of Terah. The family was from the ancient Babylonian city of Ur. And it was in Ur that Abram met Sarai—that was her name back then. At some point, Abram and Sarai got married and moved from Ur to Haran, a city on the Tigris River.

And then, GOD SHOWED UP to pay them a visit. In Genesis 12, God called Abram and Sarai to go to the land of Canaan, where he would make a great nation through—of all people - Abram and Sarai. Now Abram was already sixty-five years old, and Sarai was fifty-five when God made that promise. But if that weren't bad enough, Genesis 11:30 says, '*Sarai was barren*'. Can you imagine what Abram and Sarai must have thought? "*A great nation out of us? We can't even have children. And look how old we are!*" And so they waited. And waited. AND waited. AND waited. But still, no son. Finally, they got tired of waiting on God. Who could blame them? When Abram turned eighty-six and Sarai turned seventy-six, one night, Sarai pushed her servant, Hagar, into Abraham's tent; and nine months later their union gave birth to a son, named, Ishmael. What's the "*take home point*"? '*When God is slow in keeping His promises, you just take matters into your own hands and sin!*' Right? WRONG!

Thirteen years later, in Genesis 17, Abram is now ninety-nine, and Sarai is eighty-nine years old. Sarai is still barren; but now their home is filled with bitterness and strife, because Abram and Sarai sinfully took matters into their own hand. And we have a word for that - It's called: "*trapped*"! But then God showed up again. Genesis 17:1, '***When Abram was 99 years old, the Lord appeared to Abram and said, 'I am God Almighty.'***' The Hebrew phrase for 'God Almighty' is El-Shaddai. El Shaddai means: God is sufficient; God is powerful; God is capable. El Shaddai means '*There's nothing our God cannot do!*' Jesus says Matthew 6, ***Nothing is impossible with God.***'

So what does El-Shaddai do when he shows up? He cuts a covenant with Abram. The term "covenant" appears five times in our reading from Genesis 17. And God says that His covenant with Abram is eternal. Now, in the Old Testament, covenants weren't just promises written on paper. In the Old Testament, people didn't sign their names to a paper document to make a covenant. There were no attorneys or notary-publics. **But there was blood.** In the Old Testament people didn't sign covenants, they cut covenants. So how would you "*cut a covenant*"? The person making or "*cutting*" the covenant, would kill animals. They would slit their throats, drain their blood, cut the animals in half, and then passed between the cut animals. And what they were saying, when they "*cut a covenant*", was: "*May the same thing happen to me – killed and cut to pieces – if I ever fail to keep my covenant promise with you.*" Covenant cutting was a bloody, and deadly serious agreement! When you cut a covenant, you were literally backing it up with your life and your blood.

So what happened? God kept his covenant promise to Abraham and Sarah, through the birth of a son—named, Isaac. But God did even more, God showed up again BIG TIME, years later, fulfilling His covenant promise to Abram, to bless all nations through the seed of Abram, when Mary gave birth to our Savior, Jesus!

And you can bet that there was blood—in Gethsemane Jesus sweat drops of blood, realizing the enormity of God's wrath He would have to face for our sins, but still refusing to back down from going to the cross. At Gabbatha Jesus was scourged with whips that ripped His flesh to threads, because He had made a covenant promise to bless and forgive us, and He backed up His promise, with the blood of His scourging. And, of course, Golgotha; where from His hands, feet, brow, and side flowed blood and water, mingled down, by which Colossians 1 declares: ***"God reconciled the world to Himself, by making peace, through Christ's blood, shed on the cross."***

The everlasting covenant promised to Abraham is signed, sealed, and delivered for you. Signed in the Savior's cleansing blood. Sealed by the Holy Spirit, Who conceived Jesus in the womb of the Virgin to be our Savior, and raised Jesus from the dead as our Savior. And God's covenant promises are delivered to us in the means of grace—the Good News in Mark 2, "***Be of Good Cheer. Your sins are forgiven!***" in Baptism, 1st Peter 3, "***Baptism now saves you. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus.***" And in the Lord's Supper, where Jesus promises in Matthew 26, "***This is My blood, of the new covenant, shed for you, for the forgiveness of your sin.***" Ordinarily, when people "*cut a covenant*" in the Old Testament, they would cut animals apart, and walk between the pieces, to say, "***May this happen to me, if I should ever break this covenant.***" But for the New Covenant, in which, as Jeremiah says, "***God forgives our sins, and remembers them no more,***" neither the Father nor the Son cut animals apart, and walked between the piece, for this covenant, Jesus Himself was literally "*cut to pieces*", and His blood shed, and now given us to drink, as the ultimate assurance, He has, and does, and will forever forgive our sins, and remember them no more. You not only have His word on it, you have His blood on it. And you not only have his blood on it, you have His victorious resurrection on it!

