

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16
Romans 4:13-25

Second Sunday in Lent
Midway Presbyterian Church
February 25, 2018

A New Name

Introduction to the Old Testament Lesson

Our Old Testament Lesson for this Second Sunday of Lent speaks of God's covenant with Abraham. God's concern is not just for Israel alone. For Abraham will be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. New names are worthy of the occasion. Listen to these words from Genesis 17:1-7, and 15-16...

Introduction to the Epistle Lesson

God's covenant with Abraham that we read of from Genesis 17 is cited by Paul in his Letter to the Church in Rome. The promise came to Abraham through faith, not through the law. Justification comes to us through faith in the crucified and risen Jesus Christ. Listen to these words from Romans 4:13-25...

Sermon

Do you remember the story of stone soup? It's been told in many languages and cultures throughout the ages. When a children's book entitled *Stone Soup* came out in the late 1980's, first-grade teachers everywhere read it with their classes and then proceeded to make stone soup in crock pots and serve it to their students to teach lessons on sharing and working together.

There are many variations on the plot, but in the Portuguese tradition a wandering monk with an empty pot and a ladle in his knapsack, makes his way through a village, asking the townspeople for something to eat—a crust of bread or scraps from their tables. But time after time he is ignored and sent away empty-handed.

In response, the monk announces to the villagers that he will host a feast that evening and serve the most amazing of meals—stone soup. Curious, the townspeople slowly gather at dusk as the monk starts a fire, places his pot on the fire, and fills the pot with water. Then, from his bag he takes a stone and carefully drops it into the simmering kettle. After stirring for a time he takes a sip and declares it quite good—but not quite ready.

“Why not?” the curious villagers ask.

“Because it needs a pinch of salt and pepper and I seem to have none left in my bag.”

So one of the villagers runs to his home and returns with salt and pepper, which is tossed into the boiling pot with its solitary stone. After tasting again, the monk tilts his head in contemplation.

“You know what would make this stone soup even more delicious? Sliced onions!”

So another villager runs off and returns with sliced onions, which are thrown into the pot. The routine repeats itself again and again, with people adding carrots, slices of beef, garlic, potatoes, and so on, until the pot is filled to the brim with a feast and the people can hardly wait for a taste. A large table is set in the town square and spoons and bowls are laid out. And one by one the townspeople's bowls are filled by the monk, and together they sit and enjoy an evening of warm laughter and camaraderie, over a meal of wonderful stone soup.

In Genesis 17, God makes an amazing claim. A promise to Abraham and Sarah. God promises to make them the parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents of a multitude of nations; as many descendants as the sands of the seashore! But there are serious problems with God's promise. Besides the fact that Abraham and Sarah are elderly, Sarah is also barren. For years they have tried to have children, and Sarah's barrenness is a continuing source of pain

and inadequacy. The inability to have children has been a source of shame in many cultures across the ages. As God speaks to Abraham and Sarah of a feast of nations, they know very well that their pots are empty.

But they have faith. And their faith, we have been told, is the reason God chooses them as the father and mother of many nations. They are indeed faithful, but they are also flawed and imperfect, just like you and me. But when God is looking to do something new, to birth a people who will bear his mark and through whom all nations will be blessed, God is able to use even the flawed, the old, the barren.

Do you ever feel as if you have nothing to offer? That your pot is bare and dry? That you are not good enough? Such pain can be deeply humbling. But listen. God is often known to speak to and use well such vessels, and out of them to serve a feast of grace.

You know, six weeks can sometimes be a blur, like the final six weeks of summer or the six weeks before Christmas. Other times, six weeks can seem to drag on forever, like the six weeks before school finally lets out for summer vacation, or the six weeks following the loss of a loved one. So Lent would fall into that second category. The four weeks of Advent—the other season in the church calendar that we don purple and engage in preparation and penitence—those four weeks seem to fly by with all the holiday activities. But the pilgrimage of Lent is a slower one that begins with Ash Wednesday and stretches all the way to Easter.

Well, the pace of Lent would have well-suited the couple we meet in Genesis 17—Abraham and Sarah. They are elderly and things now take a little longer. But that allows for more reflection on the good and bad of their lives. A slower pace can provide the opportunity to pray and listen more carefully. And strikingly in just a few verses the future of Israel and the church hinges on two significant events: naming and covenanting.

In fact, everyone in the story gets a new name. God, for the first time is given the name *El Shaddai*—“God Almighty.” This is the God of Genesis 1, the One who created heaven and earth. The God of the highest mountains and the lowest valleys.

Abram and Sarai (sar ī) are also given new names: No longer Abram, “exalted ancestor,” but now Abraham, “father of a multitude.” No longer Sarai, “princess,” but now Sarah. She will be the “mother of nations,” and kings will come from her.

For people today names may be based on little more than popularity. In 2017 the most popular name for a baby girl was Sophia, with Olivia, Emma, and Ava following. For baby boys—Jackson, with Liam, Noah, and Aiden next. But in the Bible, names often have theological significance. And God gives people new names, signifying a fundamental change in a person’s identity or purpose. This old, childless couple is blessed by God, and God will do the unimaginable: in the twilight of their lives they will become the exceedingly fruitful ancestors of many nations, so that the benefits of the covenant reach out to all peoples. Thus their new names.

Lent invites us to spend forty days examining the nature of God’s covenant with us. Our Directory of Worship in the *Book of Order* states that, “The Reformed tradition understands Baptism to be a sign of God’s covenant.” (W-3.0402) So might we reflect upon our Baptism in that light. What needs to change in our lives? What new name might God want to give us? And what purpose might that new name signify?

Alfred Nobel is best known for the Nobel Peace Prize. Less well-known is the fact that he also invented dynamite. As well as a chemist, engineer and innovator, Nobel was a weapons’ manufacturer.

In 1888, Alfred's brother *Ludvig* died. And a French newspaper erroneously published *Alfred's* obituary. It condemned him for his invention of dynamite, stating: "The merchant of death is dead... Dr Alfred Nobel, who became rich by finding ways to kill more people faster than ever before, died yesterday."

Well, Alfred Nobel was devastated by the foretaste of how he would be remembered. Thus did his last will and testament set aside the bulk of his estate to establish the Nobel prizes. He gave the equivalent of \$250 million to fund such prizes. Alfred Nobel had the rare opportunity to evaluate his life near its end and live long enough to change that assessment.

According to Walter Brueggemann in his commentary on Genesis, this covenant, this contract of God with Abraham, will provide Israel the gift of hope, an identity, and their place in God's creation. People who are no people will become God's people. And this will be an everlasting covenant whereby God will be God to Abraham and his offspring throughout their generations. The covenant comes through Israel to the church and thus to you and me today. From Abraham to David to Jesus—in whom the covenant is brought to its fullness.

Yes, the second week in Lent is not only a slow week; it's a difficult week. The journey to the cross has begun, but Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, and Good Friday seem a long way off. With the glory of Easter morning a bit further in the distance. And Lent calls us to reflect on our brokenness, our emptiness, our barrenness. On the many ways we have fallen and come short of the glory of God. On what we have done and what we have left undone. And that can be hard.

But Genesis 17 provides us with a promise of God's blessing, of how even the elderly can be useful servants of God in his eternal plans. Of how the barren can be fruitful. Of how all of us flawed men and women can know a purpose in God's plans. So that even during the long

pilgrimage of Lent there is good news. Even in the shadow of the cross. God is our God and we are his people.

As Christians, we hear the divine promise spoken, “to be God to you and to your offspring after you.” We are not empty bowls of stone soup. We are God’s people, called by God to be a priesthood of believers, justified through faith in Jesus Christ.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.