

BY ANY OTHER NAME
GENESIS 17:1-9, 15-17
FOR WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, GREENVILLE SC
4 MARCH 2018, LENT III

I don't ever give anything up for Lent. I used to say that I was giving Lent up for Lent, but in reality it's never much been a part of my life. I admire folks who actively seek to deny themselves in order to refocus on God's life-giving presence, or those who add a spiritual discipline to their overbooked lives. In truth, I find Lent easy to forget. Advent's all fracas—lists, lights, carols, and chrismons. You can't go anywhere from Advent 1 to December 25 without being confronted with the looming cradle.

Lent is a quieter ordeal. To begin with, the season is considerably longer—as with basketball most of us don't check in until Holy Week, our spiritual March Madness. Excepting the Filet o'Fish (and, discovered this week at a Chick-Fil-A in heavily Catholic Baltimore, the Chick-Fil-A Fish Sandwich), the industry has not yet found a way to transform Lenten discipline into commercial gain. "This is the way Lent goes," you might say, "not with a bang but with a whimper."

Properly considered Lent demands our patience and asks us to remain faithful to an impossible promise that often seems just out of reach. Which is why the story of Abram and Sarai fits perfectly in our Lenten narrative.

Listen now for the Word of the Lord, spoken in Genesis 17, verses 1-9 and 15-17.

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abram, and said to him, "I am God Almighty; **walk before me**, and be blameless. ²And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous." ³Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him,

⁴"As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. ⁵No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. ⁶I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you.

⁷I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. ⁸And I will give to you, and to your offspring after you, the land where you are now an alien, all the land of Canaan, for a perpetual holding; and I will be

their God.” ⁹God said to Abraham, “As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations.

[...] ¹⁵God said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. ¹⁶I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.”

¹⁷Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said to himself, “Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?”

The Word of the Lord. Let us pray: *By your Word open our ears that we may hear, our eyes that we may see, and our hearts that we may be transformed. Amen.*

A lot can happen in a few years. Folks get married, settle down, get a dog, 2.5 kids, a minivan, and, in here in Greenville, a handful of golf carts. The problem for Abram by Genesis 17 is that a lot *has not* happened. Twenty-four years prior to our text God promised him descendants as numerous as the stars—descendants, presumably, by his wife Sarai. Eleven years later the elderly Sarai was without child. So desperate were they that Sarai offered Abram her maidservant Hagar, by whom he bore Ishmael. Ishmael was beloved. But he was not the child through whom God promised to build a nation. When we meet Abram in today’s text Ismael is already 14 years old. Sarai, a good and faithful woman, has watched him grow, and felt her own claim to the promise recede.

God made a promise, but reality had begun to set in.

When I was in 11th grade, Mr. Raven, my absolute favorite teacher, assigned us scenes from *Romeo & Juliet* for our Shakespeare elective.

There were not many future Oscar winners in my class, but I recall one duet as particularly cringe-worthy. Pining for her love, the third student who had chosen the balcony scene crooned in an absolute mind-numbing valley-girl accent: “*O Romeo, Romeo! wherefore art thou Romeo?*” I knew that “wherefore” meant “why,” that Juliet was pontificating about the terrible meaning of Romeo’s last name but all I could see was this girl in my class pacing on a makeshift drama department balcony with Romeo, whom I knew as the editor of the yearbook, wearing for this exercise a tattered Nirvana t-shirt and standing an inch away trying to look inconspicuous.

“Try stage left,” I loudly whispered to a classmate, “the one with the flip flops!” And then, quietly at first, we started giggling. Juliet continued, “’Tis but thy name that is my enemy; Thou art thyself though, not a Montague. What’s Montague? it is nor hand, nor foot, Nor arm, nor face, nor any other part [...] O! be some other name:” At precisely that moment the chuckle living in my gut began to swell. I could no longer contain it—I began laughing and could not stop. Juliet stood agape and Romeo dumfounded.

Mr. Raven, incredulous, threw up his hands, ordered me to stop, and kicked me out of his classroom. As I walked out into the empty hallway he ran after me with an assignment: five handwritten pages answering Juliet’s most fundamental question, the question I’d interrupted with my irreverent laugh: *would a rose by any other name smell near as sweet?*

By Genesis 17 hope for the promise had grown dim. Abram and Sarai were in a spiritual wilderness. The plain reason of their situation overshadowed God’s outlandish promise for a son. But God was not yet done with them.

From nowhere God appears to Abram with a command: *walk before me and be blameless*. The nomadic patriarchs, elderly and worn, must have been tired of walking, their legs faint from journeying, their hearts worn by disappointment. Confronted again by the divine, Abram goes weak in the knees, falling dumbstruck on his face.

Which is fine because God had quite a lot to say. God once again proclaims that Abram and Sarai will have a child, a son born in time. From those descendants shall come kings, God says, to rule the land they will inherit. And lest Abram think that not enough, God pronounces a final, binding, and everlasting word of presence: *and I will be your God*.

