What’s in a Name?

Genesis 17:1-17, 15-16 Romans 4:13-25 Mark 8:31-38
Second Sunday in Lent Trinity UCC, Gettysburg Rev. Kenneth Heasley

What’s in a name? A lot of things! Do you remember Esso?” That was the brand of gasoline now called Exxon. How about Cities Service—that name was changed to Citgo at about the same time. A few years later, the Datsun nameplate on automobiles was replaced with Nissan. The one common thing about these name changes—they did not occur because of a merger, buy out, or major corporate change. The semantics scholars of the day determined that the letter’s was too slippery and didn’t sound forceful enough to sell gasoline with power. Putting in a double ‘X’ or ‘t’ and a hard ‘g’ was determined to make their products more forceful sounding and thus more appealing. Thus, Exxon and Citgo—absolutely made up words became part of our vocabulary. For Datsun—I believe it was the effort to change the name, as they sought to change the performance of their product from lackluster to a more efficient reliable line of automobiles. The names changed on all these products so that they would be more competitive, they would have a new identity, a new image in the market place.

This business of changing the name to indicate a new identity is not something novel to contemporary advertising. All the way back at the beginning of our faith history, we have the same phenomenon. The father of our faith was A-bram, a wandering Aramean who responded to the call of God to go out from the place he called home to a land that God would show him. In faith he went and was shown the land of Canaan—the Promised Land.

The account in Genesis 17 is the story of his name change. At the center of this event is the formation of a covenant between God (Yahweh) and A-bram. The concept of covenant is central to our Lenten journey this year. Last week we recalled the covenant between God and Noah—which was really a covenant between God and all creation. The rainbow was given as the sign that never again would God destroy all creation with water. That covenant from God, with God, had a life-giving, life preserving quality for all animals, all humanity, all creation.

There are several covenants in our faith story; and each one gets narrower, more pointed, more specific. So, this covenant from God in Genesis 17 is directed to one man—A-bram. It was given as a promise of life-giving, life preserving power, but was directed to one. Abram would become the father of many nations. And so it has come to pass, for we of the Jewish/Christian faith recognize A-bram as our faith father, but so also do Muslims—A-bram is their faith ancestor also. Abram would become the father of many nations—that was the promise. His life—even though he was 90 plus years old, would be continued in off-spring- and that was an astounding promise. Not only was A-bram 90 plus, so was his wife Sarai—well beyond the age of bearing children. So they laughed. But we know who had the last laugh!

Now note, with this promise, with this covenant from God, there is a name change. A-bram become Abraham and Sarai becomes Sarah. What does the name change mean? To both of their names is added ‘ha’ which indicted, in the Hebrew language, the presence of God with them. Now they carried in their very names a pointer toward, a reminder of, the presence of the
divine. No one would forever after be able to say their names without giving a sound allusion to God, Yahweh.

Abraham and Sarah got new names, new identities when they became covenant partners with God. Now their names had a new punch, a new power. The new names came as a result of the covenant. This covenant was made not because of their exploits, their exemplary life, the fine deeds, nor even the high human probability of success. This covenant was made because of the initiative of God. God chose Abram—period. In the translation of the New Testament by Peterson, called “The Message”, Paul’s words to the Romans about Abraham are rendered this way: “God made something out of Abraham when he was a nobody.” Indeed, that is a constant in the story of our faith—out of nothing God created everything, out of a nobody God created a multitude of nations, out of a death (Jesus on the Cross) God created life, out of a band of dispirited followers, God created a Church., and out of us, God is still creating a new Kingdom.

That is what the word covenant is all about—it is God’s powerful invitation, God’s promise given in trust that establishes a relationship for a purpose. “A-bram, I will make you the father of nations, Sarai—I will give you a son—and they laughed. A-bram saw himself as near death, and the womb of Sarai—that too was lifeless. But they became Abraham and Sarah—in covenant with God, and a son was born and nations rose.

