

“The Sound and the Sign of the Covenant”

Genesis 17:1-14

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The story is told of a man wearing sunglasses who entered a pharmacy in North Manchester, Indiana. He calmly walked to the cash register counter and told the employees that he was there to rob them. The pharmacist on duty couldn't believe what he was hearing. He stepped forward and thwarted the man's plans, preventing the crime before it even began. He didn't pull out a weapon or sound the silent alarm for the police. He didn't even attempt to persuasively talk the guy out of it. The man was stopped dead in his tracks because the pharmacist knew his name. Recognizing his voice from time he had served at another store, the pharmacist simply called out the man's name from behind his counter. In fact, the pharmacist knew his address, his phone number and knew enough of his character to suspect it was a joke. The man immediately spun around and ran out of the store, boarding a nearby bus. The sound of his own name removed all anonymity. He'd been identified. He'd been named. His plan of taking money from the pharmacy and leaving in obscurity had been wrecked by the sound of someone speaking his name. He was abruptly reminded who he was and that he was not alone.

One of my favorite things to do as a staff member of our church is to assist with the Mother's Day Out Chapel service for our young 3 and 4 year olds. I get to tell them a Bible story and I always sing with them. There is one song that is their favorite. The words are from 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18....."Rejoice evermore. Pray without ceasing. In everything give thanks. For this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you." As we are singing and get to "this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you" instead of saying 'you' I will point at one of the children and call out their name....." This is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning Donna." Those kids just love that. Unlike the "would be" robber at the pharmacy, instead of embarrassment and fear, it sends a tickle up their spine, it puts a smile on their face and makes them feel loved. It makes them feel important. Then we will all pick out a classmate and sing it to them, all pointing at them and calling them by their name. Everyone just seems to love that song and it's because they love to hear their own name. It is part of their identity, their person, who they are.

Well, in our text today we have a 'name story' that transcends self-esteem or nicknames and how others treat us or find us out. It is actually the continuing story of God's call on the life of Abraham and his covenant promise. Let's read of the name change again. God appeared to Abram, Abram fell on his face and Scripture says

“... God said to him: Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham...”

Throughout history names have played an important and fascinating role in society giving clues to a person’s background and social standing or their profession and line of work, even to trace a person’s lineage. Names have always been important indicators of something interesting or important about a person.

Moses name was given because his mother drew him out of a river. His name means literally “to draw out”. Isaac means “laughter”...appropriate since Abraham and Sara got such a laugh out of God telling them Sara would be pregnant with Abram at the age of 100 and Sara at the age of 90. Names mean something, sometimes much.

Abram’s name was given him by his father. It is an ancient West Semitic name and it means “exalted father” or “father of many”. Some contend that Abram’s father, Terah, gave him the name to bring honor to himself. But think about it. Here was Abram, 90 years old with no children and a name that means “father of many”. Can’t you just imagine the scene?

A stranger meets Abram and they introduce themselves. The stranger nods and says, “Abram, what a great name. And so how many sons do you have?” Imagine the embarrassment and shame for Abram when he said “none”. The irony must have produced some most awkward moments.

And now, God piles it on. Now, not only was Abram called “the father of many” but he will now be Abraham, which means “the father of multitudes” or “father of many nations”.

Poor Abram! “Everyone knew what Abram’s name meant. And everyone knew what his new name meant. Every time someone passed him on the street, it was, “Hey, how’s it going, Father of a Multitude”? Hey, “Father of a Multitude”, could you please pass the turkey and gravy? 50 times a day he’d be reminded that his name meant “father of a multitude”and that he had no children. Sarai was barren.

According to **Nahum Sarna**, **“In the psychology of the ancient Near Eastern world, a name was not merely a convenient means of identification but was intimately bound up with the very essence of being and inextricably intertwined with personality”** and ultimately his character and purpose. I can only imagine the struggle Abraham went through over that 25 years after God made His initial promise. He was to be the father of many. The grand patriarch who was

to be the father of many nations. And yet, he was now 100 years old, his wife, Sarai, 90 and for all intents and purposes, time had run out.

