

Name Changes
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“What’s in a name?” Shakespeare’s 13-year-old Juliet asks. A name is a label by which one person is identified as different from another. Or, perhaps, as the same as another. It is a way for us to tell people, places and things apart. It is also a way to “connect the dots.” What’s in a name? Well, in the story of Romeo and Juliet, names turned out to be pretty important, a matter of life and death. And in our biblical stories, they turn out to have enormous implications as well.

The 12th to the 25th chapters of Genesis are all about Abraham...or should we say Abram. Because, halfway through the story, names change. God has been in conversation with the nomadic chief, Abram for some time. He tells Abram to move his clan to a new territory. He tells Abram that he will bless all the families of the earth through his descendants. Abram has already questioned this: where are all these descendants supposed to come from, since he and his wife don’t have even one child? Our reading today has God repeating the promise he has made before: that Abram would have many offspring, and that they would live in the land of Canaan. But now a name change accompanies the promise – actually more than one change. First, God claims a new name: El Shaddai, or God of the Mountains, or as we heard it “God Almighty.” The almighty God of the Mountains reaches down into human life, human possibility and creativity, and infuses Abram and Sarai. They don’t become different people. They don’t become younger, for instance. They become more authentically who they are. Abram, the “exalted ancestor” becomes Abraham, “ancestor of a multitude of nations.” Sarai becomes a “princess,” Sarah, blessed with the chance to bear a child and be part of that family of blessing. The new names signal a new reality. It is not yet here, but it is certain to happen. This covenant starts with their personal destinies, but leads eventually to a relationship with all of humanity.

What’s in a name? In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus asks his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” Interestingly, none of them say, “Well, they say that you are Jesus from Nazareth,” which would have been the simple, obvious answer. Instead, we hear other names, the speculative rumors that have been flying around: John, Elijah, another prophet. All dead people, by the way, which means that they thought he was a dead person come back to life. Then Jesus zeroes in on the disciples themselves, and gets Peter’s answer: “You are the Anointed One, or the Christ, or the Messiah.” (Depending on whether he was speaking English, Greek or Hebrew) Jesus silences Peter, then goes on to talk about himself by another name: the Son of Man. This is an odd, idiomatic title. Jesus seems to use it to say “I”: he starts talking about his own future of suffering, death and rising again. But other texts use “Son of Man” to mean “the Human One.” Jesus is claiming a name that puts him squarely in the middle of the human condition. His covenant relationship with God starts with his personal destiny, but leads him to identify with all of humanity.

What’s in a name? The name we go by here is the Norwich Congregational Church, United Church of Christ. We are located in the town of Norwich: we have a congregational polity or governance (and if you don’t know what that means, we can have a talk about it): we are a “church,” a worshipping body of Christians; and we belong to an American Protestant denomination that was formed from the merger of 4 other denominations back in 1957. That’s all true, but it is kind of bare bones, isn’t it? Kind of dry. Not as exciting as a Bible story, even. Doesn’t make you want to jump up and change the world. Well, I am not advocating for a name change here, like The Group of Super-nice

People Who Happen to Meet in Norwich or The People Who Do Great Pot Lucks or The Organization That Sends People On Work Trips to Interesting Places...although all of those names fit, in some fashion. But I am suggesting that we could do a better job of listening and discerning and understanding what our God-given names are. Where are we being called? How do we become more authentically who we are, as Abraham and Sarah did? How do we set our minds on that energizing meeting point of “human things” and “divine things” as Jesus called them?

When Abram and Sarai take seriously God's covenant that they are to be the ancestors of a multitude of nations, their very identities change – as symbolized in the new names they embrace of Abraham and Sarah. When Jesus takes seriously God's new covenant of life-giving sacrifice, his very identity changes as symbolized by the title of Messiah. When we remember that we are bound into the same covenants, we find that we are part of God's story of fulfilled promises that extend through a multitude of nations and through layers of generations. These are names born of trust, or shared hardship, or shared joy.

The church usually approaches the season of Lent as a time for personal reflection and personal, individual examination. Certainly, this focus on self-reflection is well and good. The emphasis of our story in Genesis, however, is less on Abraham and Sarah's personal “getting right with God” than on God's good gifts to their progeny for generations to come. The emphasis of the story in Mark is less on Jesus' personal status than on the character of discipleship. God's blessing includes the personal, but it always moves to the communal.

This Lent, we can ask the question, “How is God calling me or you to be a fully alive human in the pattern of Jesus?” I am not expecting the kind of intimate, cozy conversations that God seemed to have with Abraham, in those Genesis stories. I don't get to have the kind of talks Peter had with Jesus either. My naming happens in the events and surprises of everyday life, and in the ways I choose to respond. I can deny and let go of or lose those parts of my life that hold me back from a fuller, deeper, more authentic self. Each of us can do this, and find ourselves named as God's beloved ones.

God's good blessings always call for faithful response. With our financial resources, we're called to care for others. With our beloved faith communities, we're called to welcome in God's name. With God's gifts of creation, we're called to steward for generations to come. I don't want to sugar-coat this: connecting to others in order to fashion and nurture community requires some kind of sacrifice. There's just no getting around it. The surprise comes when we stop worrying about gratifying our wants and instead look to the needs around us, and others begin to do the same, we find more than we'd ever imagined – more life, more joy, more happiness, more acceptance, more energy – because we find a whole community looking out for us instead of only ourselves, just as we are looking out for the community of persons around us.

This Lent, we can ask the question, “How can we share the blessings we have received with our community – whether it is a community of 2 or 3 gathered together or our brothers and sisters who are living on the streets with no shelter, or in Darfur, or Syria, or in refugee camps, or any other places where the Son of Man walks in human form.

This Lent, with Abraham and Sarah, with Jesus and his disciples, may we seek to enlarge our influence on the world in which God's blessings of love, acceptance, and hope will grow. Amen.