

Names

Some of you may remember that I am the youngest of six children. Once I met someone who was the youngest of seven children, also named John. His explanation of his name was that by the time he came along, his parents had run out of names. It's a great story, but for me it isn't really true. My father had a middle brother named John, and I am named after him.

Perhaps every parent who has more than one child struggles to call the last one correctly. For years I was "Bill/George/John" as my mother ran through my brothers' names before she got to mine. I'm embarrassed to admit that sometimes I even called my own son by the dog's name, because we had the dog first. Fortunately, he thought it was funny.

Names make a difference. They convey identity. I've often said that my favorite Gospel might be different if I had been named Luke rather than John. Knowing someone's name provides familiarity, even power. Naming someone is certainly powerful. The old practice of giving a baptismal name underscored the idea of receiving new life in Jesus Christ and a new identity in the Holy Spirit.

Today we heard God give Abram and Sarai new names. Actually, if you read carefully, there are multiple names for God in this passage, which is typical for the book of Genesis. The first name is the LORD, Adonai in Hebrew, the word substituted for the divine name that was too holy to even say. In many Bibles that use of "Lord" is capitalized. Then there's God Almighty, or El Shaddai, and finally simply "God," in Hebrew Elohim, the most fascinating name because it's actually a plural word. Christians might see an early glimpse of the Trinity in that name. During the time of Abraham, the one God was known in a lot of ways and by several names.

This one God appeared to Abram in his old age and changed his name. It wasn't much of a change; Abram is taken to mean "exalted father" and Abraham "father of a multitude." Sarai to Sarah is even less of a change. The significance is huge, however. The new names and identities for both Abraham and Sarah are explicitly connected with God's blessing of all the descendants to come from them. Eventually that will include Jesus, as both Matthew and Luke tell us in their gospel genealogies.

Paul takes Abraham's blessing a step further in his letter to the church in Rome. He says that the blessing extends not through those who share physical descent from Abraham and follow the law or Torah of the first five books of the Bible, but blessing comes to those who share Abraham's faith. Both Abraham and Sarah were "chronologically gifted," we might say, yet they believed that God would do what he promised and give them a son. Hoping against hope, they believed. Paul says that those who continue to hope against hope are the heirs and descendants of Abraham, and so are receivers of the promise.

Peter hadn't yet figured that out in today's Gospel reading. When Jesus told the disciples quite openly about the suffering that was coming, Peter got angry or scared or both and pulled Jesus aside to straighten him out. Instead, Jesus straightened out Peter. In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus is the only one who is allowed to rebuke others. When Peter tried to rebuke Jesus, he got it right back in his face. Jesus rightly saw Peter's words as the temptation of Satan and named it as such. I'll bet Peter kept his mouth shut for the rest of that day, if not the rest of the week.

Now you may think that Peter should have known better. Wasn't it just a few verses before that Simon got the new name of Peter, "Rock," when he identified Jesus as the Messiah? Yes, but that's in the Gospel of Matthew, not Mark. Even with his new name, Peter still went on to rebuke Jesus about the suffering, with the same result as in Mark.

This year, Paul's description of Abraham "hoping against hope" really grips me. Abraham believed that God would fulfill his promise. Isn't that what we need today? Don't we hope against hope that the world will get better, that God's kingdom will finally come in all of its glory, that love and justice will prevail?

Abraham is remembered today because he did more than hope against hope, more than simply believe. He acted. He acted out of the core of his being, where God was present. He stepped out in faith before he had any tangible assurance that the blessing would arrive. Because he did that, blessing followed. God calls us always to do the same, to step out in faith, expecting that blessing will follow.

I still introduce myself as John, preferring my baptismal name to any of my titles. I accept that others are more comfortable using a title, and that's fine. I can live with that. But if I am to live out of the core of my being, true to who God knows and calls me to be, I have to be ever mindful of the new life given to me at baptism. You, too, were given a name by God at your baptism. You have been called a beloved child of God, sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ's own forever. How will you let that change your life? How will you extend God's blessing? What will you do this Lent to make the world a better place?

[Lent 2: Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Romans 4:13-25; Mark 8:31-38.]