

**What's in a Name?** A sermon in response to Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; and Mark 8:31-38, by Rev. Scot McCachren for Hilltop Church, Mendham, NJ, February 25, 2024.

Today's scripture readings have a lot to do with names, don't they? God changes Abram's name to Abraham – and then Sarai's name to Sarah. Jesus is talking to Peter – who used to be called Simon until Jesus changed his name – but *now* Jesus calls him "**Satan**," of all things. ... This week, all this movement around names reminded me of the concept of "**Eponyms**." ... Are you familiar with that word?... "Eponym?" An eponym is a name that is associated with something so much that we start *using* the name for that thing... That didn't make a lot of sense, did it?... I'll give you some examples: Think about the word "Band-Aid." That's the word we use for a self-adhesive bandage – no matter what company made it – Right? But Band-Aid is actually a trademark of the Johnson & Johnson Company, but we'll take a bandage out of a Curad box – or a generic CVS box – and say, "Here, let me put a Band-Aid on that..." Right?... So "Band-Aid" is the eponym for that kind of bandage. +++ Or, to get really fancy, you could make it into an adjective and say that Band-Aid is "**eponymous**" with self-adhesive bandages. +++ There are a lot of other examples... What do we call any gelatin dessert?? "Jell-o" ... Any cotton swab? "Q-Tip" ... In-line skates? "Rollerblades" ... Invisible tape? "**Scotch Tape**" ... Petroleum Jelly? "Vaseline." ... Facial Tissues? "Kleenex" ... We used to call all copiers Xerox machines – and that one was a verb, too: "Could you Xerox that report for me?" ... Of course, a really popular one right now is "Google," for any search engine. That's one's a verb now, too, like, "I *Googled* the word 'Eponym' to help me write this paragraph." +++ But, my favorite eponym is the word "Coke." ... I know it's not true everywhere, but when I was growing up in North Carolina, "Coke" was **eponymous** with *any* sodas in general – or *soft drinks* as we called them. And, I'm pretty sure it's still like that there... So, in a restaurant the waitress would ask what you want to drink with your barbecue. "I'll have a Coke." ... "OK, what *kind* of Coke?" ... "Mountain Dew." ... "OK, Coming right up."

Eponyms... **What's in a Name, anyway?** ... +++ ... All this thinking about names made me start wondering what **my** name would an eponym for? What would a "**Scot**" be? +++ A few years ago, my *kids* might have said that a "Scot" is something that embarrasses you in front of your friends... But, what would **I say** it means? ... What would I **want** it to mean? +++ +++ What do you think **YOUR** name would represent?... If the calendar of events in today's bulletin just had **your name** listed at, say, Tuesday at 11:00 am, what do you think people would expect to be happening here at that time? Or, what would it mean if someone said, "You know, this has really been a... **your name**... kind of a day, hasn't it?" Or, maybe if they said, "I really pulled a **your name** that time, didn't I?" +++ What would **your** name **mean**? It wouldn't just be what you **want** it to mean, would it? It would be what people have come to **expect** from you,... a reflection of what you've **done**, consistently, over the years – a culmination of the things you've **said** – how you've **invested** your time – the way you've **treated** people. +++ And (here's where it gets harder), – **if you wanted to** – what do you think it would it take to **change** what your name means?

See, I think all of this comes into play in both of today's scripture readings. Let's look first in Genesis. This is the third time over the past **24 years** that the Lord has promised Abram a son. The promise of an everlasting covenant relationship – and the founding of a great nation that will be blessing to the world; – those have been on the table for a really long time. The problem is, as Abram and Sarai have gotten older and older, they still haven't seen any evidence that it's actually **going** to happen; – except that God keeps **saying** it will. +++ Now, it had seemed unlikely enough the **first** time, when Abram was 75 and Sarai was 66. **NOW**, he's 99 and she is 90! And **a lot** has happened during those 24 years. – A lot of things could easily have driven them away from God – or at least away from *each other*. +++ But despite everything, – despite so many years of hope and promises, Abram and Sarai **have never stopped** relying on God's promises. And, you know, by **human standards**, their **unfaltering faith** seems absolutely **absurd**: – faith that God's word is trustworthy – no matter how long it takes – no matter how much the evidence seems to weigh against it. +++ So now, after 24 years of this, when God shows up again here and says OK, are you ready? I'm ready if you're ready... Abraham doesn't hesitate. He falls on his face in obedience. +++ And God enacts the covenant. +++

