

Sermon, February 28, 2021

Good morning! Welcome to stay at home worship from St. Mark's Lutheran Church in Oakland, MD. I am Pastor Scott Robinson and today we welcome back our gifted music directors Debi and Sean Beachy, who are providing special music for our service. Hopefully before long we will be able to worship in person again. If you would like to help support our ministries and keep our benevolence commitments in the meantime, you can donate through our web site or Facebook page. Now for today's stupid joke.

I'm glad to see February coming to an end, because this is the toughest winter we've had in a while. And as a sort of double whammy, during this pandemic it seems even the best relationships have been strained. I checked-in with one of our church families Monday. The wife said it had been snowing since early morning and it was now about waist deep in her yard. She said the temperature probably wouldn't get much above single digits, and that the wind was really howling. She said her husband had done nothing all day but stand there silently, staring through the kitchen window. She said if it gets any worse, she should probably let him in.

Music

The Lord be with you. Let us pray. Eternal God, it is your glory always to have mercy. Bring back all who have erred and strayed from your ways; lead them again to embrace in faith the truth of your Word and to hold it fast; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit one God, now and forever. Amen.

A reading from Genesis, the seventeenth chapter. When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said to him, "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless.

And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous."

Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, "As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you.

I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. God said to Abraham, "As for your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her."

Here ends the reading.

The Holy Gospel of the Lord, according to Mark, the eighth chapter.

[Jesus] began to teach [the disciples] 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. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?"

Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

The Gospel of the Lord

Let us pray. God of wisdom, may your word be a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path.

Amen.

My Mother had a childhood friend who eventually went to medical school and became an orthopedic surgeon. That orthopedic surgeon's name? Doctor Bonebreak. Yep. Ron and Jeffrey Toothman practice together in Hagerstown. What do they practice? Orthodontics. Shouldn't it be Teethmen? I have no idea what her parents were thinking when they named my eighth-grade girlfriend Sandy Shue.

In dental school I carpooled with a clinical instructor named Michael Payne. He was a nice guy, struggling to get a private practice started. But nobody seemed to want to schedule dental appointments with a guy named Doctor Payne. Go figure...

Ethan Winer is a guy who collects funny and unfortunate given names on his web site. That's where I learned about the plumber in Freeport, Maine named Harry Rump. And the Tahlequah, Oklahoma pizza shop named Sam and Ella's. Really?--would you order a pizza from Sam-and-Ella's? Tahlequah is also the home of Ernie Coli's Chili Pot Restaurant. That's right—E. Coli's Mexican Restaurant. One of Ethan's favorite names was borne by an Egyptian-American young mother he learned about named Carrie Dababi. I bet she did. "What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet," according to Ms. Capulet in act two scene two of

Romeo and Juliet. So to Shakespeare, the answer to the question “what’s in a name?” was apparently, “Not much.”

But the authors and editors of the Hebrew Bible, our Old Testament, would vehemently disagree. In fact, the names given to most characters in the Hebrew Bible are VERY important to understanding them—what they were like and what they would do. Unfortunately, the Hebrew names have been transliterated instead of translated into English, so the stories behind most biblical names are mostly lost on us.

Transliteration into English means to anglicize names in a way that they sort of sound like the names would sound in Hebrew. Moshe becomes Moses. A-DAM becomes Adam. Havah becomes Eve, and so forth.

But you know, if the names had been translated rather than transliterated, we would up-front know something about the person’s story or the nature of his or her character. For hundreds of Old Testament figures their names pretty much tell their story. Moshe means “to draw out,” like the baby Moshe drawn out of the Nile by Pharaoh’s daughter. And the grown-up Moshe who drew God’s people out of slavery in Egypt.

Havah means “source of life,” which of course Eve was after she and A-DAM, or earth-man, were banished from Eden, or gan ay-den--meaning well-watered, fruitful garden.

In the Book of Ruth, Naomi had two sons, who tragically died young. Surprised? I wasn’t. Their names were Mahlon and Chilion. Mahlon means “sickly, or diseased.” Chilion means “wasting away.” Those guys never had a chance. Ruth and Naomi are the much admired heroines of the Book of Ruth. Of course they are. Naomi means “pleasant one.” And Ruth means “Friend.” Nice. But biblical names can also be ironic.

Bible names are very popular again these days. I just wish parents would first consult a rabbi before choosing them. I've met a couple of young Calebs over the last few years, which is the transliterated form of the Hebrew name kalev. Kalev means "Dog." Oops. Ichabod has a nice ring to it, doesn't it? But in Hebrew Ichavod means "No glory." Ouch.

