

AFTER THE FLOOD: NEW NAMES

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the second Sunday in Lent, March 16, 2003.

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-17a; Romans 4:13-25; Mark 8:31-38

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

You're sitting at dinner table with your family. Your dad tells you the story of *his* grandfather.

"When your great grandfather was sixty he married your great grandmother, a woman ten years younger than he was. They weren't able to have children." Everybody laughs. Of course they weren't able to have kids. Nobody has kids at that age. Your dad goes on, "When your great grandfather was a hundred and great grandmother ninety God blessed them with a baby." "Come on," everybody at the table says. "Who are you kidding?" One of your cousins asks, "Do you mean they adopted a child?" "No!" your dad asserts. "Your great grandmother Sarah had a baby when she was 90. Your great grandfather was the father." Everybody roars laughing. Your dad sure can tell tall tales. "How could this possibly have happened?" "I don't know. But *you're* here and you wouldn't have been unless they had a child."

We don't usually think the Bible contains much humor, but it does. Years ago, Elton Trueblood wrote a book entitled, The Humor of Jesus. He could have written a much larger book on the humor of the Bible. The story of Abraham and Sarah has been making people laugh for over 3000 years. The story has been told in desert nomad tents, medieval cathedrals, and around dinner tables right down to the present day. *Only today, no body laughs* when they hear the story. After all, the Bible is a holy book and it's hard for us to associate holiness with humor. *But the story of Abraham and Sarah having a baby when most people their age live in a geriatric ward was meant to provoke laughter.*

Last week Carol Carter shared a joy with the congregation. Her grandmother is celebrating her 100th birthday and is preaching the sermon in her church today. We laughed. "Isn't that great? A hundred years old and she still goes to church and can even preach." But what if Carol had announced, "I have a joy. My grandmother is celebrating her 100th birthday and, you'll never believe this, but she just announced she's pregnant! Gramps and grandma were a little embarrassed when the news got out but the rest of our family is so excited!" If Carol had said that, I'd have said, "Could you repeat that?" And

when we were sure of what she said we'd either *laugh our heads* off or *shake our heads* in concern for Carol's mental health. "Carol's been under a lot of stress lately."

When God told Abraham he'd father a child at the age of one hundred, "*Abraham fell on his face and laughed.*" He nearly knocked himself out when he hit the floor. Why did Abraham laugh? Fred Buechner suggests six reasons. (1) Abraham laughed because *only a fool would believe* that a 90-year-old woman would have a baby. (2) He laughed because *God expected him to believe* it anyway. (3) Abraham laughed because *God, himself, seemed to believe* the promise. (4) He laughed because *he half believed it himself.* (5) He laughed because *laughing felt better than crying* at such a cruel joke on an elderly childless couple. (6) Abraham laughed because *if the promise did come true* they would *really* have something to laugh about.

God promised that Abraham would be a father and confirmed his promise by changing Abraham's name from *Abram* to *Abraham*. "Now," God says, "When anybody asks you what your name is say, "My name is Abraham." The name *Abraham* means "the ancestor of a multitude of nations." Now imagine the embarrassment his new name Abraham would feel since he didn't have any children. A man who has no children is named *Father of Many Nations!* What a laugh. That's like calling *Poor Richard, Little Richey Rich*. It's like calling Yao Ming, the seven and half foot star center for the Houston Rockets basketball team, "Shorty." It's so incongruous. It's laughable.

Nevertheless, God changed Abram's name to *Abraham*. People change their names for many reasons. Sometimes immigrants give themselves a new name when they get to America. When *Giuseppe* comes to America he tells his friends to call him *Joe* because he wants to fit in. Probably some of you have family names that have been changed since your family came to the States. Sometimes we change our names when we become adults. As a child you were called *Davy* but now you're *David*. They called you *Bubbles* in high school but as an adult people call you *Anne*. When we grow up, we often change our names.

Our names are important. They belong to us, like a possession. You have a house, bicycle, television *and you have a name*. It's a possession. For many of you, it's your most valuable possession. You're proud of your name and cultural heritage. Parents used to say to their kids, "Don't do anything to disgrace our name." One of the most painful things we sometimes have to endure is when people trample our name in the mud through slander or gossip. There's something terribly wrong with our values when we place material possessions over a good name. For example, Elvis Presley sang,

You can knock me down, step on my face
Slam my name all over the place
Do anything that you're going to do
But uh uh honey lay off of my shoes

Blue Suede Shoes became more important to him than his name but most people put a far higher value on their name than their possessions.

A new name means a new identity. You've heard of the *federal witness protection program*. The witness protection program provides new names *and identities* to gangsters who witness against their partners in crime. A gangster in the program is given a *new name* and the opportunity to live a *new life* with a *new identity* protected from his enemies. He *dare not* be who he used to be. He *must* become a different person. Old things have passed away. All things have become new. Our names help to give us our identity.

Names are real. Just as the Bread and Wine of Holy Communion are more than mere bread and wine, our names are more than letters and sounds. Names are real as our flesh and blood. "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names can never hurt me." That's just not true! Names can hurt - even destroy a person *because names are real*. If people mispronounce your name you correct them until they get your name right. Fred Buechner says when somebody forgets *his* name; he feels *he's* been forgotten. If your name were different, you'd be different. When you tell people your name, you give them a hold over you they didn't have before (Buechner). I feel uncomfortable when a telemarketer who doesn't know me calls and says, "Hello, Ted, how are you?" And I say, "Who are you? Do I know you?" I feel a little violated.

Names mean something. What does your name mean? Are you named after a parent, relative, friend of your family, or a famous person? Did your parents ever tell you *why* they named you *what* they named you? Does your name contain a hope? Who are you? Christians have been given a new name, identity, and destination through faith in Christ. The first question in our Presbyterian Catechism for children asks, "Who are you." The answer: "I am a child of God." People laugh! "Who do you think you are? calling yourself a child of God?" "Don't laugh! I *am* a child of God. And God wants to claim you as his child too."

Last week we were overjoyed when Elizabeth Smart was found and returned to her home. One of the strange twists in the case is that shortly after she was kidnapped she heard people looking for her call out her name. She could have responded, but out of fear remained silent. When the police finally found her she was wearing a disguise. The police asked her what her name was. She said, "Augustine". Not "Elizabeth" but "Augustine". She'd been brainwashed. She had lost her name and her identity. But now she's home and remembers who she is. After she had been reunited with her family, her dad, sobbing, said, "All of the children out there deserve to come back to their parents the way Elizabeth has come back to us."

God wants us to come back home to him. Have you forgotten who you are? In baptism God claimed you as his beloved son or daughter. He calls you by name. He gives us a new name, identity and destination. God's grieves when we runaway, or are brainwashed by the enemy to believe we're someone other than who God destined us to be through Christ. We run away, we wander, stray, delay and forget who we are. But God keeps searching for us. He'll never give up until we remember our name, remember who we are, and come safely back home. Through faith in Jesus Christ, God has given us a new name, identity, and destination. He's searching for us. He's calling you and me now – by name! "Remember who you are! You belong to me! I love you!"

We give thanks to you, O Lord our God, for all your servants and witnesses of time past: for Abraham, the father of believers, and for Sarah, his wife, In your mercy, give us, as you gave them, the hope of salvation and the promise of eternal life; through the firstborn from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.