Let that sink in. *I will be your God*. The God of the mountain and the sea and the birds and the plains binds himself to the future of a 99 year-old man and his yet unborn descendants, enters into time to offer hope where there previously was none. And in so doing God promises that presence into perpetuity—binding himself to the fate of a feeble, faithful people.

As a seal of that promise, God gave the unlikely couple a new name.

Back at Irmo High I struggled with Mr. Raven's essay. Of course a rose by any other name would smell as sweet—*rosa, rosado* there are a million different languages with a million different names for the same delicate, thorny flower. But is it the same with a man? Juliet certainly thinks so:

“So Romeo would, were he not Romeo call'd,” she crooned from her balcony,
“Retain that dear perfection which he owes
Without that title. Romeo, doff thy name;
And for that name, which is no part of thee,
Take all myself.”

I wasn't so sure, and anyway she was laying it on a bit thick for my taste. What is Romeo without the Montagues? Without the confidence of wealth and assurance of youth? Romeo is Romeo *because* he is a Montague.

Mr. Raven sent me into the hallway and right down the barrel of an identity crisis. What was Romeo? Or Juliet? What had my own name come to mean? Whether in scripture, Shakespeare, or society, names tell us something about those we encounter, or those we might by their name choose to avoid. They betray the complexity of a human with simple signifiers, hinting at status, identity, gender, nationality, and faith.

And it's not only our proper names that shape us. By the time we're in elementary school a host of adjectives have been heaped on our developing personalities: the smart one, or the pretty one, vacuous, chubby, rich, poor, prissy, or a tomboy. We live into and against the best and worst of the names we're given. They become a part of how we exist in the world.

For Abram and Sarai their names had come to mean failure and frustration, the foolishness of a faith that struggled to believe an impossible promise, world-weariness that collided with hope.

So it is that in the midst of the darkness of despair, of failure and frustration, God came and with five words transformed their very identities, *I will be your God*. And who are you? No longer disappointed, or bitter, no longer defined by a mocking world. You are mine. God claimed them and everything else receded. As a reminder of the promise God gave the couple new names: *Abraham* and *Sarah*. The names themselves are linguistically insignificant—only an extra syllable for Abraham, a new regional identifier for Sarah. Theologically, though, they mean everything.

What we come to understand in the story of Abraham and Sarah is that God's claim on our lives is not incidental, one identifier among many, of equal weight with any other. God's claim is fundamental to our very selves, as profound and as intimate as our names. God *transforms* Abram and Sarai by binding himself to them, God gives them a future and a name, claiming them as his own.

And that matters for us. The covenant of God's faithfulness was not just a promise to Abraham and Sarah, it is *everlasting unto generations*. From Abraham to Isaac, Isaac to Israel, Israel to Christ. And by virtue of an empty tomb and a living God, it extends now to us.

When you are baptized the pastor inquires of your name. It is a powerful moment, a named washed in the waters, a child claimed and named as God's own. "See what love the father has," the pastor proclaims, "that we should be called children of God *and we are*." It may not change what's written on our birth certificates, but that simple designation holds a power that precedes all others, a power that wipes clean all other names by which we will be known.

That claim, announced at our baptism but true from the moment of our birth, is an irreducible, fundamental fact of our identity. We are who we are because God has called us into being, sustained our living, and given us hope in the midst of world-weariness.

I will be your God. The claim changes everything. But remember. *You will be my people*. Which is another way of saying, *walk before me and be blameless*. It doesn't matter what names the world gives you, warring Capulets, wealthy Vanderbilts, the poor trash down the road, the rich folks behind the gates. It doesn't matter how the world identifies you, gay or straight or male, female, or somewhere in between. It doesn't matter what flag you fly, American or Mexican or North Korean. When God says to Abraham "*I will be your God*" we learn the most important fact about ourselves, that we are a part of who God is, *and* we learn what it is we must *do*: *walk before me and be blameless*. It doesn't matter what the world called you but it matters that you *go*.

Too often we fail to live into God's call on our lives, choosing instead the world's labels. Too often we scoff at God's plan for our world, sure we have a better way. Too often we participate in degrading task of denying humanity by affixing labels. This Lent we're called elsewhere. We are called to deny the pull of a society that seeks to define and limit, pursuing instead the God of endless possibility, of enlightened darkness, of hope despite all odds.

Perhaps that's why Abraham and Sarah are my Lenten patron saints. They lived between promise and fulfillment. They were a faithful, complex couple. They laughed at the wrong times, lost faith at the wrong times, they experienced the darkness of hopelessness. But God stayed with them. God created faithfulness for them, and when their failures became too much, their names too heavy, God reminded them of precisely who they were. And if God will do that for Abram and Sarai how much more will God do for us?

We are named and called God's own. In our naming we are given an identity and a vocation: *walk before me*. Like Abraham and Sarah, everything about us is, in the light of the living God, is transformed. Even in the darkness of Lent, on the trail to the cross, that is a sweet smell, an everlasting promise, an aroma that traces our doubt and transforms it, a name that calls us and creates us, following us throughout all of our days.

—The Reverend Leigh Stuckey