

Sermon – “Naming and Knowing”

Scripture Readings – Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16, Mark 8:31-38

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Our first reading is Genesis chapter 17 verses 1-7 and 15-16. Abram has been called by God out of the land of his fathers. God has promised him descendants beyond number, and Abram and God have cut this covenant with animal sacrifice. Abram has followed God for many years, responding always to God’s call and doing as God directs. And now, God appears again to Abram, to tell Abram again of God’s unending promise. Hear now God’s holy word.

*1 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. 2 And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous." 3 Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, 4 "As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. 5 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. 6 I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. 7 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.*

*15 God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. 16 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." Amen.*

Our second reading is Mark 8:31-38. Jesus is right in the middle of his ministry, teaching and healing and gathering crowds everywhere he goes. Peter has recognized that Jesus is the Messiah, and the disciples seem hopeful that, any day now, Jesus will rally the crowds and lead them to victory against the Romans. But Jesus is a different kind of Messiah. Hear what the Spirit is saying to God’s people.

*31 Then he began to teach them 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. 32 He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 33 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." 34 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. 35 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. 36 For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? 37 Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? 38 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." This is the Word of the Lord.*

The title of the sermon: “Naming and Knowing”

*The text: “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.” Genesis 17:5*

Let us pray: God of mercy, you promised never to break your covenant with us. Amid all the changing words of our generation, speak your eternal Word that does not change. Then may we respond to your gracious promises with faithful and obedient lives; through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

I won't lie to you. Our readings have been giving me trouble all week.

When I glanced at them several weeks ago, I was quite optimistic and excited. The naming of Abraham and Sarah! The first mention of the cross! Jesus scolding Peter! What's not to love?

But then, when I actually sat down to read and study and pray and—hopefully at some point write a sermon—I got stuck.

Usually the Old Testament reading and the Gospel reading of the lectionary have some fairly obvious shared theme—but I couldn't find it this week.

Usually my commentaries and textbooks and class notes provide me with wonderful insights that illuminate the passage and show me a path.

But this week, all the commentaries wanted to talk about was the part of Genesis that we did not read today: verses eight through fourteen. For those of you who didn't look in your bibles to see what we skipped, these missing verses are all about circumcision, an ancient sign of the covenant that Christians, alone of the Abrahamic religions, have decided is not necessary for a life of faith.

But apparently all the scholars want to talk about in regard to Genesis 17 is circumcision. And I did not find that at all useful.

So I turned to the text again, and realized the way forward had been staring me in the face the entire time.

The verses we have read from Genesis today are about God giving Abraham and Sarah new names.

Maybe it is that simple. After all, it was this that got me excited weeks ago when I first looked at these stories.

So settle in—we're going to be exploring names.

As I think I've mentioned before, Biblical Hebrew is a rich and multi-layered language, and the Hebrew Scriptures are full of complex and nuanced word play. It is within this context that we must consider the renaming of Abraham and Sarah, the great patriarch and matriarch.

Abraham's original name, we are told, was Abram. Abram was instructed by God to leave his father's land, and did. Abram has been following God's lead and worshipping God for quite some time. Abram has heard God's promise of descendants more numerous than the stars in the sky.

“Abram” means “exalted father”. And in all the stories we’ve heard of Abram, this seems like a fitting enough name.

But at this moment, when Abram is old and God’s promises seem impossible, God steps in and renames him. No longer is he Abram, exalted father—he is Abraham, father of multitudes.

Abram was a good and strong name, to be sure. But now, every time Abraham’s name is spoken, God’s promise and prophecy is repeated. The promise of the covenant is held within his name, and IS his name.

Sarai’s name change is a little harder to track, for scholars are not quite sure what Sarai means. It is clearly some type of feminine form of the word “Sar”, which means prince. And the ending suggests that it might contain a first person possessive. So it can’t be too far off the mark to think that Sarai might mean something like “my princess.”

Again, this is a good and lovely name. And just like Abram, exalted father, Sarai—my princess—seems to fit the mother of our faith well enough.

But God never leaves “well enough” alone.

And so Sarai becomes Sarah, a word used to refer to noblewomen, and specifically the wives of kings and the bearers of the royal lineage.

At this point in Abram and Sarai’s life, Abram has a son, but by Hagar, the servant girl, not by Sarai, who is barren, and now too old to have children in any case.

Sarah’s new name affirms that God has chosen her as the mother of the covenant, and that it is her children who will receive the blessing of God’s promise to Abram, no matter how impossible these children might seem.