But when God changed Abram's name to Abraham, hope was rekindled. God had spoken. In His sovereignty, God's plan and purpose once again was revealed. This time, through the very personal and intimate action of changing Abraham's name, God's providence prevailed. In the changing of his name, God confirms His initial promise to Abram from Genesis 12 when He said, **"...in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed"** and Abram's new name, Abraham, is, as eminent Presbyterian preacher of the 20th century **Donald Barhouse** said, a ***"divinely guaranteed statement about Abraham's identity and future destiny. His very name guarantees that he will father many nations."***

So God changes Abram's name to Abraham.

Please notice something else. After God changes Abram's name to Abraham, he says *"... for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations."* Genesis 17:5a

That is PAST tense. God has already done this! There is no doubt that it will happen. In the God's plan and timing, it is already done. If ever Abraham doubted, God is telling him that it is a done deal, signed, sealed and delivered.

And the reason it is finished is that God's covenant is God's doing. He gets Abram's attention in this most telling and singularly important and personal way...He changes Abram's name...*and only one in absolute authority could change one's name*...and God tells him that the promise is not just His plan, but it is His work and in His sovereignty, His will has been and will be done. He says:

"I have made you..."* AND THEN *"I will make you fruitful..."* *"I will make you into nations..."

"I will establish my covenant..."* *"I will be God to you and your offspring..."

"I will give to you...the land of your sojournings..."* *"I will be their God..."

God is clearly saying to Abraham, **"I am the one true God. Beside me there is no other. And you are mine, Abraham. And my plan for you remains as I told you 25 years ago. It is a plan that is already completed. You will be the father of many nations. I have ordained it and I will do it!!"**

What an amazing revelation.....But here our account takes a turn.

When I began preparing for today's sermon, I realized that it had been quite some time since I had read this passage in Scripture. So as I read it, I read it with fresh eyes 'so to speak'. And as I did, I sat back and marveled at how extraordinary this part of the covenant was. Think of this. When the Great Flood had come and gone, the sign of God's covenant with Noah and all creatures not to ever flood the earth again was a 'rainbow', a beautiful multi-colored rainbow arching the skies to remind everyone of God's covenant promise. In contrast to that, in God's covenant with Israel at Mt. Sinai, God gave Moses Ten Commandments carved into two stone tablets. These served as a sign of God's covenant and Israel's responsibility of obedience. But now, here is Abraham, hearing from God once again, after 25 years, that He is to be the 'father of many nations'. And the one stipulation God makes begins in verse 9:

"As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised.....(this) shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you....so shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant."

Genesis 17:9-14

This sets up somewhat of a tension in this narrative doesn't it? If we are reading it for the first time, we cannot take for granted that Abraham will simply obey God. Even though circumcision was practiced in Egypt and by some tribes in Palestine, it was foreign to Babylonia, Abraham's homeland. Additionally, as you've probably already imagined in your mind's eye, circumcision was a painful and bloody rite. Even though Scripture does give us the details, we won't get that graphic this morning by reading it but you've got to empathize with Abraham.

God has stated His intentions, this is His covenant and now, as a sign of this covenant, he has instructed Abraham to circumcise every adult male including all the slaves he has purchased and sojourners who have remained with them, every youngster and adolescent, even every baby who is eight days old forever going forward.

I don't know about you but I'm thinkin' Abraham's gotta be thinking, ***"Look, it's been twenty-five years since you made your promise to me. And, yeh, I know you said it's a done deal and all but Sarai is still barren. I have no son. I'm the laughing stock of the land, even more so since you changed my name to "father of many nations" and now, you're telling me to do what?"***

But to quote the Apostle Paul, “What does Scripture say? Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness.” **Romans 4:3**

When God first appeared to Abraham and called him out of Ur, Scripture says, “So Abram went, as the Lord had told him, and Lot with him.” **Genesis 12:4**

The writer of the Book of Hebrews says of it this way, “By faith, Abraham obeyed and went even though he did not know where he was going.” (**Hebrews 11:8**)

Abraham has been the man of faith. He is the chosen one. And he has chosen time and again to trust God. He is the one whose faith and obedience was counted as righteousness. Is there really any doubt that Abraham would obey God’s instruction?

When we continue reading in **Genesis 17 verse 22** we read: “When he had finished talking with him, God went up from Abraham. Then Abraham took Ishmael his son and all those born in his house or bought with his money, every male among the men of Abraham’s house, and he circumcised the flesh of their foreskins that very day, as God had said to him.”

