

“What’s in a Name”
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Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16 Homily
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Ever wonder why God even *bothered* to change Sarah’s and Abraham’s names? After all, these new names are only *ever so slightly* different from the originals—Abram and Sarai. What’s the big deal? Can you imagine what it must have been like for them to have to adjust to new names at ages 90 and 99?! ...But clearly this was an extremely meaningful moment in God’s relationship with this couple, which God felt called to mark. It’s kind of *endearing*, actually. But obviously it was way more than that.

...God doesn’t take names lightly: When God renamed Jacob “Israel,” it was a very big deal, not just for him, but for the future of the Hebrew people. Saul’s metamorphosis into the apostle Paul was a huge deal for him as an individual and for the future of Christianity. ...And so Sarah went from a name that had no particular significance to one that meant “princess;” while Abraham evolved from “exalted father” into “father of many nations,”—what a difference a few letters make! They entered an entirely new chapter in their lives as foremother and father-to-be of an eternal covenant with God--new identities that would require new responsibilities and standards of behavior. No more cowardly lying to Pharaoh about marital status or nonchalantly surrendering Sarai to Pharaoh’s bed to save Abram’s skin. No more second-guessing God’s promises by getting Sarai’s maid pregnant when Sarai didn’t conceive fast enough for their tastes. No more cruel treatment of the maid, Hagar, or of her son by Abram, Ishmael. Now, after years of unfulfilled pregnancy prophecies, it *really was* time to settle in with a copy of *What to Expect When You’re Expecting* and live into the covenant and its promises! ...The irony, of course, is that, at Abraham’s and Sarah’s advanced ages, they were probably well beyond such questionable behaviors anyway. Yet, given that there is no hard and fast correlation between

chronological age and emotional maturity, perhaps the couple had only just come of age after so many years of wandering.

Speaking of coming of age, maybe some of you can relate to Abraham's and Sarah's renaming experience. Surely many of us came to a day in our lives when it was no longer okay to be called Tommy or Pammy or Pumpkin by our families. When those youthful nicknames began to feel too constricting and even embarrassing, like outgrown little kid clothes and toys. As silly as it may have struck our families at the time, proclaiming one's self Tom or Thomas, Pam or Pamela was a huge, empowering step on the road to independence. For me that day came in high school when I began to ask people to refrain from referring to me by my given name--Carol-Anne—and just call me what *I* preferred--Carol. For a friend of mine, it was legally changing each part of her name—first, middle, and last—at 18 to get a fresh start, symbolically releasing a wounded inner child who had been subject to merciless teasing and name calling throughout her years in school. Marrying and changing or hyphenating last names, divorcing and reclaiming last names, or even just skipping over the “Miss” box and checking off “Ms.” instead--each of these renaming actions is a ritual and a milestone in its own right, publicly proclaiming as they do whom we are becoming and whom we no longer choose to be.

And yet, there's a huge difference between a name choice we make or a name our parents selected from a book of baby names and a name that is bestowed upon us by God. Imagine God taking in your essence, the over-arching theme and purpose of your life, weaving them together and crafting them into a name unique to you. A name which is utterly perfect and resonant. A name that captures you right where you are, as well as where you are challenged to go in order to be your best self and do whatever it is you have been born and called to do upon this earth. In

some ways, it would make life a lot easier to have that information handed to us so directly. But presumably there would be some pressure too, and perhaps some shame upon realizing that we're not quite living up to that ideal. Certainly we know that name changes, even those ordained by God, didn't turn Sarah or Abraham, Jacob or Paul into perfect people. They continued to be flawed, yes, but changed nonetheless. And ultimately, that was what God had called them to—change. Not just a superficial name change, but a deep down, core transition from aimless--or even destructive—wandering to purposeful living, which advanced God's plan. No longer were they mere Jane or John Does; now they were active participants in a project far, far larger than themselves.

This is also not to say that renaming brought unconditional ease into their transformed lives. Among other things, for Abraham and his male descendants, going forward there would be circumcision—the painful ritual requirement upon which the covenant rested. For Jacob there would be tensions with pretty much his entire family: his wives, his father-in-law, his brother. For Paul there would be imprisonment and eventually martyrdom. Even for my friend, renaming didn't necessarily yield a miraculous escape from her painful past, but there was a certain amount of distancing, which made it possible for her to live and to purposefully move forward into adulthood...

To what extent do our names define us? Were my parents thinking they would mold me into a “Song of Joy Favored by God” when they chose to name me Carol-Anne? I'm not certain, but I think their choice was probably a bit more random than that. And I know my name is not a family heirloom. Of course fashion often factors into the baby naming equation. I don't know about you, but I went to school with a ton of Carols and Marys and Johns and Bills. Not one of

those names is on the top 10 baby name list today. Apparently now we have a whole lot of Sophias, Emmas, Aidens, and Jacksons. After last year's royal wedding, we'll likely be seeing a lot of baby Kates soon as well. Abraham, on the other hand, he isn't even in the top 100 names. But you'll still find Sarah at number 28.

As we're examining and getting right with ourselves and God during Lent, I would invite us to ponder just what resides at our cores and just what and whom God is calling us to do and to be in the grand redemptive divine scheme of things. If we were to scrub away the residue of brokenness and sin that has accumulated around our hearts and our souls over the past year, what sort of gem would be revealed? What would it ask of us? How would we live into its unique beauty? How would we harness that beauty for a higher purpose? Can we get some clues about its substance from the names given to us by our parents? Or might we like to discern with God a new spiritual name that better expresses who we are and why we are here? As our ancestors Abraham and Sarah can attest, we are never too old or too tarnished to be renamed and repurposed.

If you are game, I would suggest starting this exercise with our given names. We may even begin to recognize patterns in our lives that reinforce those names and the lessons they can teach us about our best selves. As I prepared this sermon, I realized for the first time that my college nickname—Smiley—bore a somewhat striking resemblance to a carol or Song of Joy. This is not to say that I am always smiling or singing or joyful, but that on my best days I was and I am, and that perhaps this is the inner gem God continually calls me to dust off and allow to radiate brightly for God's redemptive purposes...

What's in your name? And what happens when we bring all of our individual names, our best selves, and our higher purposes together under one roof? Just what vision might God covenant to birth through us??