In today's first reading, God changed Avram's name to Avraham, and Sarai became Sarah. And in English you might wonder, "that's only a letter or two different--why bother?" But Avram was one of those ironic names. It means "exalted father" and that was probably a humiliating moniker for our story's ninety-nine-year-old father of nobody.

When he became Avraham, however, things changed. Avraham, means "exalted father of many," and sure enough--through sons Ishmael and Isaac, Avraham became the patriarchal ancestor of all Christians, Jews and Muslims. Let's see, today that would be about 3 ½ billion people. Father of many indeed.

When God changed your name in the Old Testament, it was a sign that God was about to change your life. If you don't believe me, ask ninety year-old Sarai, which means "contentious one." She became the exalted MOTHER of many, under the name Sarah, meaning "princess."

By the way, when old man Avram was told his old lady wife would have a baby he laughed. When Sarai heard about it, she laughed too. So it's no surprise they named their son yitzak, or Isaac, which means "He laughs."

Even God got a new name in today's first reading from Genesis. It is El Shaddai, which our text renders as "God Almighty." But language scholars say El Shaddai probably means "God of the Mountain," and one of the important functions of God's covenant with Abraham was to foreshadow and prefigure the coming covenant between God and Moshe

on Har Sinai, or Har Horeb--the burning bush mountain whose name not surprisingly means “glowing heat.”

When Paul wrote to the Romans that Abraham’s faith was likened to him as righteousness, I bet the significance of the name changes wasn’t lost on him. According to the Book of Acts, Paul himself was named Saul prior to his conversion to Christianity. Sa-ul means the “asked for” or “prayed for” one, and early-on Saul apparently DID see himself as “God’s gift to humanity.” Paulus on the other hand means “humble.” After becoming a Christian, Paul pretty much was.

Name changes still often accompany life changes, don’t they? The majority of brides still adopt their husband’s surname. I came into this world as C. Scott or Scotty. I became Mister Robinson when I first got in trouble with my high school principal, but then again later after college. My dental degree changed my life and my name to doctor, and sixteen years ago my life changed yet again when my name changed to Reverend, or Pastor. Pastor means “shepherd” or “leader.”

And coincidentally it was a misunderstanding of what leadership really means in our faith, that brought Peter his new name in today’s Gospel reading from Mark. His new name? “Satan.” Ouch again.

Problem was, according to Jesus, Peter had his mind set on human things. You know, like when leaders think they are bosses who are meant to have their way and call all the shots.

Leaders are the ones who thrive and prosper, and get all the glory, right? Certainly NOT the ones who serve others and suffer. You know—like Jesus.

Following Christ means to teach what he taught, and where possible, do what he did. And does. Christian Leadership isn’t about personal glory or telling others what to do. It’s about serving others and living a life punctuated by kindness, compassion and self-sacrifice. Maybe we aren’t

there yet. But if we truly are believers, then we should probably be working on it.

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Because having faith changes who you are, how you think, how you speak and what you do. It's easy to spot people of faith. They are the ones actively doing the few things God asks of us. Helping others in times of need, comforting each other in times of sadness. Welcoming strangers and reaching out to outsiders, especially those who otherwise so easily fall through the cracks. Sure, God credited Abram's faith to him as righteousness. But God expected more. In the very first verse of our first reading today God also told Abram, in God's words, "Walk before me and be blameless," which is much easier said than done.

"Walk before me" was a Near Eastern way of saying, "Be loyal." Tamim, the word translated as blameless, more correctly means "without blemish." When Christians fail to help, support and serve each other they are really NOT being loyal to their Lord, are they? And when people who call themselves Christians engage in fear-mongering, and promote hatred, discrimination and intolerance, the entire community of faith is blemished, isn't it?

Many of us are Lutherans. And we know that salvation is by God's grace through faith, and not what we do. But what we do matters too. Martin Luther said that if you are not doing the things God expects and asks of you, you probably didn't have much faith in the first place.

If you go out today, I hope you don't run into Barb Dwyer. If a Lady smiles at you at Wal-Mart and says, Iona Stonehouse, she's not bragging. She's just introducing herself. If I were you, I wouldn't get too close to Anita Shower.

Other favorite names of Ethan Winer include Stan Still, Paige Turner, Rose Bush and Mary Christmas. Whatever you do, be careful out there. That's the advice of our cautious friend named Justin Case.

Amen