

Sermons at St. Luke's

A sermon preached by the Rev. Joseph H. Hensley, Jr. on Sunday, March 8, 2009.

Lent II Year B

Names are important. My first name is “Joseph,” and when I was a boy, everyone called me “Jody.” This name suited me just fine until I was in the fourth grade and it dawned on some of my peers that the name Jody could be a boy's name or a girl's name. “Jody's a girl's name! Jody's a girl's name!” I wish I could say that I was able to ignore these childish taunts, but I couldn't. So one day I walked into school and informed my teacher and classmates that my name was now “Joe” (just like my dad). That name stuck, and I have been Joe, for the most part, ever since (certain members of the family still call me “Jody.”). I changed my name, but things did not really change much. The mean kids found other things to make fun of. I had a new name, but I still had a lot of growing up to do. Our grown up names, our true names are not names we give ourselves. Our true names are given to us. In this morning's lesson from Genesis, Abram and Sarai are given new names. God bestows upon them names that signify God's covenant with them and their descendants. Their new names show that Abraham and Sarah are forever connected to God, and that God has a special purpose for them.

The scripture tells us that God appears to Abram and announces that God will make a covenant with him and his descendants. A covenant is like a contract, an oath of loyalty. As I have said before, the fact that God makes a covenant with human beings is unique, because the gods of the near East in the time of Abraham were generally aloof, doing their own thing. The gods might respond to human attempts to influence them, but there were no guarantees. So for God to appear to Abram and offer a promise, a covenant, is pretty special. And then there's the fact that Abram is ninety-nine years old. He's an old man, and here is God offering him the chance to become the father of many nations, to have numerous descendants, to be the ancestor of rulers. What we need to remember is that Abram and God have been in conversations about this covenant for a while. And Abram has not always been ready to believe. But at this point, now that the covenant is on the table, so to speak, Abram does not hesitate. The scripture says, “He fell on his face.” Abram gets on the ground, he assumes a vulnerable and humble posture before God as a way of saying, “okay, God, I'll walk with you. I'll trust you.” Then God gives Abram that new name, “Abraham” which means “father of many nations.” And he says that Abram's wife, Sarai, (who is 90 years old by the way) will also have a new name, Sarah, which means princess. In other words, Abraham and Sarah are going to begin a new chapter in their lives, a chapter in which they will no longer be living for themselves. They will be living in faithful contract with the divine and responsible for future generations. Even though they are old, even though they have little reason to hope in what God promises, God changes their names.

Name changes are part of the culture, these days. Every time you turn around people and businesses and churches and communities are changing their names, changing their identities. Sometimes we change our own names. Sometimes names and identities are changed for us. A lot of times what changes is not our everyday names but the titles that go with those names. A job promotion may mean a more impressive title. A job loss may mean that someone's title changes from “employee of such and such company” to “independent contractor” or “consultant” or simply, “unemployed.” Such title changes may bring a sense of pride (in the case of advancement) or perhaps a sense of shame when we feel like we have failed to keep a title that

we worked hard to achieve. The trouble is that we, both individually and as a society, give a lot of power to titles and names which have little or nothing to do with who we really are. We put a lot of faith in the letters after a name (PhD, M.D., B.F.A., M.A., M.S.W., M.Div. etc.). I think it's pretty ironic that a lot of undergraduates earn the letters "B.S." after their name, because in many ways that's just what our letters and titles represent...just a lot of b.s. I'm not putting down the work that goes into attaining such letters and such degrees. And certainly God is working in the work we do. But so often, these names, these titles don't tell us who we really are. They don't connect us to God or one another. In many ways, they set us apart, divide us up into arbitrary categories and hierarchies. And yet, we spend a lot of time and energy changing our names, changing our identities so that we can fit into these categories and hierarchies. We spend a lot of time and energy changing our names, perhaps because we are in search of our true names, our true callings.

Abram's name change does not come about because Abram is aiming for a promotion. It is not his success as a wealthy shepherd that earns him a new title. Abram becomes Abraham, the father of many nations, because he is willing to walk with God. He is willing to get down on his face. He is willing to make himself vulnerable and trust. God offers Abram a covenant of loyalty and a new responsibility for future generations. Abram does not puff himself up with pride. He literally gets down on his face in the dust, a posture of vulnerability and humility. He bows down, acknowledging that God is greater than anything he can ask or imagine. And while he is in this position of seeming weakness, God speaks his new name, his true name, "Abraham," a name of strength.

What is our true name? What name has God given us? I believe that God has a true name for each of us, a name that is more authentic than our family names or our professional names. God has a name for each of us that connects us to God and to the greater human family. A name that reveals the covenant that God, the divine creator, has made with our ancestors and with endless generations. Our true name is a covenant name, signifying that we walk with God. A covenant name gives us a relationship to the creator and a purpose in God's creation. Abraham and Sarah's purpose was to be the father and mother of many nations, to show the way of walking with God in faith. God gave them their names, gave them their purpose, not according to what they thought they could do, but according to what God enabled them to do. They were old. They were unlikely parents. But they received their names anyway. What is our true name? How will we be called by God?

This holy season of Lent is a time to get down on our faces, to put our heads to the ground and say, "Okay, God, we're listening. We're down here on the ground. We're vulnerable. We're listening, listening for the name you want to give us, Lord, the covenant name. We're tired of changing our own names. We're tired of having the world tell us who to be. We're ready to walk the walk with you." God knows who we really are, even when we may have forgotten. The Spirit of grace and truth knows who we are even while we are busy trying to figure it out. This holy season is perhaps a season to do less figuring and more listening. During Lent, we confess our sins and admit how we have allowed the world to change our name, how we have trusted in false titles and false identities. We seek God's forgiveness, but we also seek God's voice. We clean the ears of our heart during Lent that we might hear God calling. When we fast, we are not seeking to please God with our hunger as much as to awaken our hunger for the truth. When we pray, we are not seeking to influence God's will as much as to place ourselves at God's mercy, trusting God to influence our will. When we give alms and help the needy, we are not trying to impress God with our service. We are giving thanks for what we have and recognizing that we

are all needy before God. When we take up our cross, as Jesus invites us to do, when we take up a holy burden, we do so not to show God how much we can shoulder. We take up the cross to be shown how God can transform an instrument of shame into an implement of grace. These disciplines of Lent, these spiritual practices and exercises are all ways that we can fall on our faces, all ways that we can give ourselves over to the loving, creative, mysterious presence of God. And God will take us, like Abraham and Sarah, unlikely and unworthy servants though we be. The Divine, Holy One will bless us in ways we cannot ask or imagine. God continues to offer us that contract and covenant. We can be God's people, a family united by matriarchs and patriarchs. God will always be our God. Fall down, brothers and sisters. Touch your face to the ground from which you are made. Smell the earth. Listen to the Spirit calling you by a new name.