

Genesis 17: 1 - 7, 15 - 16
Psalm 22: 23 - 31
Year B, Lent II

Romans 4: 13 - 25
Mark 8: 31 - 38
March 8, 2009

What's in a Name?

What is in a Name? I grew up in a home where there were five framed items in our hallway. Each of those mounted pictures was carefully cross-stitched by my mother. On the top line was each of our family member's names, the meaning of our name, and then a bible verse that related to that meaning. In case you are wondering, William and Bill are English names which mean "Great Protector". Every time we went to bed or came downstairs to get something to eat or even headed to the bathroom, we passed those names and their meanings. They served as constant and vigilant reminders of both who we are and who we were called to be. We took a certain pride in them along with knowing a great deal about our genealogy. Of course, they eventually became part of the background of our lives. We passed them a few million times so we became numb to their presence.

In ancient Judaism, names were this important times about a million. Scripture uses names very, very intentionally and carefully. While knowing some Hebrew helps, the reality is that names reside as the only constant description we have of the characters in our faith narrative. We do not know if Abraham was tall or short, slim or bald, handsome or ugly. We know Sarah was beautiful but little beyond that broad term. Names are meant to fill a void of description that modern authors use to fill pages of a story. One of the best examples is Adam and Eve. In Hebrew, God picks up some adamah, which means "earth" or "clay", and fashions it into Adam, meaning "earthling". Likewise, God fashions a woman from the rib of the earthling and creates Eve or "life". The scriptures are written so that we can hear these plays on words

and find a greater depth and meaning to the stories of faith. Today, we hear three new names in Genesis. A covenant is made between a man named Abram and his wife Sarai with God. The result is a fundamental transformation in the relationship of all those involved.

What is in a name? After the 11:00 AM service, this community has generously offered to celebrate the forthcoming birth of my son. We will meet, eat, celebrate, and share. Jessie and I thought it only appropriate that we should share the name of our son with you as a community. We have already told many of you that the initials are M. M. M. We have chosen to reveal that the last two letters stand for McCutchen Murray. McCutchen is Jessie's maiden name and a wonderful connection to the first grandchild for her family. Murray is obviously my last name. The first M is the one thing we have decided to keep silent until today. Let me just write his name on this board – (I will write out the Hebrew form of the name- משה) For those of you who know Hebrew, let's just keep it our little secret! And don't worry, I will translate by the end of the sermon.

What is in a name? God appears to Abram when the patriarch is 99 years old. The man has long given up on his equally elderly wife giving birth to a son. So, he has a child by the slave Hagar named Ishmael. He is moving through life thinking that this will be his one and only child. God decides to change everything. God comes to Abram with the promise of not only children but thousands upon thousands who will become mighty nations led by fierce, loyal kings. Abram lives with the belief that his little portion is all he is meant to have only to discover that God is offering abundance on top of abundance. God chooses to make a covenant with this man. One of the signs will be circumcision. The other sign to the world is the changing of Abram's name. Abram means great ancestor or mighty father. That is part of the

reason why we have that great children's song, "Father Abraham, had many sons." The new name will reflect God's greater promise of nations being produced. Abraham means "father of many" or my favorite interpretation "father of a throng of nations"¹. God's very covenant and decree transforms the father of one into Abraham, the father of many. Sarai also is altered. Her name changes from the old Sarai to the new Sarah, princess. We could even read it as scholar Everett Fox translates that line, "As for Sarai your wife- you shall not call her name Sarai for Sarah/Princess is her name!"² She stands alone in all of scripture as a woman whose name is changed by God. Of course, I think God could be buttering her up since she is about to be pregnant at the ripe old age of 80, "Abraham, if you are smart, you are GOING to call her Princess!" Life changes so their names change to reflect this fundamental altering of the presence of God.

I would love to tell you all that naming our son was just such a dramatic moment. It was not. After the ultra-sound where we discovered that we were having a son, Jessie and I went to Macaroni Grill, sat down with crayon in hand (since you can write on the paper table cloth there), and started a conversation about names. (and no, his name is not Macaroni) Jessie looked at me and said, "I would really like to have McCutchen as a middle name for one of our children." Great. So, I wrote down McCutchen Murray. After I wrote that down, she said she liked one name in particular. I wrote that name down. I noted that the name was also the name of my great-grandfather. He was born in 1885 the son of a Cumberland Presbyterian minister, the last preacher in our immediate family. He was a farmer his entire life and perhaps one of the gentlest, kindest persons anyone ever met. I actually remember him from my

¹ Fox, Everett. *The Five Books of Moses*. The Schocken Bible: Volume 1 (New York: Schocken Books, 1983) p 71.

² *Ibid.*, p 93.

youth as a warm, loving joyful person we all called “Papa”. The first time my dad met him, Papa was 86 years-old, working on his tractor, and changing the tire that was bigger than him. He was a wonderful, exceptional man- a perfect person to honor with the name of our son as the child of a preacher. We talked about a few other names but nothing every stuck. About two weeks later, I turned to Jessie and said, “Well, have we landed on the name?” The immediate response was, “No!” At which point Jessie accused me of choosing everything, “You chose the colors of all the rooms in the house. You chose the where to live. You chose everything!” I then gently reminded her that she had in fact decided on the name. With that realization, she said simply, “Well, that is his name!” The name of our child is Moses “Mose” McCutchen Murray. We will call him Mose. The power of this name comes from his great-great grandfather Mose, from his mother’s suggestion and decision to give him this name, and from the powerful reflection that recalls how Pharaoh's daughter “pulled” baby Moses out of the water (Exod 2:10) with the added twist that the verb form in the name Moshe is active, not passive, and thus it is Moses himself who will one day "pull out" Israel from the Red Sea.³

What is in a name? Names are critically important. The funny thing is that we miss the third name that is presented anew in the Genesis text. God appears on the scene and reveals a new name, El Shaddai. The translation is typically “God Almighty”. However, many note that this name likely refers to “God of the mountains”. Everett Fox proclaims that El Shaddai is used when God is bringing about human fertility.⁴ Noted scholar Terence Fretheim slyly records, “God’s new name matches the new names of Abraham and Sarah,

³ *Ibid.*, p. 264.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 71, footnote.

signaling a beginning in their relationship.”⁵ From this powerful point he continues, “The community of faith must be open to new names for God, names that may be more congruent with the life experiences of people in new times and places.”⁶

The power and sweep of the story of the covenant with Abraham, Sarah, and God rests not simply in this new relationship but in the revelation of yet another facet of God. We are allowed a new glimpse of someone we thought we knew. Lent is a season of discovering those different relationships. Just as Moses impetuously asks God, “What is your name? Who should I say sent me,” we constantly beg and hope and pray to understand just a little more. We hear those different names all the time: Father, God, Spirit, Jesus, Almighty, Creator, Redeemer, Savior, King of Kings, Shepherd, Rabbi, Teacher, and even Friend. Sometimes the names are not as common but equally powerful: Wisdom, Living Water, Gentle Lamb, Source of Life, Great High Priest, the Great Physician, Love, or even Daddy or Papa. Scholars have sought to catalog the names of God, limiting the Divine as surely as any other method of theology. No name ultimately defines God. No title sums up the One-Who-Is. Yet those different names can help us in our relationship with God. We can find greater hope, joy, and comfort in seeing something new in something we think we know. What is in a name? Everything. The invitation this morning to each of us is simple, what relationship do we seek with God? What name do you use for the Divine? What is in a name?

⁵ Fretheim, Terence. *Genesis: The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 1. (Abingdon Press: Nashville, 1995) p 460.

⁶ *Ibid.*