

---

# A New Creation

**Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 11 June 2023**

Psalm 33:1-12 • Romans 4:13-25 • Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

---



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

The Apostle Paul, who experienced a life-changing conversion on the road to Damascus, left us a wealth of knowledge in his letters to the young Christian congregations he had been instrumental in establishing. His conversion thus had repercussions far beyond his own salvation. Jesus chose Paul to bring the Good News to people far and wide, and he inspired Paul to develop his teachings both intellectually and spiritually for the benefit of us all. That light of revelation which Paul saw on the road shines through his teaching and lights our path even today. We owe a lot to Paul as the Father of theology, literally “words about God.”

In his letters, he tackles some pretty tough concepts. Sometimes Paul is pretty slow reading, pretty heavy going, in fact, for us in the 21st century. But he is worth the time it takes to read and ponder and understand what he is saying about Jesus and God and our relationship to them. In today’s reading he talks about faith and our relationship to God, using the example of Abraham. Abraham is one of our earliest

models of how to live in the grace of God. God spoke to him directly, directing him to travel to the land that would be given to him, and bringing him to Hebron, to a place called Mamre. There God gave Abraham a tremendous promise — that he, Abraham, would be the father of many generations, with offspring as numerous as the stars in the heavens (Gen 15:5). Can you imagine that? Descendants as numerous as the stars? With great simplicity, the Bible tells us that “[Abraham] believed the Lord, and [the Lord] credited it to [Abraham] as righteousness” (15:6). God’s promises may be small or large, just as God’s guidance may be obvious to us, or more difficult to discern. Our response should be the same: belief and faith. Faith is what Abraham showed when he believed God could make him the father of nations, and faith is what we show when we take the bread and the wine at Communion and believe that by doing so we become part of Christ’s body here on earth. And just as Abraham’s faith was his response to God’s promise on that long-ago day near the trees of Mamre in Hebron, our faith is a response to the promise Jesus Christ made us when he opened the doors of heaven and gave us the gift of eternal life.

Jesus’s death and resurrection is at the heart of our Christian belief, and when Jesus died, we, in a sense, died also; and when he lived again, we also came alive. But while Jesus — God — is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow, we have been changed by Jesus’s sacrificial act and God’s raising of him on the third day. Jesus’s death and resurrection has profound and eternal consequences for all people, and particularly for those people who, like us, choose to follow Christ.

The death of any man or woman may have its effect on us. My father died just over twenty-six years ago, in 1997. His death was sudden and unexpected, the result of an accident in his small plane. There was of course the immediate shock. He left his home in the morning and was never seen again. I’m sure he had plans for meetings, social get-togethers, and such things in the following few weeks or months; he didn’t get to them. There was a sudden empty space there, which was particularly felt by my mother, as my siblings and I had already left the nest. Her loss was immediate and sharp. Over time, the pain was dulled, but not, I think, removed entirely.

While I was growing up, I always looked up to my father. He could do anything, or so it seemed to me. He set an example for me of what it meant to be a good man. He was my role model, and I respected him greatly. When I moved out of my parents’ house and started my own life, I continued to carry him in my heart and my head. I mentally turned to him for advice, or to compare my behaviour with the way I think he would have acted in a particular situation. And even after his death, I still do the same. I haven’t seen him for over twenty-six years, but a part of him lives on with me. He is still a role model. I consult with him in my heart, and still seek his approval.

If my father, a mortal human being, can continue to influence me and live on in me years after his death, how much more will God in Christ Jesus live on in us, years after his death and resurrection? For Jesus's death changed us. As Paul writes, "Our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin." (Romans 6:6) The death of one man, Jesus Christ, caused the death of our old lives. For Paul, it was contemporaneous; Paul lived in Jesus's time on earth. For us, it is at our baptism that we receive the great benefit of Christ's death. We are not the same people following our baptism that we were before. God changes us: we no longer are subject to the tyranny of sin, slaves to our emotions and temptations from outside. We become slaves instead to God, and God is a loving and just master. In God's service, there is freedom; in God's service we may truly grow in grace.

This is not to say that we can no longer sin. Of course we can and do sin. We make confession here every week for those things we have done but shouldn't have, or that we have not done but should have. Sin is still in the world. But as baptised Christians, it no longer rules us. We have submitted ourselves to God's rule, and that excludes the rule of sin. So we are changed, through the grace of God.

That change is profound. It colours our whole lives. We are no longer controlled by sin. We can choose to sin, but we wish to please God, for the Spirit guides us to do so. We keep in contact with God through thought and prayer. We consult with God, just as we consult our consciences. Indeed, what is the conscience of a Christian, but the Spirit acting in him or her? The Spirit guides us to act righteously and to avoid sinful behaviour. The Spirit guides us to live in communion with God and our fellow humans.

Paul speaks elsewhere of living under the law, meaning the law of Moses: the Ten Commandments and the purity laws, as given to Moses by God and repeated by Moses to the people in the early days. Before the coming of Christ, God's people lived according to the laws, and sin was in the world, because having a law means you can know when you break it. There is no breaking the law until you have a law, so there is no sin without law. But since the coming of Christ, who died on the cross to take away our sins, we live differently. We are alive to God and live in the Spirit.

God asks us for the same faith that Abraham showed when he believed God's promise of descendants as numerous as "the dust of the earth" (Gen 13:15), the same faith that Noah showed when he built the ark, and the same faith that Mary showed when God made her the mother of the Saviour of the world. In our own lives and in our own ways, through the power of the Holy Spirit, we will grow in faith and righteousness, and be worthy of God's great promise, just as these our ancestors were. Thanks be to our loving God. Amen.