Abraham believed God and obeyed God and circumcision became the outward sign of the covenant God had made with his people.

But in reading the whole of Scripture what we find is that God’s people are woefully unable to keep their part. Think of it. The descendants of Noah fell way short of God’s plan. After God established this covenant with Abraham and his descendants, Scripture tells us that even Moses failed to circumcise his son and the whole generation that grew up in the desert was uncircumcised. After the Ten Commandments were given, it was but a short time that we see widespread failure on Israel’s part to keep covenant with God.

If Israel would demonstrate again and again that they could not keep up their part of the covenant, then how could God say to Abraham in verse 13 that His covenant would be an “everlasting covenant”??

“...So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant.” **Genesis 17:13b**

Think about it. If God’s people by nature have proven over and over again that they are incapable of keeping the covenant, of walking in righteousness and obeying God and setting themselves apart as His covenant people, then how is this going to be an EVERLASTING COVENANT?

The answer is this. We've already seen that God is the covenant maker. Well God is also the covenant keeper. Remember two weeks ago when Gerrit took us through the covenant sacrifice of animals in Chapter 15. He said,

“Then Abraham, coming out of his sleep, saw a strange sight. In the darkness, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between the split carcasses of the animals. The smoke and fire represented the LORD God. The sovereign King of the universe walked the blood path for Abraham. God staked his very life on keeping his promise to Abraham. And he obligated himself for Abraham's part of the deal too. God pledged to do in and for Abraham all that was required. He keeps His part and He keeps our part.”

God is the 'doer'. **He is faithful and He will do it.** That is the 'good news' of the gospel. He does what His people could not do for themselves. He does what we cannot do for ourselves. And woven throughout the Old Testament stories of God's sovereignty and His involvement with His people, we see how God, in spite of the disobedience of His people, would guarantee that this would be an everlasting covenant; a covenant dependent, not upon the righteousness or faithfulness of His called people, but on His grace.

How does He do this?

1. God will establish a New Covenant.

The night before Christ sacrificed Himself on our behalf, he met with his disciples in the upper room. He took the bread and the cup and he said this:

Luke 22:20 “This cup that is poured out for you is the **new covenant** in my blood.”

The author of Hebrews puts it this way:

Hebrews 9:15 “Therefore he is the mediator of a **new covenant**, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance (the everlasting covenant), since a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions committed under the **first covenant.**”

God's chosen people are unable to fulfill their part of the covenant. So, as God promised, He fulfilled both His part and ours. Remember, in that covenant ceremony in chapter 15, each party committed to their own blood sacrifice if they did not fulfill their part of the covenant. God, the covenant maker, fulfilled the covenant, His part and ours, through the blood of Jesus Christ.

Secondly,

2. God will establish a New Sign for His new covenant.

No longer will the sign of belonging be circumcision because being a child of the covenant, being a descendant of Abraham, is not being born a Jew nor being circumcised. Being a child of Abraham is an inward, spiritual reality. It is a circumcision of the heart.

Romans 9:6–8, 4:9-12, 2:28-29 “...For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel; nor are they all children because they are Abraham's descendants... Faith was credited to Abraham as righteousness... while (he was) uncircumcised... no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter.”

Circumcision was an outward sign of God’s promise, not the faith or righteousness or faithfulness of the one circumcised.

Baptism is a sign of the new covenant and it is a sign of God's promise of eternal life and blessing found in the New Covenant in Jesus Christ. It is an outward sign, as was circumcision, expressing the reality of God's promise and the new covenant. It does not express the inward faith of the one baptized. (Abraham was counted righteous by his faith before he was circumcised.) Baptism expresses the reality of God’s promise.

The Third way that God makes this an everlasting covenant is that, just as He did for Abram:

3. God will provide a New Name for His chosen people

Revelation 2:17 “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. **To the one who conquers** I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, with **a new name written on the stone** that no one knows except the one who receives it.”

God will give us a new name when we enter into his kingdom.

A New Covenant. A New Sign. A New Name.

“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.” **2 Corinthians 5:17**

Ezekiel 36:26 “And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.”

Jeremiah 31:33 “But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts.”

2 Corinthians 5:17 “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.”