

God Calls You By Name
Genesis 17:1-7,15-16 Isaiah 43:1-7
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Names are important. God changed Abram's and Sarai's names--more about that later. The Isaiah scripture tells us that God calls us by name. Abraham and Sarah named their son Isaac, which means, "laughter" because Sarah laughed when she heard she could become a mother at her advanced age. Moses was so called because the Pharaoh's daughter drew him from the water. The angel told Mary what to name Jesus and also told Zechariah what to name John. Those are just some of the naming stories that quickly come to mind from the scriptures. Recently there was this article in the ADN about naming babies: "Be creative--but not too--when deciding what to call baby" it warns.

Does your name have a story? Do you like your name?

When I was born, as the second child, another daughter, I was named Jimette, after my father, James, because they had wanted this baby to be a boy. Even as I'm typing this manuscript, that red line that indicates a misspelled word appears under my legal name, Jimette. The truth is, I have only heard of two other persons with this name. Each time I was introduced, after assuring people that my name really was Jimette, not Jeannette, Janet, or some other more common name, I heard responses similar to this: "I'll bet your parents wanted a boy!" I didn't mind it so much while I was still living in Texas. I think I tried to be the boy Daddy wanted--I am the only one of my sisters who succeeded in sports in high school.

I think trying to be a boy even made me taller--I am 5'8" and neither of my sisters made it past 5'2". So it wasn't all bad. But about the time I was 31, I felt like I had given Jimette my best shot and decided to go, if not a more feminine route, at least a more floral one.

The name Rose just came to me one day--there's quite a bit more to the story, but since I'm hoping to actually focus this sermon on our relationship with God and not my personal saga, I'll move on. I will say, when choosing a name for your children, that sometimes the more unique names create as many issues as naming your child the most popular name of the year does. But I digress.

Let's look back at the lectionary scripture for today from Genesis. Abram was 99 years old and Sarai was 90. As far as the scripture tells us neither seemed displeased with their names. The idea for the name change comes from God. Abram and Sarai may have thought that if they had lived nearly a century with these monikers that there was no need to change. But if they thought that, they didn't say so or at least if they did, it is not recorded in the scripture. It was God's idea to change their name--to give them names that were more in line with what God was calling them to do and be at this stage of their lives. God and Abram were already in a covenant relationship--and had been for twenty-five years. But God decided to tweak both the names and the covenant--and to include Sarai fully in that covenant. Let's see what we can

learn from this scripture. First, we can be reminded that we are never too old for God to call us into a new relationship.

More and more people are living to celebrate 100 years on the planet. This fact alone is keeping Willard Scott employed. It is exciting to know that God continues to have new plans for us regardless of our age.

As I approach retirement--and it seems to be getting further and further away as the market continues to fall--I am tempted to think that I have somehow fulfilled my call from God--that in these last two or three years in ministry, I'll just glide by. But if I take this scripture seriously, I can expect God to call me to more opportunities to fulfill our covenant relationship.

I think of Della Waghiyi, the Siberian Yupik elder who was a member here when she lived in our neighborhood. The name of the book about her life of service is *As Long As I Have Breath*. The gist is that she will continue to serve where God calls her as long as she is alive. She is well into her 80's and is active in a variety of ways serving God through the Native community, not the least of which is being a member of the conference committee on Native Ministries.

So if you are older than me--and a few of you are--keep listening for God to call you to live out your faith in maybe a new way.

God appeared to Abram and said to him "I am God almighty; walk before me, and be blameless." Let's unpack this command. I needed to consult a commentary to discover the contextual meaning of a couple of these terms. First, the phrase "walk before me" is a phrase that means--"be loyal to me." God is reminding Abram to continue to be loyal to God. The term, "be blameless" doesn't mean be without sin, but rather to exhibit unreserved faithfulness. What we can understand is that being in a covenant relationship with God means that we are loyal and faithful, but not necessarily sinless. This may seem like an oxymoron. But think about it: none of us here is sinless, and yet most of us are loyal and faithful to God. God can use us even though we are sinners.

As a sign that Abram was listening and willing to obey God, he fell on his face. What was that about? Again, it is "Biblese" to show humility. That is, he humbled himself and became open to God's new plan. And here is the new plan. The name, Abram, meant "exalted father", but the name "Abraham" was more specifically, "father of multitudes". In other words, Abram was being called to a new stage in his identification with a divine purpose. His new name calls him to look to the future, to look outward, and is centered on the lives of others. And similarly "Sarah", which means, "princess" infers that she, too, is a forbear of other nations. She is a full participant in the covenant.

This is extra--you don't have to pay more for this. The inclusion of Sarah in this covenant is a sign of God's clear inclusion of women in God's covenant. The original covenant with Abram hadn't been so clear--the misunderstanding was that ANY son of Abram would fulfill the

promise--but this time God made it clear: the offspring was to be that of Abraham AND Sarah. God calls both men and women to be in a covenant relationship with God.

Has God called you to be in a covenant relationship? Is God calling you to be in a covenant relationship? Does God have a new name for you?

The Isaiah scripture says "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the Lord your God." God calls us and names us. God calls us by name. And the reverse is true. We can always call on the name of the Lord for God is always with us.

Lent is a time for introspection. Do you know what your name means? I looked up the names of some of our St. John people who I think are appropriately named. Alene--daughter of light; Anita--favored by God; Nora--honorable; Melinda--grateful woman; Karen--pure one; Rene'--born again; Ruth--one who is a friend to all; Ann--heavenly messenger; Brian--strong; Charles--one who is manly; Clark--learned; David--beloved one; John--God is gracious; Michael--he who is like God; Theodore--God's gift; William--determined guardian. Do you live up to your name?

One of the romance novels I recently read was titled *TEARS LIKE RAIN*. Two children had been orphaned and were adopted by the Cheyenne. The little girl was only six at the time and was sad for many months. Because she cried so much, the people named her "tears like rain". You may remember *Dances With Wolves* was the name given to the Cavalry officer in that epic story by the same title. The heroine's name was *Stands With a Fist*. These names described the actions of particular persons. In Acts 4:36, we are told that one of the early Christian missionaries and a cohort of Paul was named "Barnabas" (which means son of encouragement).

Wouldn't you love to have that as your legacy? Have you thought about a name that would describe you? I may hope to be named, "joyous and happy one", but more likely would be called, "shops many bargains" or "whines when computer fails."

God knows us by name. God knows us by our baptized name as well as any other names we may have acquired, because God knows our hearts. And God calls us to be open to new names with new challenges.

There wasn't anything wrong with Abram being an exalted father. It was just that Abraham, father of multitudes, opened up more possibilities for the future. That is the beauty of being in relationship with a creative, dynamic God who continues to move us toward new possibilities.

I wrote an affirmation based on the Genesis scripture that I wish to use as a closing: I believe that God calls each of us, regardless of our gender or age or status in life, to be in a covenant relationship with God.

I believe that covenant relationship includes our being faithful to God.

I believe that when God calls us our response should be one of open listening with humility.

I believe God will let us know God's plan for us and equip us to be faithful.

I believe God will always be with us.

Listen, watch, God is naming you and calling you by that name. Will you faithfully answer God's call?