

“Name Calling”

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

March 12, 2006

Abram had already encountered this God who was now calling himself El Shaddai. It started back when he'd left Mesopotamia and settled in Haran in what is called the fertile crescent. He was 75 years old then and his wife, Sarai, was 65. They were childless. God came to him making promises--promises about receiving land, becoming a numerous people, and having a relationship with God that would benefit other human families.¹ Abram believed him, pulled up roots--lock, stock, and barrel--and headed for Canaan.

God shows up at least three times over the years, making the same promises of land and offspring--but still Sarai isn't knitting any baby booties. Abram kept believing God. But still no child. In desperation to have a child, Sarai gives Abram her servant, Hagar, as a second wife and he has a son by her--Ishmael, who later is sent away.

God appears yet again to Abram--today's passage--*15 years* after that first promise was made. Abram is now 99 years old. God is making the same promises. But this time there's a difference. God makes a covenant with Abram. The promises are repeated--ancestor of many nations, land, the promise to be their God--and he gives Abram a new name. His old name meant 'exalted father'. The new name, Abraham, meant 'father of multitudes'.

It's not just about Abraham, though. Sarah participates fully in the covenant. There is a point in this story where God says that it is by Sarai, who is also renamed--to Sarah--that these multitudes of nations will come. With that Abraham falls on his face in laughter. There is the ludicrous in this story of Abraham and Sarah...what God proposes is laughable--that a 100 year old man and a 90 year old woman would parent a child, much less produce multitudes of nations. Later, Sarah, too will laugh at the idea. What they didn't count on was the power of El Shaddai--God Almighty--who had come to Abram bearing a covenant that was for all eternity.

As I said, this visit from God was different. The covenant required something on Abram's part. Accepting new names for him and his wife was only the beginning. God said this was an everlasting covenant--for all of eternity. And God required circumcision from him, his descendants, and all the males in their households as a sign of entering that covenant--of making God Almighty the only God for him and his descendants. God said, "I will be their God."

Abraham and Sarah entered that covenant with God, accepting their new names, and bound by the covenant to live into those names. Their lives were changed. Now they must be outward looking, centered on others, focused on how God's purpose for their lives would lead them to a new destiny.

When we bring a child into the world, we too, consider that child's destiny. Along with the naming go our hopes and dreams for what that child will be. Yet, in our culture, we are pretty casual about names. We often name our babies according to what sounds good to us, how it flows with the last name, what's popular that year. Sometimes we incorporate family names, but it seems the greater interest is in coming up with a name that is unique. In biblical times and in other cultures, names are treated more seriously.

Most of you will remember the book *Roots*, by Alex Haley, popular in the 70s. It begins in The Gambia, West Africa. Omoro's firstborn child is a son. By ancient custom, for the next seven days, the single task which occupies Omoro is the selection of a name for his firstborn son. It would have to be a name rich with history and with promise, for the people of his tribe--the Mandinkas, believed that a child would develop seven of the characteristics of whomever or whatever he was named for.

Each household in the village was visited and invited to the naming ceremony--the eighth day of the child's life. Prayers were said for the baby, that God would grant him long life, that he would bring credit and pride and many children to his family, to his village, to his tribe. They prayed that he would have the strength and spirit to deserve and to bring honor to the name he was about to receive.

The father lifts the child and whispers three times into his son's ear the name he had chosen for him. It had not been previously spoken aloud because Omoro's people felt that each human being should be the first to know who he was. Then Omoro whispers the name into the ear of his wife and then to the village teacher who announces to those waiting in anticipation. "The first child of Omoro and Binto Kinte is named Kunta!" It was the middle name of the baby's grandfather, a man of great honor, who was the village holy man before his death. It was now Kunta Kinte's life-long duty to live into his name.

When in turn, it was time for him to name his first child, this one a girl, he considered carefully. This required long and serious reflection, for he knew that what a child was called would influence the kind of person he or she became.³ That was Abraham's legacy. His name became the major influence

for his life. Abraham now had a duty to live into his name. And God watched with vested interest.

Being named, or renamed, is only part of the story. The other side is in the naming. Naming something--or someone--changes that relationship. There is a sense of pride, of protection, of ownership, if you will. Or perhaps, more appropriately, a sense of kinship. I think about astronomers--professional or amateur--who discover new stars, then have the honor of naming them. I think after that they would always feel a sense of connection with that particular star. Even with seemingly inanimate objects it seems to be true--look at Ken Kesey and his bus, Further. You name your ranches...and with that come high hopes of the ranch living into that name.

We do it with animals. When I was a child we raised a beef calf off our milk cow each year. One little bull calf we kids named Sancho after a bull in a movie--independent and free. We took the calf away from his mother the day he was born and fed him his portion of the cow's milk from a calf bucket--a metal pale with a rubber nipple attached. Sancho was half Herford and his face was snowy white with wavy hair. When he sucked, his little tail would whip back and forth and every little bit he would butt the bucket, sloshing milk. When Sancho was old enough we taught him to drink, dipping our fingers into the milk and letting him suck our fingers while we slowly lowered our hand into the bucket of milk. Sancho soon learned to suck up the milk on his own. We petted and stroked and talked to him while he ate. I bet you can see where this is going. When it came time to butcher him, we were traumatized and all of us kids refused to eat him. We had developed a bond with him. Naming does that. After that, the calves were not named.

If it is true of us with animals or inanimate things, how much more is it true for the God of love when God names humans? A bond is created that is revealed in the way God watches over and guides that life. There are several significant renamings in scripture besides Abraham and Sarah. Jacob is renamed to Israel after he spends a night wrestling with God. Simon is renamed Peter by Jesus as Jesus declares that on this rock he would build his church. Saul, persecutor of the followers of Jesus, is renamed Paul after he encounters the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus. In other instances, God names the child before it is born. When these namings or renamings happen, it signifies a turning point, God taking action in the world to bring about the divine purpose.

Abraham and Sarah lived into their names, into that divine purpose--parenting multitudes of nations. They became spiritual parents for Jews, Muslims and Christians. They are our spiritual parents. From their lineage came Jesus. God named Jesus before he was born. The name he was given meant 'savior' and Jesus lived into that name.

Through Jesus Christ, we have received new names. Beloved ... Child of God ... Christian. A name change is viewed as the external sign of an important turn in the life or function of the bearer. It marks a new era. It doesn't mean a change in personality or character. We don't magically become someone different. We are still who we are, but in a higher, more noble sense of living into who God calls us to be. That new name, Christian, carries with it the name of the divine. Renaming marks a new stage in our identification with the God's purpose.

We took on the name Christian when we agreed to become part of the new covenant. Rather than circumcision, the sign of our faithfulness to the covenant is our baptism. It is God's dream that we live into that name, do justice to it, bring honor to it, be faithful to the relationship with the promising God.

God doesn't force or coerce us. The unfaithful can remove themselves from the covenant. But always, God remains faithful. God promised it to Abraham and Sarah. God promises it to us. We can always cling to God's promise, which is fulfilled in Jesus Christ. In the second chapter of Revelations we read that those who remain faithful will one day be given a white stone with a new name written on it, a name no one will know except the one who receives it. Like the naming ritual of Kunta Kinte, each of us will be the first to know who we are. Thanks be to God.

¹ *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with Apocrypha*, ed. Bruce M. Metzger, Roland E. Murphy, Oxford University Press, New York, 1991.

² *Roots*, Alex Haley, G.K. Hall & Co., Boston, 1976