

*"A New Name"*

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

Six weeks can sometimes pass by in a flash, like the final six weeks of summer vacation, or the six weeks before Christmas. At other times, six weeks can drag on forever, like the six weeks before school gets out or sadly, the six weeks following a loved one's death. Lent seems to fall more into the second category.

Both Advent and Lent are for Christians, seasons of preparation and repentance, but unlike the four weeks of Advent which seem to fly by in the fluster of the holiday rush, Lent is a slower time, seeming to drag on much longer than the added two weeks should warrant! Still if taken earnestly, a personal journey through Lent should be slower and perhaps more cautious.

The pace of Lent seems to be right for *Abram and Sarai*. They are well into their 90s, in the evening of their lives. They would have been honored with many roses on the altar if they were members of our church! As we age, we generally become more reflective, more contemplative, and more aware (if not more honest) of the mistakes we have made and the wounds we may have caused. Again, appropriate for reflection for the six-week journey through Lent.

Sometimes we need a slower pace and a place to listen and pray carefully, to confess our sin, in order become more aware of God and to turn to God. Perhaps it is in such a place that we find *Sarai and Abram* as the 17<sup>th</sup> chapter of Genesis opens.

Whatever the case, the Lord appears to 99-year-old *Abram*, and in the space of a few verses the future of Israel, and through Israel the church, pivots dramatically on two significant events: naming and covenant.

Naming: *Everyone in this story is given a new name.* For the first time, God is given the name El Shaddai, "God Almighty", which might also be translated "God of the mountains." It is made clear that this is one and same God who brooded over the void in the open verses of Genesis. God is the God of the highest mountains and the lowest valleys, in all creation, and in the lives of God's people – an appropriate image, I believe, for the Lenten season.

Along with God taking a name, *Abram and Sarai* are given new names: Abraham and Sarah. The changes are subtle, yet the theological implications are profound.

In our culture names are little more than labels, chosen based on popularity, how they sound, or nostalgia. In the OT names reflect the character and destiny of the person. In the case of Abraham and Sarah they have been chosen and blessed by God. They will be the ancestors of many nations, their heirs more numerous than the stars in the sky. This destiny, this purpose is divinely given and guaranteed!

Neither Abraham nor Sarah has any choice in the matter. They do not choose their names, God does. God is active and intimate in this re-naming ritual. Before re-naming them, God says, "I am El Shaddai." giving them God's new name. Perhaps it's a stretch but I hear the echoes of modern marriage vows, "I, El Shaddai, take you Abraham and Sarah to be my own, and this is my vow to you and all your ancestors in faith." And out of this comes the birth of a son, the long-awaited Isaac.

[A little side note here about the supplanting of Hagar and Ishmael in the biblical story. Although the Biblical writers describe the casting away of Hagar and her son, God's care for them remains consistent. Although Sarah will see to it that they are banished from Abraham's tent, God promises them a future as well. (16:10; 21:18) God has more than one blessing to bestow.]

God's promise, whether with Abraham and Sarah or Hagar and Ishmael will not be broken. God's promises are not dependent on our faithfulness but on the character of God. No matter what happens this covenant will not be broken. This is the destiny of all who follow in the covenantal line of Abraham and Sarah.

The gift of these verses in Genesis 17 is that they serve as reminders that at the center of our being rest blessing and promise. We are followers of the One, *El Shaddai*, who established a never-ending covenant with Abraham and brought that covenant to fullness in Jesus Christ. In our baptism we have been given a new name, "disciple of Jesus." In our U.C.C. Book of Worship after the water of baptism has been poured over the child or adult baptized, the pastor may lay hands on the head of the baptized and say, *"The Holy Spirit be upon you, (name) child of God, disciple of Christ, member of the church."* And this tells us everything we need to know about ourselves and everything we need to know about God.

Through the extravagant grace of God, the life of the church, and the waters of baptism, the covenant established with Abraham and Sarah has been opened to us. God is our God, and we are God's people. This is a covenant which cannot be broken, even as we journey through these dark, sober days of Lent seeking the follow the way of one named Emmanuel, whose destiny is our destiny: the cross

the grave, the skies.” to quote the great Easter hymn “Christ the Lord has risen today.”

Yet still as I began this message, the six weeks of Lent seem to be slow weeks. And here we are only on the second Sunday! There are still four more; which is okay! We need to be reminded that unlike the world or marketing and promotion, we do not head directly to Easter from the shopping malls of Christmas. Instead, we are invited to spend forty days (Well now only 31 not counting Sundays which aren't counted in the 40 days of Lent) examining the nature of our response to this covenant God has made with us through Abraham and Sarah. Do we trust it? Do we really trust that God will keep the covenant or do we spend our lives hedging our bets?

And this naming ... if we were to ask God for a new name, (other than “disciple of Jesus”) what name do you think God might choose for you?

What new purpose might that name signify?

What about our church?

If God were to interrupt one of our congregational meetings and say, “Congregational Church of Laconia United Church of Christ, considering your 197 years of ministry, all the ups and downs of life, wars, depressions, cultural shifts, changes in your community, and all that you’ve been through more recently with this COVID-19 pandemic and all that adjustments changes you have made throughout all of this, from now on your name shall be ...

What name would that name be?

What would this say about our future and God’s trust in us with that future?