

“A Good Name is to be Chosen . . . ” (Proverbs 22:1)

Salado UMC—25 February 2018

Lent 2

Preaching Text: Genesis 17:1-1, 15-16—Year B

Salado, Texas 76571

“It’s a sign of mediocrity when you demonstrate gratitude with moderation”

Roberto Benigni (*Newsweek*).

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Hear the day’s lesson:

17 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” (Genesis 17:1-1, 15-16—NRSV).

Even today, we modern and sophisticated people understand that the birth of a child is a signal event in the life of a family—nuclear and/or extended. Perhaps in some cases the birth is an event that will have community if not wider historic implications. The birth of a child is God’s way of instilling hope in sometimes otherwise hopeless situations. It is, in a sense, a way to give a family or a community a “new start.”

The Bible has its share of miraculous, unusual, and extraordinary stories of the birth of faith champions. Although these narrative accounts are many, they are not as numerous as we might expect. Yet, there are several of significance. Using the theme of miraculous, unusual, and extraordinary birth stories, the Bible is not unique. Many cultures/religions have birth stories that are in some respects similar to our biblical ones. What is unique, biblically speaking, is that Christian Scripture unfailingly offers a theological rationale for the circumstances surrounding such births.

We need to recognize that the Greeks and the Romans had quite a number of miraculous, unusual, and extraordinary birth stories. Nearly all cultures have produced myths, traditions, or legends about its heroes. Some heroes, such as the Greek Achilles, have one mortal and one divine parent. Other heroes are fully human, yet have godlike strength or beauty. Some heroic accounts relate significant phases of the hero’s career—such as the circumstances of the hero’s birth, a journey or quest, or the return home. We now turn to our lesson.

The Bible tells us: “But God said, ‘No, your wife Sarah will give birth to a son for you, and you will name him Isaac. I will set up my covenant with him and with his descendants after him as an enduring covenant’ ” (Gen 17:19). The birth of Isaac—never mentioned in our lesson today—is pretty miraculous.

In our lesson today, we see that God changes the biblical characters’ names. This is a biblical way to denote a radical alteration in a person’s earlier identity. For two obvious instances of this outward scriptural aspect: Jacob turns into “Israel” and Saul becomes “Paul.” And so, Abram/Sarai turn out to be Abraham/Sarah. As the mother and father of all nations these two names become the names by which this ancient couple will be known forever. These designations redefine them and give them a what we might call their “mission or calling.” As Yahweh did for Abraham and Sarah, so God does for us as those God has created for something momentous.

Of course, Genesis 17 as we know, is not the first time that God voices the divine promise to the first Hebrew. In chapters 12 and 15, God invites Abram to depart to a land toward which God will guide him. Abram, Yahweh promises, will become a great nation—and also be a blessing to all nations.

Now in chapter 17, we read in four places about the grand numbers of our aboriginal parent’s descendants. Accordingly, God offers Abram a name that denotes “ancestor of large numbers.” Like Noah’s covenant, the Abraham covenant is perpetual. God also alters Sarai’s name as well. She now becomes Sarah which means “princess. As a side note, God will tell the parents to name their covenant child Isaac. Isaac simply means “laughter.” After all his parents were 99 and 90 when he was born. Imagine seeing this couple in the Salado clinic waiting room for a visit with their obstetrician.

Last week’s Genesis 9 reading featured God’s covenant with Noah and “all flesh.” Today our lesson has to do with a much more focused covenant. This covenant is with Yahweh and Abram/ Sarai. When Yahweh changes their names—ever-so-slightly—what we have is a sign or symbol of God’s covenant with these two persons. Thus, the name change for husband and wife is equivalent to the rainbow as was a sign of the covenant for Noah.

A name is a powerful thing. Our individual names identify, describe, and introduce us to the world. Our name offers the world a good clue to our identity. Bible writers knew the consequence of names. Whether it was a community or those who were biblical storytellers and writers, from the start names of people, animals, and other objects have held great import. Perhaps you remember God allowing the man to name each animal as God created it (Genesis 2:19-20). In another part of the creation account, God names the “earth creature” *adam*. This alerts careful readers that humans came “from the earth” or *adamah*. This is why on Ash Wednesday the liturgist says to those imposed with ashes: “You came from the earth and to the earth you will return.” Repeatedly we see in the Bible that Jesus/God either know people’s names or that names are important. For example:

--Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine (Isaiah 43:1).

--The Lord called me before I was born, while I was in my mother’s womb he named me (Isaiah 49:1).

--I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father (John 10:14-15).

-- . . . they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life (Philippians 4).

Like circumcision for Jews, God likewise marks Christians. God claims us at our baptism and baptism is a physical sign. God gives us our names at baptism. Whatever we think of ourselves—whether we have a bad self-image, for example, we feel embarrassment or dispiritedness or we over indulge in our pride of our own magnificence. Either way, God knows our frame. In fact, Psalm 139:15 reads: “My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth.”

Knowing our authentic name helps us live God’s covenant with us. As Lord Jeffery once said: “A good name, like good will, is got by many actions and lost by one.”

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