Now, there's something I want to be sure we all understand about God's covenant with Abraham. It's not a *deal* – there's no *quid pro quo* involved. – There is no, “I will be your God **IF** you worship me. ... There are **no** “*If's*” at all. That's not the way these covenants work. +++ God does it in God's own time, making an eternal relational connection with these people who continue to walk in the Lord's path... “As for **me**,” the Lord says, “this is **my** covenant with **you**.” (See – God commits first.) >>> “As for **me**,” the Lord says, “this is **my** covenant with **you**... You **shall** be the ancestor of a multitude of nations.” +++ ... (And here's where we **find out** “What's in a Name”) ... No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham,” which means “Ancestor to a Multitude...” And Sarai's name will be Sarah, meaning “Princess” because “she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.” +++ Abraham and Sarah have not **chosen** their new names. God does. But it's their faithful walk with God through all these years of frustration that has made it a possibility. >>> See, the covenant is **not calling** them to be something **new**, – **no**, – it acknowledges and puts names to what they've **already become** by living year after year in loving obedience to God. +++ Sarah and Abraham are already living covenant lives. – Their new names simply reflect who and what they are. +++ ... +++ **Living faithful Covenant lives for God ALWAYS changes us – and it changes everyone we are involved with.** +++ It even changes **THE LORD!!** +++ You'd never notice it in our English translations, but the Lord opens this dialogue by giving God's Self a new name as well: “I am God Almighty,” – in Hebrew, “*El Shaddai*.” – ‘El’ is an abbreviated form of the existing word “Elohim,” or “God”, but “**Sheddai**” is **brand new here**. – This the first time it appears in the Bible. – It's a *new proper noun*: – “*El Shaddai*,” “God Almighty.” +++ **Everyone** is changed by living in covenant relationship. As of this moment, we'll all be called what we've proven ourselves to be for one another: “I **AM** God Almighty,” “**You ARE** Ancestor to a Multitude,” and “Sarah **IS** Princess.” +++ +++ **What's in a Name?**

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In our gospel lesson today, Jesus is talking to Peter. – As I mentioned earlier, Peter has had his own experience with name changes... You'll recall that when Jesus first designated the 12 disciples, he had changed *Simon's* name to “**Peter**,” – at least that's the English version of the Greek word *Petros*, which means “Rock.” (Related to modern words like “**Petrified**,” meaning “turned to stone,” and “**Petroglyph**,” images carved into rock.) Jesus explains this change from “Simon” to “Peter” best in Matthew, when he says, “And I tell you, you are Peter, and **on this rock** I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.” Jesus changes Simon's name to Peter – **not because Simon chose it or asked for it** – but **because** of the deep love and commitment he **already has** for Christ. His new name reflects something that is already there. – It doesn't call him to do something **new**. It reflects who he **is**. +++ +++ And, in the passage just before **today's** reading, we see that Peter has already been living up to his new name. +++ Walking along the road with his disciples, Jesus had asked “‘Who do people say that I am?’ And they answered him, ‘John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.’ [Then] he asked them, ‘But who do **YOU** say that I am?’ ... [And] **PETER** answered him, ‘You are the **Messiah**.’” +++ (There's **another** name – another **label**, this time for Jesus – Jesus **IS** the Messiah.) +++

And Peter had been right – Jesus **IS** the Messiah. But now..., immediately following that, in **today's** reading, ... Peter takes it too far when Jesus explains what it **really means** to be the Messiah: – “He began to teach them that the Son of Man must **undergo great suffering**, and be **rejected** by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and... **be... killed...**, and after three days rise again.” +++ And **the Rock** calls a timeout. – He doesn't like what he's hearing, so he takes Jesus aside for a minute. Now, we don't have the details of what he started to say to Jesus, – we just know he “*began to rebuke him*.” – But it must have been something like, “Hold up now, Jesus, I think someone needs to explain to you what the Messiah is **really** supposed to do – and it's not all this betrayal and suffering and dying business. See, you're supposed to rally all these people together, and... ..” +++

*Whatever* Peter he was trying to say – he didn't get very far with it... Jesus reacted immediately with a stunning, tough, rebuke of his own. – First, Jesus pauses and turns to look at his disciples. He wants to make sure they can all see his reaction and hear his words. Then, he says to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” +++ “**Get Behind Me – SATAN???**” +++ Jesus hadn't even said **that TO Satan** when Satan tempts him in the Wilderness for 40 Days and 40 Nights – at least not in **this** gospel – remember, we just talked about that last week. So, Jesus reacts to Peter MUCH more harshly than he had to Satan.

