

Rev. Lynne Ogren                      Zion Lutheran Church, Lewistown, MT  
February 28, 2021                      2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Lent, Year B  
Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Mark 8:27-38

Show us your ways, O Lord, and lead us in your truth. Amen

“What’s in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.” Shakespeare’s Juliet declares her love for Romeo, even if his last name is the name of her family’s enemy. But in the end, for Romeo and Juliet, what’s in name does matter.

In my childhood and teenage years, my family’s name carried expectations I sometimes struggled to live up to. With a teacher for a mother, and two high achieving brothers—both in the classroom and in sports—I felt the pressure to be what others expected of me. Thankfully, that helped me live up to my potential and, eventually, to define myself as an individual.

Both our Old Testament and Gospel readings today focus on the importance of names and how a name can inform the trajectory of a person’s life, as well as the lives of those who will follow.

Throughout the Hebrew scriptures the meaning of names can become part of the story. Last week we noted that Adam was named from the Hebrew word *Adamah*, meaning soil or earth. Adam is a creature of the earth.

Every now and then God renamed people, particularly at key turning points when their role and purpose in God’s plan changed. Jesus follows suit when he renamed Simon the fisherman, Peter. In Mark’s gospel that happened when Jesus selected the twelve disciples who would become his apostles, meaning they would be sent out to continue his work beyond his death and resurrection.

Names do matter. They form our identity and set us apart from those around us. Let’s see what that means for Abraham and Sarah, for Jesus and Peter, and for us.

When Abram shows up on the scene in Genesis 11, he is listed as a distant descendant of Shem, the oldest of Noah’s three sons. Over the next few chapters God comes to Abram three times to declare a covenant with him, promising to make a great nation from him and his descendants. God promised to bless Abram so that he and his family would be a blessing to others. But it is this third time, in chapter 17, when God includes Abram’s wife, Sarai, in the promise.

By now, Sarai had given Abram her servant Hagar who had given birth to Ishmael. As Abram’s first-born Ishmael could easily have served as the next generation in God’s promise of descendants as many as the stars in the sky. But, in the declaration of the covenant we read this morning, God names Sarai as the mother of a multitude of nations, even though she is still barren.

Last week, we noted that God’s covenants consist of a promise and a sign. The promise here is that God will be the one and only God for Abram and Sarai and for every generation of their descendants. For their part, Abram is told to walk in the ways of God and be blameless, which we all know is asking a lot!

Abram would be the first of God's people who would be so connected to God that they would learn to walk in God's ways in order to serve as a blessing to all nations. At least that was the intention of this covenant.

Now, officially, the sign of this covenant is the act of circumcision, which is stated in the verses the lectionary skipped. I have sometimes added omitted verses back in to fill out the story, but today I'd like to focus on the changing of names as an additional sign of this covenant.

The name Abram means "exalted father" and God changes it ever so slightly to Abraham, which means "father of a multitude." Abraham had already become the patriarch of his tribe that traveled with him from his homeland into the land of Canaan, and he was probably exalted, or looked up to, by his servants and their families. Now, with the addition of two letters, God makes the name reflect the covenant, that this elderly man would become the father of a multitude of people and nations.

The names Sarai and Sarah are as similar as Rob and Bob, but by renaming Sarah, God emphasizes her place in this covenant. Even though the descendants of Hagar's child, Ishmael, would also become a great nation, God is giving Sarah, meaning princess, the honor of becoming the mother of not only many descendants, but of future kings.

It took incredible faith on Abraham's part to hold onto the promise that God had made 25 years before this passage. And even when his faith wavered, and he and Sarah tried to move things along on their own by involving Hagar, God never wavered and eventually fulfilled the first step in that promise with their birth of Sarah's only child, Isaac.

This covenant takes the long view. God says it is an eternal covenant, one that God commits to for all generations, for all time. Down through those generations, kings were born, beginning with David, but the people had a hard time walking in the ways of God. So, from David's descendants, the Son of God, Jesus, was born.

In the first half of Mark's gospel, Jesus had been demonstrating what God had declared at his baptism, "You are my Son, the Beloved." He had been teaching the crowds about the kingdom of God and performed many miraculous healings.

In our reading today Jesus asks his disciples what people are saying about him. John the Baptist, Elijah, or another prophet are all reasonable guesses. But when he asks what the disciples think, Peter quickly responds correctly, "You are the Messiah!"

Messiah is more of a title than a name, and it comes loaded with expectations. Literally, it means "anointed" as kings were anointed when they began to rule. But Peter doesn't say You are a messiah, he says, You are the Messiah, as if they had been waiting for one particular person.

Jesus doesn't dispute this title, and he goes on to refer to himself as the Son of Man, which is a title used in the book of Daniel anticipating a future Savior. Then Jesus describes what is coming next for him and for all who would follow him. Suffering, rejection, and death are clearly not what Peter and the others had in mind when The Messiah showed up. Oh yes, there's the bit about his resurrection, but maybe Peter missed that part!

In order for resurrection to take place, death must come first. This Messiah, the One anointed to bring God's kingdom into the world, would give everything he had to give—his position, his dignity, and even his life. THEN, in his resurrection God would open the way for all people, of every time and place, to enter into that eternal covenant with God.

In Holy Baptism, we were named and claimed by God and brought into the covenant in which God promises to be our God. We, too, are called to walk in the ways of God, or, as Jesus says, to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow him. That means denying the names and titles the world would give us—whether those give us power or put us down—and giving ourselves over to God's work and purposes.

For Jesus that meant giving his life on the cross. For us, that could mean any number of ways we turn aside from our own wants and desires in order to love and serve our neighbor. In the words of one of our offering prayers, "we offer with joy and thanksgiving what [God has] first given us—our selves, our time, and our possessions, signs of God's gracious love." That is what it means to take up our cross and walk in the ways of God by following Jesus.

Our names contribute to our sense of identity—connecting us to a family and forming us as individuals. As children of God's promises we do our best to walk in God's ways, trusting that God will not leave us and is always guiding us into the ways of blessing and new life, especially for those who will come after us.

Thanks be to God. Amen

## **Prayers of Intercession**

Relying on the promises of God, we pray boldly for the church, the world, and all in need.

*A brief silence.*

Your gift of grace is for all people. Give confident faith to all the baptized, that they may follow you wholeheartedly. Give new believers joy in your promises; give hope and courage to those who suffer for their faith. Hear us, O God.

**Your mercy is great.**

You rule over the nations. Raise up advocates for peace and justice within and between nations. Give life where hope seems dead; call into existence new realities we cannot even imagine. Hear us, O God.

**Your mercy is great.**

In Jesus you joined humanity in suffering and death. Reveal to us the depth of your love shown on the cross. Accompany all who suffer in body, mind, and spirit. Restore all who are sick or grieving. Bring vindication for victims of injustice, exploitation, and oppression. We pray especially for those listed in our bulletin today and those we name in our hearts. Hear us, O God.

**Your mercy is great.**

You made Abraham and Sarah the ancestors of a multitude of nations. Bless grandparents, parents, and foster parents, and the children who look to them for care and guidance. Console those who deal with infertility, parents who have entrusted their children to adoption, and children longing to be adopted. Equip ministries and services to families, especially the Council on Aging who care for the elders in our community. Hear us, O God.

**Your mercy is great.**

We await the day of Christ's coming in glory. Lead us by the example of all the saints whom you have called to take up their cross and follow you, that together we may find our lives in you. Hear us, O God.

**Your mercy is great.**

We entrust ourselves and all our prayers to you, O faithful God, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

**Amen.**