

What's *Your* Name?

June 2, 2024

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Genesis 17, portions of

“What’s your name?”

I had just ordered a latte at our neighborhood coffee bar in London whilst on sabbatical.

“Sarah”, I said, with my midwestern American accent.

“Stella?”, He inquired before writing it on the cup.

I thought, Now *that’s* a cool name.” So I said, “Yes. Stella”....

And I’ve been Stella ever since-- at least when ordering coffee, or food, or waiting for a table at a restaurant. The most fun is at the farmer’s market. Every summer, after I order the eggs and hash from the same guy at his food truck, when it’s ready he yells out so loud, I can practically hear him across the market, “Stella!!”

We all have stories about our name. Where it comes from. If it’s changed. How it’s changed. Why it’s changed.

I remember one of the very few if not only times my Chicago grandmother snapped at me. It was at the meal after my grandfather’s funeral, and I was a little girl playfully pronouncing his last name in what I imagined was the Czechoslovak way and not the Americanized way. I said “grandpa yousko”, not Jusko. I didn’t know it would be hurtful to my grandmother.

The Bible is full of name changes, not just of people but of places. Sometimes God renames, and sometimes a person renames...Jesus renamed disciples... were they nicknames? New names might symbolize new identity and purpose. Sometimes they are not who or what they used to be.

During this summer series, a plethora of preachers will lead us in exploring, from this pulpit, a plethora of Bible stories about names.

Two meetings happened the week of May 12th that couldn't have been more different.

On Thursday May 16th, there was cruel and childish name calling during a three-hour congressional committee meeting in Washington D.C. One commentator wrote "Even by the rock bottom standards of the 118th congress Thursday night was a new low. They went after each other's appearance: "I think your fake eyelashes are messing up what you're reading." There was so much shouting and cross talk it was impossible to tell who was saying what, and from which direction the insults were flying." (New York Times) Perhaps the voyeur in us could find this fascinating, but mostly it's just so sad that it's come to this in our congress.

In strong contrast, the night before, there was a three-hour meeting in a church basement in Minneapolis Minnesota where 126 people gathered to discern a path forward about something near and dear to their hearts, near and dear for all sorts of different reasons. About the name of their beloved church. Yes, they packed the dining room.

It was a beautiful thing, the feeling in that room, as people seated at round tables (people didn't choose their own tables, the table was chosen for them) went around twice sharing their thoughts and their feelings about the name of their church. We didn't want a vote at that time-- that sharp decision that quickly separates people into two opposing camps. Instead, we were using a variation of the Quaker discernment model Allowing time, in this covenantal community, to speak from the heart and listen to one another and feel God's presence within and among. In the end, we didn't have enough time to stay in that "alternative" mode of decision making, which is neither autocratic, one person decides, nor democratic-majority rule. But it seems, that as time weighed down on us, it was getting late, people increasingly fell back into our automatic setting, which in this country is democratic, strategic, caucusing, political..... not spiritual discernment...

Even still, that Wednesday evening meeting and all of the many gatherings of the last year and a half have been remarkable. Civil but not just that. Kind and deeply caring. We care about one another and do not play politics with this potent and emotional question of our name. We know we can't avoid this deep reckoning work, as a Christian community, in the wake of the murder of George Floyd that has set off an anti-racism and anti-colonialism movement all across the world and we can't avoid this deep wondering work as we approach the 100 year anniversary of our church: Who do we want to be? And I tell you: The What's IN A Name committee is remarkable. Whatever happens, we know it will be done with the greatest love and care.

Back to the Bible and names.... One of the first name changes in our book is Abram to Abraham and Sarai to Sarah. Why did God change their names, according to our religious mythology?

