

### **“What’s Your Name?” – Gen 17:1-7,15-16 ( + Rom 4:13-25)**

What’s in a name? A lot, usually, especially a family name. Our names define us – our surnames place us into groups, clans, family lines. Justin was telling me as we traveled together to Victoria a couple of weeks ago that he comes from a small island near JeJu Island, an island with a population of perhaps a hundred people or so. He remarked that there are essentially two families on the island – Kim’s and Lee’s – and they don’t mix well. I told him I thought what he had learned from that background would serve him well in Woodstock, NB, a part of Canada where family lineage is still regarded highly.

And speaking of names, I had an email from my oldest son Jamie in PEI laughing because he had discovered Jimsmith Lake Park near Cranbrook in southeastern B.C. I replied that I was pretty sure that the lake had nothing to do with me, or my father Jim Smith who grew up in New Denver, or my grandfather Jim Smith who settled in Revelstoke and then New Denver. (I believe I’ve been told that the Jim Smith after whom the lake was named was a prospector, but I’ve forgotten any other details.) In any event, it’s kind of fun to trace backwards along the family tree.

It’s also hopeful for us to think about what kind of a future our descendants will face, and will history take note of us, or our family, or even our name? We must remember that it’s not always possible to do so, because most of us will not rise to either fame or even infamy – few if any of us will have our faces plastered all over CTV or CBC or newspaper front pages – and also not all of us have or will have children.

Abram was in that position. Well, he had one son, but that was from an arrangement with a slave girl set up by his wife, Sarai. He had no children with his wife, and they were long, long past an age at which it was no longer possible. And so, when God spoke to him, and told him that He, God, would make Abram the father of a “multitude of nations”, Abram did the only sensible thing – he laughed in God’s face! Now you would think, especially if you listen to those who are awfully serious about their faith, or at least awful serious about following the rules of their faith, or just plain awfully serious – if you listened to them you would think that laughing in God’s face would earn you instant cosmic and divine disfavour. You would expect perhaps a bolt of lightning to turn you into a reject from the smoking altar, or the earth to open up allowing hordes of nasty demon-creatures to drag you screaming into the depths. The last thing you might expect, especially if you listen to those who see God as a harsh, rule-giving, vengeance-taking task-master, the last thing you might expect from God would be His honouring a promise to someone who laughed in His face.

But God did honour the promise He made to Abram. And it is vitally important for us to understand that God made that promise to, that covenant with, Abram not because Abram was fastidious about observing the Law, or the laws that God had laid down, because this was long before God laid down the Law. The apostle Paul recognized this, and emphasised that very point in his letter to the Romans, pointing out that God’s gift accorded to Abraham was for his faith, not for his observance of the Law.

Let’s back up a little, and refresh our memory about the story of Abram, a rich and well-established man who lived in or near the ancient city of Ur in what is now the battle-torn area of southern Iraq. I was disturbed while researching to read an article from the Observer International, a reputable newspaper published in the UK, from May, 2003 reports that that ancient city is now the site of a major USA airbase, has suffered graffiti such as “Semper Fi” spray-painted on millennia-old walls, and has suffered the removal of millennia-old bricks as souvenirs. It’s more than a little saddening to think that ancient bricks from the city in which the wheel was invented long before there was an Egypt, the city in which mathematics was invented, the city in which the Epic of Gilgamesh, the world’s oldest existent poem was written, are now sitting as souvenirs on a fireplace mantle in Texas – but I digress.

Abram was a rich and well-established man to whom God spoke and said, “pack it all in, and go where I tell you.” Amazingly, he did – pack it all in and traveled to what is now the site of Syria, Palestine and modern Israel. Now there was an act of faith!

One of the author-editors who is responsible for the story as we have it recorded in scripture focused on the part of the promise from God that the descendants of Abram would “occupy the land.” That author-editor lived in the golden age of Israel, the time of Solomon or thereabouts, a time when Israel was experiencing the fulfillment of the land part of the promise. Our reading today comes from a different hand, an author-editor who lived in a time when the land and the nation had been lost and the people were in exile in Babylon, a much more difficult time to understand that the covenant God offered to Abram was still in place and effective.

