

2nd Sunday in Lent 2009

Gen. 17:1-7, 15-16; Ps. 22:23-31; Rom. 4:13-25; Mark 8:31-38

L. Hlass; Good Shepherd, Berkeley

We got a phone call at home Friday night. After I answered I heard a familiar voice say, “May I talk to Etoy?” I responded, “This is Etoy.” You see, Etoy is my family nickname, a term of endearment that as best as we can figure, originated from my sister who when I was born was three years old and probably could not quite say “Lisa.” When I heard my dad address me by that name, immediately my heart warmed, I laughed, and I knew that everything was okay back home.

It’s amazing the power of a name. Much of our identity is carried in our name, and when someone we know forgets or mispronounces our name, we may feel angry or like we’re not valued, similar to the way it used to be when African American men were dismissed with the word, “boy.”

Some people change their name. I recently watched a piece on the evening news about Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal, who was born in the U.S. to parents who had immigrated from India. His given name is Piyush but later in life he took the name Bobby, and it has probably served him well politically. Likewise, Barack Obama was surely advised earlier in his political career to take on a more “American sounding” name. The fact that he didn’t change his name says something not only about President Obama, but about the growth and progress that our country has made on many fronts.

Can you imagine what it might be like to be given a new or revised name by God? That’s what happens in our Old Testament lesson. Abram, which means “my father is exalted,” becomes Abraham, “father of a multitude of nations is exalted.” Sarai, “noble woman” becomes, “Sarah,” princess. These name changes are not about changes in Abraham and Sarah’s personality or character, but about a new stage in their life in relationship with the divine, a stage marked by a covenant relationship with God that requires their faithful commitment.

The idea of divine covenant is not new. Last Sunday we heard about God’s covenant with Noah when God promised that there would never again be a flood that

would destroy the earth. And this is not the first time that Abram heard of God's covenant promise to him that he would inherit land and have countless descendants. Each time covenant with God is addressed, though, it represents an advancement in the divine-human relationship and a deepening of what it means to be called by God and to receive God's promise.

From among all peoples and all creation God calls and makes this covenant with Abraham and Sarah. They are to become ancestors of a multitude of nations. In return, Abraham is called to "walk before God and be blameless." He must put his devotion to God before all other loyalties and use that relationship as a guide for a righteous life. This covenant is marked by God's very imprint on Abraham and Sarah's names. Their new names symbolize the divine covenant and not only call them into a faithful relationship with God, but, as ancestors to multitudes, to look outward from the perspective of this covenant relationship to the lives of many others.

Abraham, in a response of faith, falls on his face before God. In our reading from his Letter to the Romans, Paul elaborates on Abraham's faith in God, "God, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence things that do not exist." Hoping against hope, Abraham *believed* that he would become 'the father of many nations.' He didn't weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which Paul notes, "was already as good as dead, for he was about a hundred years old." He did weaken in faith when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. Nothing made Abraham waiver concerning the promise of God, and he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, being fully convinced that he would receive what God had promised. That name change must have had a powerful impact on Abraham.

If you'll remember, Peter, a focal character in our Gospel lesson, also experienced a divine name change. In the Gospel of Mark it's just mentioned in passing when Jesus appoints him as one of the twelve. But in the Matthew's Gospel we hear Jesus saying to Simon, "And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church..." Powerful stuff.

Immediately before today's Gospel lesson in Mark, Jesus asks the disciples, "Who do you say that I am? Not surprisingly, Peter quickly and confidently answers, "You are the Messiah." But we soon discover that Peter, in spite of his enthusiasm and passion, doesn't really understand what it means for Jesus to be the Messiah.

When Jesus begins to teach the disciples that he must suffer, be rejected and killed, Peter rushes forward to pull him aside and rebuke him. The Messiah, after all, is to establish a powerful earthly kingdom; to defeat the evil political system; and of course, to offer great reward and power to those like Peter and John who had been such great supporters. The Messiah was NOT to suffer and die.

Jesus turns and rebukes Peter, much as he had Satan in the wilderness, for Peter's rejection of Jesus' announced path of suffering represents as real a temptation as any that Jesus had faced in the wilderness.

Jesus then uses the occasion as an opportunity to teach the crowds what it means to follow the Christ. "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 want to lose their life for my sake and for the sake of the gospel, will save it."

Those who take on the name of Christ must undergo transformation at a price. Discipleship is demanding. Those of us who confess Jesus to be Messiah and Son of God must be faithful disciples. Does this mean we're demanded to live flawless lives? Of course not; look at Abraham and Peter – their lives were marked with plenty of costly mistakes and poor judgment. Like Bill Moyers says, Abraham is the father of our faith not because he's a good guy, but because he is the reminder that our relationship with God is a relationship defined by faith.

"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 want to lose their life for my sake and for the sake of the gospel, will save it."

The season of Lent is an appropriate time to pray and ponder what it means for us to be faithful followers of Christ – as individuals, as a community, and as the body of Christ in the world.

For sure, the demands of discipleship look much different than the desires, demands, and worries of our society.

Like Abraham, Sarah and Peter, we are not called to live perfect lives. We who bear Christ's name are called to lives of faithful commitment in relationship with a loving God who promises to be with us every step of the way.

O God, whose glory it is always to have mercy: bring us with steadfast faith to embrace and hold fast the unchangeable truth of your Word, Jesus Christ. Amen.