Remember with me that the book of Genesis is about beginnings. The first 12 chapters is “about the one who calls the world into being” After the goodness of the creation story, things start going bad...think Cain and Abel and Noah and the ark and the tower of Babel . So, then in chapter 13 God makes a second call. “God fashions an alternative community in creation gone awry. It is the hope of God that in this new family all human history can be brought to unity and harmony.” God calls Abram and Sarai to leave what is known and go forth into the unknown, with faith. They do so, and they are not young! Abram is 75! As third act people they do not settle into safety! (Brueggemann peppered in here)

Several chapters later, after much has happened with Abram and Sarai, God makes a covenant with Abram. Abram is now 99, according to our myth. *“This is my covenant with you, you will be the ancestors of many nations. You are no longer to be called Abram, ‘respected Parent,’ but Abraham, ‘Progenitor of a multitude, for you are the progenitor of a multitude of nations’.*

And God tells Abraham that the covenant will go through another son, to be born of Sarai, not his existing young son, Ishamel, who was born of Hagar. Abraham laughs in disbelief that Sarai who is 90 can bear a son. Later Sarah also laughs in disbelief. That’s why God names this soon to be child “Isaac”, which means laughter. *As for Sarai, God says, her name will now be Sarah, “noblewoman”. I will bless her, and she will become nations; rulers of peoples will come from her.”*

Name changes in the book of Genesis express newness of identity and purpose.

As long as I’m in these passages of the Bible and in the pulpit today, I’m going to use this opportunity to deviate from the theme of “what’s in a name” for a bit. I must, given the events in the world that are so connected to this scripture.

Being immersed in this biblical mythology this past week, gobbling up different translations, and at the same time reading news of Israel Palestine, especially the city of Rafah, is heartrending and a reminder of how excruciatingly difficult, this is.... My empathy for Jews and especially rabbis, who interpret these texts for their congregations, has been stirred up more than I can ever remember. We must hold the multi layered complexity in our hearts.

The texts speak repeatedly of faithfully moving into the unknown future, trusting in God, being chosen people, given a promised land, and being the center of the world for all peoples. Although I, as a Christian preacher, have loved and will continue to love and

speak about many of these rich metaphors, like the stories about our chosenness, that God is not indifferent to humanity, and that we are being lovingly lured into moving faithfully into the unknown future. Yes, these are some of the most meaningful stories that exist for the human soul. BUT the literal interpretation, and biblical literalism is seldom true or good, the literal meaning can still seep in, often unconsciously, and shape a people's consciousness, making them believe, for example, that *they* are the chosen ones..... oh... to be a liberal rabbi, one who does not take the text literally, in these times, would be extraordinarily challenging.

This language is everywhere in these chapters about Abraham and Sarah

I will make of you a great people.

I will bless those who bless you, and curse those who curse you.

I will give to you and to your descendants after you, this land in which you are an alien, the land of Canaan; it will be yours and your descendants....

And then there is also **this** story, In Chapter 18, just after Abraham and Sarah's names are changed. The story of how an emboldened Abraham stood up to God, challenged God, in organizing we might call this an agitation, He asks God potent questions hoping to provoke God to act in accordance with God's deepest values--, not to harm the innocent in this city even as it holds so many sinful ones, or enemies... Hear this from the Inclusive Bible translation. And wonder with me, Is Raha the modern-day Sodom?

We must hold the complexity of all of this, and be empathetic to everyone including our Jewish siblings whose faith and world view flows, with all its layered implications, from this text.....

Back to names....

A new name often signifies a new phase in the life of its bearer....

So, I don't have a drop of Scandinavian blood. And I make it known often in this MN north country. I'm always playfully joking about Scandinavians, tiresomely so, as many of you know.... I suppose it comes from an unconscious fascination, also probably from some unconscious resistance, feeling a wee bit like the "other", but it's mostly lighthearted joking that I feel I have permission to engage in because I'm married to a 100 % Swede. Someone with the funny name Gustafson. Speaking of nicknames, I have about six Scandinavian nicknames, I alternate between, for him, and if I ever use the name "Mark", he knows something's wrong.

When we got married in 1983, I didn't give a thought to changing my last name. It was partly the culture and time I was shaped in, and partly it would have felt wrong because I wasn't Scandinavian. The name didn't fit my identity.

But there was a moment in the hospital room-- and because it was Covid time I was alone, my daughters would spend time in the courtyard below,-- yes there was a moment after my soul mate had his second massive stroke, two days after the first, when he was asleep there in the hospital bed, **when I knew**, if he dies tonight I will change my last name to Gustafson.

What's your name story?

Sources

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