

Lent 2 Year B 2009
Texts: Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16
Psalm 22:22-30
Romans 4:13-25
Mark 8:31-38

“No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. “ Genesis 17:5

I don't know what they could have been thinking. I haven't a clue as to why my parents gave me the name Doris. Granted, after the doctor delivered my twin sister and walked out of the delivery room only to be summoned back by the nurse and told, “someone else is in there” my parents had to come up with a another name rather unexpectedly and quickly.

But Doris? I don't think they knew Doris was a wife of the god Zeus. She was a sea nymph who bore him 3000 children. At least I'd like to think they didn't know because if they did then they have some explaining to do.

I have always disliked my name. It was always old fashioned. I was always the only one in any of my classes, from elementary school through two master degrees, to have it. And what really irritated me was that whenever we went on vacation and stopped at a place to eat there invariably were kiosks that sold key chains and little license plates that were personalized, and my name was never there. It was like I didn't exist.

When David and I were planning our trip to England two years ago I found out the importance of a name. I had been trying for 5 months to get my birth certificate from the state of New Jersey. I received a letter that stated that despite and exhaustive search they could not find any indication that someone by the name of Doris Ann Colby was born on January 21, 1959. Because they could not find my name according to the state of Missouri I do not exist.

A name means that something or someone exists. To know the name is to be in relationship with that person or thing. To know someone's name is to know something of their essence.

God gives his name to Moses when he gave him the law on Mount Sinai. God tells Moses, “I AM who I AM.” God gave his name so that his people could be in relationship with him.

We know God’s name is important. We are warned about abusing God’s name in the third commandment. Barbara Brown Taylor, a noted Episcopal priest and author, translates that commandment as “don’t throw my name around. A name is a very personal thing, and the fact that you know mine at all is a sign of our closeness. Do not abuse the privilege.”¹

So, I’ve been thinking about names a lot this week. In today’s Old Testament reading we hear about Abram, who at ninety-nine years old is without a son by his wife Sarai. God appears to Abram and promises that he will be “the ancestor of a multitude of nations.” Then God does a very curious thing, but it is something that happens repeatedly in scripture. God changes Abram’s name.

God tells Abram that his name shall be changed to Abraham, which means “father of nations.” Every time Abraham is called by his new name it is a reminder to God and to the community of God’s covenant with Abraham and the relationship that exists between them.

The name changing doesn’t stop there. God changes Sarai’s name to Sarah, meaning Queen or princess because, “she shall give rise to nations.” When people spoke her new name they were reminded of Sarah’s blessing received from God and that from her, from an old barren woman, new life will come forth.

There are other examples in scripture of someone’s name being changed. Jacob is renamed Israel. Jesus renames Simon and calls him “Peter” which means “rock” because as Jesus tells him, ‘You are the rock upon which I will build my church.’

What I find most interesting is that all of these people had their names changed AFTER they entered into relationship with God, AFTER they were given a commission. And all of the names given in some way reflected that person’s relationship with God and what they were called

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, “Gospel Medicine” p. 47

to do. All these individuals entered into relationship with God and were forever changed by that relationship.

We also rename individuals. Every time we baptize someone they are given the name “Christian,” one belonging to Christ. Every time someone is baptized they have an encounter with God that will forever change and shape their life. Baptism is God’s sign that he has called us into relationship and that we have a very specific job to do.

To bear the name Christian shows something of our essence. Hopefully, what people see when they enter into a relationship with us is the essence of Christ. It is because we bear that specific name that we are to share the saving love of God in Christ. If being Christian is really at the core of our essence we are literally the embodiment of God to the world.

We bear the name of our Savior from our baptisms unto our deaths and by bearing his name we bear his message that God saves. His story is our story. His death is our death and his resurrection is our resurrection.

We are in the second week of Lent. Lent is a time to reflect on our God-given name and what it means to bear it. Lent is a time when we are asked to enter into God’s essence, into the life-saving death of Jesus Christ. It is a time to recommit ourselves to a deeper understanding of the life-changing story we are a part of and that God has called us to help write.

Lent is also a time when the Church characteristically asks that we contemplate what it means to be a disciple. Part of being a disciple is to show others how they are a part of this story as well. Each person has a part to play in bringing God’s kingdom to earth. We cannot do it alone and we cannot do it in its entirety. The full scope of God’s kingdom will only be realized in God’s time. But our job, everyone’s job, is to bring God’s kingdom as near as we possibly can. Our job is to show the world a taste of the glory that awaits us.

In his name and by his name we are given the strength to go and proclaim the Gospel to a broken world that so desperately needs to hear the message of salvation.

Yes, names are very important things. Whether we like ours or not we are to remember that we are given a new name when we are touched by God. My hope for all of us is that we let God have his way with us; that we let God name and claim us and then we go out in faith to live a transformed and transforming life.

Amen.