+++ “Get Behind Me – Satan!!” +++ By the way, there’s another good Eponym for you – “Satan”. What are all the things it means to be called by that name? +++ Nothing good, that’s for sure. +++ +++ And, at least for the moment, Jesus gives Peter that name – Satan; – that name, for the very disciple who just, not two minutes ago, humbly named him the Messiah... That name for *Petros*, the Rock upon which his church would be built. +++ Can you imagine how stunned and hurt Peter is by Jesus’ reaction? >> He was just trying to help!... Just trying to protect Jesus by leading him down a safer path, – away from all that suffering and violence. +++ +++ The problem, though, is that Peter isn’t *listening* to what Jesus is really saying. +++ +++ Something brand new is about to happen... – must... happen. Something that will be excruciatingly difficult yet eternally fulfilling. It will be terrible and wonderful. ... Jesus is trying to bring Peter and the others on board so they can play their part. But Peter isn’t ready for... not quite (he’s getting there...). +++ ||| +++ But walking on the road that day with his master, Peter is trying to fit Jesus into typical human values and priorities, – namely, – *don’t let yourself suffer and die*. There’s got to be a better answer – a quick fix. Easy solutions... *Shallow* solutions... Short-term goals. +++ Peter needs to learn the same lesson that bangs us on the head over and over again: Our instinct for self-preservation, disguised as righteous thinking, is dangerous! ... Satan hides in the safe. – Satan *lures* with defensiveness. – Satan *captures* with self-protection. These are... temptations. – They are the values of the *world*. – But they are NOT the values of the Messiah. And with all good intentions, Peter has just done Satan a favor by throwing them up as stumbling blocks for Jesus. He was “setting his mind not on divine things but on human things.” +++ And Jesus calls him on it. +++ “Get behind me, Satan!”

+++ In his book *Whistling in the Dark*, Frederick (BEEK-ner) Buechner reminds us that following his baptism, Jesus spent 40 Days in the wilderness with Satan to figure out just what it was going to mean to BE Jesus in this world. And now, during these 40 Days of Lent, it’s up to EACH OF US to figure out just what it really means to BE his Disciple. +++ And this morning, at Peter’s expense, Jesus has given us a huge lesson about how to do that: ... “We must set our minds on *divine* things, not on *human* things.” To follow Jesus is to live in the absurd... where everything seems topsy-turvy from the values we learn in this world. – To live in the absurd, just as the elderly Sarai and Abram had done, clinging to the absurd promise that they would be ancestors of a great nation... Christ draws us away from human logic and even common sense: “If you want to become my follower – deny yourself – take up your cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, will save it.” +++ That’s the opposite of what society teaches us. +++ +++ Jesus calls us to Self-sacrifice, *not self-preservation*... Generosity, not stinginess... Open arms, *not a closed fist*... Hospitality, *not rejection*... That’s what it means to be a disciple of the Messiah. +++ And if you are not ready to do that – Jesus tells Peter and all of us – then you are already following someone else. You are following someone who dwells in THIS world – focused on HUMAN things – someone who uses our fear against us. +++ Get behind me, Satan! >> Christ calls us into the divine.

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What’s in a Name? Ab-ra-ham... Sar-ah... Pe-ter... Sa-tan... Mess-i-ah... God Al-might-y...+++ ... Dis-ci-ple... These names each reflect the true nature of the one it represents... who they already are – not who they aspire to become. +++ The GOOD NEWS is – we can always change, just as these names changed.– We can become more – as our lives in Christ grow... and deepen. +++ That’s what Jesus is calling you to do with these 40 days... +++ Grow into the divine..., with him. +++ So, here on the second Sunday of Lent – these texts remind us of our inward journey to the cross and beyond. +++ They invite us to ask and discover: “What DOES ... MY name mean..., +++ today?”... And more importantly – not what it might come to mean..., not what do I want it to mean..., but what WILL my name mean once I set aside the all-to-human things of this world – and follow Jesus..., headlong..., into the absurdity... of the divine.

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