The Sunday School curriculum today is explaining to some of our youngest children that God made sure Abraham and Sarah received new names that were almost like their old names, so that it would be easy to be called by their new names.

There is nothing wrong with that explanation, of course. But the similarity in sound is a gift of the richness of Hebrew wordplay. The sound is similar, of course, and the meanings are related—but in renaming Abram “Abraham” and Sarai “Sarah”, God is drawing out new meaning—new dimensions of their already existing selves.

And these new dimensions speak explicitly of God’s promises to them.

Their very names declare God’s covenant—Abraham and Sarah are now witnesses to the power of God’s promises, proclaiming what will be: descendants more numerous than grains of sand, multitudes of nations—even though even one child still seems an impossibility.

And speaking of an impossible child—though our story about Jesus today does not include any naming, it immediately follows on one such passage.

Just before our gospel reading, in Mark chapter 8 verses 27 and 28, Jesus asks the disciples: “Who do you say that I am?”

Peter answers: “You are the Messiah.”

And Jesus sternly instructs them to say nothing about him.

Peter has found a new name for Jesus.

So here we go again.

Jesus, of course, already has a name—one that, unlike Abram and Sarai, will remain his name, even as he also takes on the name of Christ.

Though it is the name we know, “Jesus” is not what he was called in his lifetime. Jesus is a Greek name—it is Greek for the name Joshua. We use the Greek version because the gospels are written in Greek, and so Jesus is the name found within our Scripture.

Joshua is a Hebrew name that means “God is salvation”, or “God saves”.

It is not surprising that this is the name the Angel Gabriel instructed Mary to give to her impossible child, the savior of the world.

But Joshua was not an uncommon name, so even though we can see it and know what this name reveals, it would not have been so easy for the people of Jesus’ time.

Messiah, however—that was not a name that ever was tossed around lightly.

Messiah—and its Greek version, Christ—means “anointed.”

This Messiah, this anointed one, was desperately longed for by the Jewish people, particularly under Roman rule.

And Peter knows enough to name Jesus as the Messiah.

But then, in the passage we did read today, Jesus starts to talk about exactly what will happen to this Messiah—to what precisely it means to be the Christ→the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and rejection, and be killed.

And Peter can’t take it. We don’t know what Peter says to Jesus, but “rebuke” seems to speak for itself.

Peter pulls Jesus aside and begins to criticize him for saying what he’s saying.

Peter! Who just named Jesus as Messiah!

What exactly is Peter’s problem??

Well—for Peter, this Messiah was an earthly savior, one anointed as a king and military leader who would—soon and very soon!—call the people to arms and lead them into victorious battle against the Romans, and reestablish the kingdom of David and reign supremely over a wealthy and well-respected nation and begin a new line of kings.

Peter has named Jesus as Messiah—but he does not actually know what he is talking about, and Jesus' talk about suffering and rejection and death does not fit into his understanding—it is an impossible thing.

Jesus—his friend and teacher—is Jesus Christ—the anointed salvation.

But Jesus is Messiah in a way that Peter cannot yet understand.

So Jesus rebukes Peter in turn, scolding Peter for focusing on earthly power, on earthly understandings of victory and salvation.

And Jesus again tries to teach this to his disciples—that they must overthrow their earthly understanding of his new name, for all expectations will be overthrown and the world will be made new.

For Jesus is Christ in a way not yet seen, in a way that seems as impossible as a barren old woman becoming the mother of a multitude of nations—a way that turns away from earthly power and to divine power, a way that leads to the cross.

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So we have Abram and Sarai becoming Abraham and Sarah—being renamed by God in such a way as to make their very names declarations of the covenantal promise.

And we have Peter, even in his confused expectation, completing the name of Jesus, and calling him Christ.

But what is your name?

What does your name mean?

Who named you?

How is God's call to you, God's promise to you, revealed in your name?

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I've been thinking a lot lately about the power of naming, inspired by the baptism we celebrated last week and by our two high school students who are preparing for baptism later this month.

For in the sacrament of baptism, we ask: "What is your name?"

When we are baptized, we are named—and in our naming we are claimed by God.

The names said by the pastor during the sacrament itself are always the first and middle names—never the last name. This is because at baptism we take on a new family name—the name of Christian.

In baptism we are named and renamed by God, like Abraham and like Sarah, and our names are made complete, and so our very names become signs of this everlasting covenant to which we belong, to these promises that God makes to each of us.

And so the speaking of our names becomes a witness to the covenant, a calling to each of us to live into this covenant, into our baptism, and to know and follow the one named Christ. Amen.