Today is another time when it can be difficult to understand that the covenant God offered to Abram is still in place and effective, that the promise made to him because of his faith is still good. A large part of the reason it is difficult today is due to ‘family’ squabbles over inherited property. You see, the promise made to Abram was that he would be “the ancestor of nations” – note the plural: not ‘a nation’ but ‘nations’. A multitude of nations, to be precise. And just as kids – well, grandchildren usually, will fight over that summer place on the water, the great-great-great-grandchildren of Abram are fighting over that summer place by the water. Both the Jews and the Muslims understand, and rightly so, Abram to be their patriarchal ancestor, and so both claim the right to the land promised to him, the land at the east end of the Mediterranean Sea variously called Palestine, Israel, the Middle East and a ‘hot spot’ in more ways than one. The struggle between the great-grandchildren has been going on for many centuries already, and there’s not much sign of it easing, and the world is a troubled place as a consequence.

There’s another little-recognized part of this covenant story, however, that most people gloss over if they notice it at all, and that is the part about God changing Abram’s name to Abraham, and Sarai’s name to Sarah. We kind of shrug, and say, “well, OK, so?” when we hear or read that, but it’s a really crucial part of the story. In western society, we are pretty casual about names – we use nicknames as just one example. Come to think of it, even using nicknames shows that names are more important to us than we might admit – I much prefer ‘Jim’ to the stiff and formal ‘James’; indeed, as I tell people I don’t care what you call me, as long as you call me for supper! But names are very important in other parts of the world, and certainly names were very, very important in Abraham’s world. Then, and even now, a person’s name defined them. A contemporary of the author-editor who wrote this portion of Genesis, namely the prophet we call ‘second’ Isaiah wrote from Babylonian captivity that he heard God to say, “I have called you by name, and you are mine” [Isa 43:1] in conjunction with a promise to keep the faithful safe through the waters and the fire. And so when God renamed Sarai to Sarah, and Abram to Abraham, God was signaling to both of them that they were new people, changed by their encounter with God. Not just changed in that they would become parents, but ever-changing, as children have that effect on parents.

Sarah and Abraham were named and called by God, and became the ancestors of multitudes of nations. The Israelite slaves in Egypt were named and called by God, and became a mighty nation, with powerful kings. The Israelite exiles in Babylon were called and named by God, and returned to their homes by promised highways made straight in the desert. A maiden was called and named by God, and offered a covenant of becoming mother to a world-changing son. A son was called and named by God as His beloved Son, and the world was offered a covenant of reconciliation through him. And we in turn have been called and named his, by faith.

That’s where this ancient story contacts us, where this story that otherwise seems so far away and so long ago touches us where we live in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. This story of Sarah and Abraham being

named and called by God to their role in the history of faith is but one of the covenants people of faith understand as God having made with people. Covenants of grace, and mercy, and forgiveness. Covenants of promise of meaning, and possibility and hope. As we look back across the dusty ages we recognize that the promises made then by God to people have been kept by God – broken many times by people, but always kept by God, and that offers us hope that the promises God has made to us will also be kept by God – even as we recognize that we will most surely not keep our promises to Him.

In particular, we find our hope in the promise that God made to us in the covenant of His Son, affirmed at the baptism of Jesus, affirmed again in the Transfiguration, seemingly abandoned for a time at his crucifixion but then gloriously affirmed for all time in the resurrection of Jesus as the risen Christ. A promise augmented by the further promise of life in and through the Holy Spirit, an additional promise sealed in the flames of Pentecost, a promise we live out energized by that same Spirit.

And so we come to my question, “what’s your name?” Yes, all of us have different names given to us by our parents, or nicknames given to us by friends. Some of us have names that we have chosen for ourselves. But we also share a name, a name by which we have been called and identified as belonging to God. “What’s your name?” Could it perhaps be, “Christian?”