There are two crucial dynamics in a covenant. When we think of a covenant we usually think of the human side—that is what we know best. But a covenant with God points just as strongly to God’s faith in us. God’s covenant is formed because God trusts us. To live in a trust relationship means to live with responsibility, to live with gratitude.

Abraham and Sarah model this—they laugh at the promise—but accept it. They laugh at the absurdity of bearing children at age 90 and more—but accept the gift of Isaac with gratitude. In short, they are faithful.

To live in covenant with God is to live in response to God—that is to live in faith, to live in trust, to live in gratitude. Eight months ago, Pastor George and I entered into a contract relationship with you. We contracted to be your Interim pastors. Together, you as a congregation and we as interims have worked together to be faithful to this contract, during this interim, transition time. There have been specific tasks that we have contracted to address: Providing worship leadership, tending to pastoral needs, Coming to Terms with your History; Discovering a New Identity as Trinity Church; Allowing Needed Leadership Changes; Renewing Denomination Linkages; and Discerning new Directions in Ministry. We will continue to work on these.

Somewhere down the road, you will call a new settled pastor, and with that new pastor, you will form a covenant: a covenant based on your mutual faith and trust in the future. That covenant will be larger than you and your relationship with the new settled pastor for that covenant will also be with the Gettysburg Association in recognition that as a congregation in the United Church of Christ we live in a larger context than just a local setting.

When that day happens, you will no longer be a congregation in transition. Your pastoral leadership will not be Interims. You will, in effect have a name change—no longer in transition,
but a congregation with a settled Pastor in covenant together, seeking to, willing to follow Jesus of Nazareth in a new relationship of trust. That new identity is an identity with power and purpose. That identity calls us to do absurd things—like bearing a cross, working for reconciliation, accepting forgiveness, and serving with compassion, losing self. Those are laughable, even absurd in the world place—but life giving in our faith understanding. It is through the death of Jesus that we have forgiveness, life, identity, purpose. Thus you will live in this covenant, trusting that the promises of old given to Abraham—that he would bring forth new life just when he thought himself too old to do so will give you the promise of new life as a community of faith of God’s people. Thus you will live in this new covenant—as Christ’s people, you will live in that promise made new in Jesus—that he gives us life when that seemed impossible due to the spectacle of the cross. We live trusting that in spite of the absurdity, in fact, we stake our existence on it and Jesus stakes his future, his hope on us.

Mark’s gospel lesson for today has Jesus telling his disciples what lies ahead for them. Peter doesn’t like what he hears and challenges Jesus. However, Jesus is all the more forceful. To follow Jesus is not the easy path—it involves denying self, cross bearing, life-risking choices. One commentator cautions: ‘Don’t use Easter to escape Lent and Good Friday. We have this season to Lent to confront ourselves, to examine the quality of our discipleship, to consider the cost of being faithful. Yes, Easter has its wondrous message of life and forgiveness and victory. But to fully appreciate that we need to go through Lent and Good Friday.

Two persons were having a conversation about a ‘popular preacher’ perhaps they were looking for a new pastor. This ‘popular preacher’ had stated, ‘You cannot succeed preaching the cross. People do not want to hear that, they have enough problems already.” Yes, that preacher was popular—but the deeper question begged to be asked—was that preacher faithful?”

We are called to live in covenant with God. We are summoned to live faithfully through Lent and Good Friday before we get to Easter.

A fanciful story: Upon Jesus’ arrival in heaven, a host of angels greeted him. After the formalities, they asked him whom he had left behind on earth to finish the work he had begun. Jesus replied, “Just a small group of men and women who live in covenant with me. ‘That’s all?’ asked the angels, astonished. Don’t you have any other options” What if this tiny group should fail?” Jesus replied, “I have no other plans.”

We are the ones—chosen by Jesus to build His Kingdom. We are the ones who have responded to his trust. We are the ones with his name as we call ourselves by his identity—Christian. We are the ones as we live in covenant with one another and with Christ—he has no other plans. Amen.