

Our second Scripture is the foundation for our first reading from Romans 4:13-25. Our second reading is the story of Abraham and Sarah found in Genesis in the Old Testament. Abraham is first introduced to us in the Bible not as Abraham but as Abram. Sarah is first introduced not as Sarah but as Sarai.

We learn that both of their given names have meaning. Abram means “exalted ancestor” while we learn that Sarai’s name means “princess.” However, in this Scripture that are about to read, we will find these two, Abram and Sarai, being given new names.

Abram was promised 24 years earlier, when he was 75 years old, that he would become a dad. He and Sarai were both very old when they got this word, but they trusted God and they made their plans. They traveled to a new land and expected to become pregnant. But several years passed with no pregnancy.

Abram and Sarai began to lose faith in this promise that they were given. So, Sarai convinces Abram that she is too old to bear a child but that her maid Hagar is not. Abram agrees, and Hagar conceives from Abram and together they have a child. This child is named Ismael.

You may or may not know that today’s Muslims trace their lineage back to Abram’s child Ishmael. That is why Christians, Jews, and Muslims all claim Abram or Abraham as our common ancestor.

But Abram is told that this child through Hagar is not the only child that he will become a father to. That he and Sarai will also have a child even though Sarai is now in her 90s.

Let’s read about the next part of this story.

Read Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

Earlier you were asked to list names that you have been called. You were asked to list the funny ones, the serious ones, and the hurtful ones. I am going to read the names that you listed.

Reflect on the names that you have been called.

We have all been called names whether we like it or not. For most of us, we remember the negative ones first that left a scar on us. We remember the names that were placed on us that do not define who we really are.

Names are placed on us as an attempt by others to shape who we are. We are given a name at our birth by parents that carefully choose names for a reason. It may be a family name to remind the child that they are part of an extended family. The McGregor children were all given names that correlated to extended family names.

Others of us were given names that correlate to a special friend of our parents. Maybe some of us were given names that are a combination of names from people important to our parents. We did that with one of our children.

Some of us were given names because they represent a certain place or experience. I once met a child named Frisco. When I asked him why he was named that he told me that he was conceived in San Francisco.

Sometimes people are named simply because the parents like the sound of a name. My aunt told me about working with a family one time who had a child named Diarrhea. They named her that because the parents said the name sounded pretty. I recently verified with my aunt that this naming is a true story.

But then sometimes we are given a descriptive name by people trying to use something about us to put us down in some way. We may have been called lint head. We may have been called that colored girl or that slanted eyed boy. That yankee or that dumb blonde. Four eyes or cripple.

Names can really stick on us even when we try to discard them. Names can shape how we think and act.

Today's story is a story about naming. When Abram was 99 the Lord appeared to him and said to him that God was going to make a new covenant with him. As a condition of this covenant his name would be changed. No longer would he be called Abram but Abraham. Abraham is a name which means "Father of Nations."

And no longer would Sarai be called Sarai. Now she would be called Sarah which means she, too, will become a parent to a great nation.

We may not know it, but we have also been renamed. Through baptism we are named "Child of God." And being called "Child of God" has so much more power than those derogatory names we have been called which may have hurt us so much.

Many of us feel a sense of inadequacy or shame because we are trying to live up to a certain name that has overwhelmed us. Others of us feel a sense of inadequacy or shame because we have allowed those negative names to define us.

But we do not need to allow the needs of others to put us down to be the name by which we are known.

Your most important name is child of God. All the other names that you have been given mean nothing compared to this naming. Child of God is the way you are seen by God. When we affirm this about ourselves we are seeing ourselves the way that God sees us.

We are going to conclude with a clip from one of the greatest Presbyterian ministers of all time. When I show you this clip many of you may not know that this individual has a Master of Divinity from Pittsburg Theological Seminary and was an ordained Presbyterian minister. His ministry was with children. And his name, as many of us now know, was Mr. Rogers.

I came across this clip of him being interviewed by Joan Rivers on the Tonight Show. If you don't know the Tonight Show was the model for late night talk shows before Colbert, Fallon, and Kimmel.

Whenever you feel down because you have allowed some negative name to beat you down, you can listen and watch this.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FWTjvFERNuE>

God likes you just the way you are and renames you "Child of God." AMEN.

+++++

-Given: February 25, 2018 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)