

February 28, 2021 – Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16 & Romans 5:1-11

I was only five or six years old at the time. Far too young to understand what was going on. But looking back, I realize now what a significant moment it was. You see, a girl in my Kindergarten class was getting a new name.

Well, not really a completely new name. Just a respelling of her first name. Her name was Sara. Spelled, as it often is, S A R A. Sara was the daughter of two Christian parents. But those parents were significantly different in their theological dispositions.

Sara's mother was a confirmed Lutheran while Sara's father was a lifelong Baptist. And as a lifelong Baptist, he had insisted that she not be baptized until she was an adult. Or, at least, a mature teenager. Much to the chagrin of Sara's mother.

That standoff had persisted for many years. But her father had, of late, come around to more of a Lutheran persuasion. He joined our congregation. And he agreed to allow Sara to be baptized far younger than he had ever intended before. Only five years old.

Sara's mother was ecstatic, of course. She wanted to make this a huge, significant event for the family. And so, thinking back to our Old Testament lesson for today, she decided, "Why not change Sara's name?" Change her from Sara – S A R A – to Sarah – S A R A H, as a permanent reminder of God's grace in Holy Baptism.

It was a nice gesture. I can appreciate the symbolism in it. Because, throughout Scripture, names are a source of tremendous meaning.

We see it all over the place. Sometimes it's a reminder of their origins. Isaac, meaning 'laughter'. As in, the laughter of Abraham and Sarah when God told them they would have a son. Moses, meaning 'from the water'. Because he was, literally, rescued from the Nile River. Samuel, meaning 'God has heard me'. For he was the answer to Hannah's prayer for a son.

These names serve as reminders of their infancy and parents. But sometimes names are prophetic as well. Pointing to events in the future, long after the person is named. We heard about Jacob just this past Wednesday. It means 'one who grabs the heel'. A reference to the circumstances of his birth, yes, but also a euphemism for "someone you can't trust," for that is what Jacob would become to just about everyone who knew him.

Then there's Solomon, meaning 'man of peace'. For Solomon would reign over the greatest time of peace and prosperity in Israel's entire history. Jesus, meaning 'the Lord saves', for he would save his people from their sins.

Over and over again we see this happening. In the Bible, a name is never just a name. Especially when it's a new name. God does not give out new names lightly. If he's doing it he has a reason.

Our Gospel lesson today comes from Mark's Gospel. Had we read it from Matthew's Gospel, we would have heard Jesus giving Simon a new name: Peter. The Rock. Not just because Peter would become a prominent leader among the Apostles' and the early Christian Church. But because the confession that he made – "You are the Christ. The Son of God." - that confession is the rock upon which all of Christianity is built. And Peter was blessed to be the first to say it out loud.

Jesus wanted Simon to know that what he had just said would transform Simon's entire life. His entire future. His entire identity. Everything would change because of what Simon has just confessed. And so he was no longer Simon. He was Peter, from that time forward.

The same was true for Abram and Sarai. They had perfectly good names. Abram means “exalted father,” Sarai means “princess.” And these weren't names given out randomly. They represented a family that had prominence in the community. A man and woman who really were exalted and treated like a prince and princess. They were as much titles as they were names.

But not anymore. We know Abram was a wealthy man in his birthplace of Ur. A man befitting the title of exalted. But he wasn't in Ur anymore. He had packed up his family and servants and cattle and everything he owned and moved thousands of miles away to a piece of wilderness known as Canaan. He gave up everything he knew. His home, his community, his status. Everything.

Why? Because God told him to. God told Abram and Sarai, “Go to Canaan.” So they went to Canaan. And now this “exalted father” and his “princess” were living as nomads in tents, looking to settle in an unfamiliar land. It was not the life either of them probably had planned. Certainly not in their retirement years.

But it was worth it in the end. They left on faith, sure, but when they arrived, God came to Abram and said, “Good. I'm glad you obeyed. Because I'm going to make you into a great nation. You are going to have a son. And you are going to have more descendants than you can count.” Not a bad tradeoff.

But the promise had not been fulfilled. 24 years went by after they arrived and God made that promise. 24 years. In that time, Abraham had grown to the ripe old age of 99 and Sarah was now 89. It was doubtful to think of her getting pregnant 24 years prior when she was 65. Now it's just absurd.

But God hadn't given up on them. This wasn't just some human promise, easily forgotten over time. This was a divine covenant with them. And this wasn't a covenant they had together. God doesn't call it “our covenant.” It's God's covenant. A one-way street. I will do this for you. Period.

And He confirmed it with a new name for each of them. To Abram, He gives the name “Abraham.” For he is no longer just an exalted father-figure for the community. He will be what that name means: the father of many. The father of an entire nation.

And for Sara? For Sara he has a new name too. But, actually, it doesn't mean anything different. It's just a different spelling of the same name.

But even in that, God is telling her something. He's saying, “You're not just going to be a princess in the eyes of the community or the eyes of your father or the eyes of your husband. You're going to be a princess in My eyes. You're going to be the princess of My people and my nation.”

Names have meaning. These new names had an incredible meaning for Abraham and Sarah. They meant that God was still with them. The covenant was still good. The plan was still in effect. God's promise was still trustworthy.

And we are part of that promise. Because we are the children of Abraham. Not by blood, but by faith. We have been adopted into Abraham's family tree.

Abraham is “the father of many,” and we are the many. When God told Abraham that he would be the father of a great nation, that he would be more numerous than the stars in the sky, Abraham couldn't possibly have counted all the people who would be his decedents. But God could. When God told Abraham that he would be the father of many, He was thinking of you.

And he has given you a new name. In Holy Baptism, God declares that you are his in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. In Holy Baptism God adopts you and gives you His family name. The name of Himself. The name that it above every name. The name of His Son.

So I am not just Joshua of the Ketelsen family. I am Joshua of Christ's family. And you are of Christ's family and you are of Christ's family. And we are all of Christ's family. That is our name. That is our identity.

While we were still no more than a star in Abraham's eye, God had a plan for us. While we were still powerless, the Son of God came to us. While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

To reconcile us and to save us. Through His death and, even more so, through His life. A life that is our own. A life that comes from having a new name. God's name. Written on our hearts.

Defining us as more than whatever we thought we were. More than the sinners that we know we are. A name that makes us one of Abraham's descendants. A name that makes us one of God's people. You have a new name and that new name is written in the Book of Life. Written in the blood of Jesus Christ. Amen.