But if there is one message the devil doesn't want you to hear it's the Good News of Revelation 1, "***And with His blood, (Jesus) purchased people for God.***" He does not want you to believe the Good News of Revelation 12, "***We overcome the devil, by the blood of the lamb.***" He trembles at the thought of you taking Jesus at His words in 1st John 1:7, "***The blood of Jesus cleanses us from all unrighteousness.***"

Why does the devil tremble? Jesus' forgiving blood sets "*trapped*" people free!

When we feel trapped, the devil wants us to hear other voices, rather than Jesus' forgiving blood? And the other voices the devil wants us to hear are very persuasive voices. Hedonism says, "*Party your way out!*". Materialism says, "*Spend your way out!*" Individualism says, "*You are the way out!*" And the devil says, "*There is no way out!*" And if we listen to those voices long enough, our feelings of despair can overwhelm and destroy us. So many just try to escape the pain, by self-medicating, only to be further "*trapped*". We numb our pain with six-packs, food binges, TV, porn, sinful affairs, or mashing endlessly on Facebook. We express our angst with volcanic anger, and silent stares—we're experts at both. Yet, we're still "*trapped*".

When we feel trapped we see ourselves as imprisoned in fear. We feel like we're at the end of our rope, with no way out of our mess, and no possibility of parole. "*Haven't you read the news, heard the reports, or seen the studies? Airplanes crash. Bull markets bust. Viruses attack. Good people let you down. The other shoe will drop. The fine print will be found!*" Your enemy, the devil, wants you to believe you are totally trapped in your sin, your past, your circumstances. But you're not. **Page 4**

Hear this, and hear this well. God has shown up for us in Jesus Christ! We are no longer trapped! Say “no” to the devil’s lie that you’re “trapped” in sin, with the forgiving blood of Jesus, that cleanses you, not only of the sins you’ve done, but also of the sins done to you. Say “no” to the devil’s lie that you’re “trapped” in death with Jesus’ empty tomb and what it means: **“Whoever believes in Me will live, even if they die”**. Say “no” to the devil’s lie that your life in this world, or that your life in Christ is meaningless with God’s promises, such as Jeremiah 29:11, **“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”** But this promise of God “to prosper you” is not a promise that you’re going to “strike it rich”. It’s even better than that, what it really says in the Hebrew is this: **“These are the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans to Totally Restore You!”** God’s plan for Abram and Sarai, Hagar and Ishmael, you and me, and all the world, was to bless all nations, in Jesus, with Total Restoration, from the sin that enslaves us, the death that swallows us, the devil that condemns us.

Because God kept His promise to Abram, to send him a seed through which all peoples are blessed, what it means is this: Sin can’t trap us. Jesus forgives that. Death can’t trap us. Jesus conquered that. Hell can’t trap us. Jesus paid that. Hopelessness can’t trap us. For Hope is risen from the dead. **“No power of hell, no scheme of man, can ever pluck you from His hand!”** Those are words by Keith Getty. **“Nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”** (Romans 8:39) Those are words of St. Paul. **“I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you, as an everlasting covenant, to be Your God, and the God of your descendants.”** (Genesis 17:7) Those are the words of our God to Abraham and Sarah, and to each of us.

What’s it all mean? If you have small children and little free time, you’re not trapped, you’re forgiven for your parenting mistakes, and free to enjoy the most precious gifts God could ever give you. If you have rebellious teenagers giving you gray hair, you’re not trapped, you’re forgiven for wanting to pull your hair out, and reminded that Jesus entrusted them to you to love, forgive, enjoy and teach them how to get out of their graves alive. If you’re struggling in your marriage, and the romance is gone, you’re not trapped, you’re in the best position to forgive each other, and participate in God’s rekindling of your love. If your body is sick with cancer or anything terminal, you’re not trapped, in Jesus you’re going to live forever. If your heart is broken to pieces, you’re still not trapped, you have a Savior Who binds up the broken-hearted, promising you: **“In Me you may have peace” “Come unto Me all you who are weary, and I will give you rest!”** And if you listen closely to what Jesus is saying, what you’ll hear in Jesus’ words is your prison door opening.

In the end, have a word for what Jesus gives to all who are “*trapped*” and that word is: ***FREEDOM!***. “***He comes to set the prisoners free!***” God showed up for you in the manger. God showed up for you on the cross. God showed up for you, bursting out of His 3-day grave. You don’t have to take matters into your own hands like Abram and Sarai did, to have a Savior who can get you out of the “*traps*” your sins have gotten you into. God already took matters into His own hands, and has given you a Savior, Who has, does, and continues to get you out of the “*traps*” your sins have gotten you into. And if the Son sets you free, you’re no longer trapped, you’re free, indeed! AMEN!