

Weekly Devotion March 15, 2021

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“What It Means to Have a New Name”

Today we read from Genesis 17 where the Lord reestablishes His covenant.

“Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to him and said, “I am God Almighty; walk before me faithfully and be blameless. ² Then I will make my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers.”

³ Abram fell facedown, and God said to him, ⁴“As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations. ⁵ No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. ⁶ I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. ⁷ I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. ⁸ The whole land of Canaan, where you now reside as a foreigner, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God.”

If most people today heard the name Michael King most probably would not recognize it. But if you were to look at his original birth certificate filed April 12, 1934 the name for five-year old Michael King was crossed out and next to it was a carefully handwritten name, ‘Martin Luther King Jr’.

In the summer of 1934 The Rev. Michael King, senior pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta was sent on a tour that would change his life. He traveled to Rome, Jerusalem and to Germany where he learned about Martin Luther. As we Lutherans will know Martin Luther began a reformation with a little document called the 95 theses, nailed to the church doors in Wittenberg on October 31, 1517. Inspired by the work of Martin Luther, the Rev. Michael King came back a changed man. Some time later he would change not only his name to Martin Luther King but also his son’s name by which we all remember him, Martin Luther King Jr..

Changing a name can hold a host of different meanings. For MLK Sr. it was to emulate a reformer like Martin Luther. Closer to home a name may change because a relationship has become a covenant. When my wife and I were married she chose to change her last name to include our family’s last name of Woods. It is an old tradition reflective of the name in a relationship from two to becoming one.

The Lord changed Abram’s name as well to indicate that a change has taken place. Abram meaning ‘high father’ was changed by the Lord to Abraham meaning “Father of many nations”. Notice that this name is given to Abraham before Isaac is born. It would not be Abram we remember most but Abraham who would bear Isaac and with this new identity Isaac would be Abraham’s one and only true son. We remember when the Lord tested Abraham God called Isaac Abraham’s only son multiple times. The Lord would do the same with Sarai “argumentative” to Sarah meaning, “Princess.” Like Abraham her status changed too from a mother of none to a mother of many nations. In both cases their names changed because something new was coming.

Of course, we see this again with Jacob, “Caught by the heel” because he was born holding onto the heel of his twin brother, Esau as he was born. And after an all night wrestling match

with the Lord (Genesis 32), the Lord changed his name to Israel meaning, “To fight/wrestle with God.” Once again, something new was coming, namely the fulfillment of God’s covenant with Abraham. From Israel are the sons who eventually become the twelve tribes of Israel.

Fast forward to John 1 as Jesus is calling His first disciples. After spending a day with Jesus Andrew went to find His brother Simon, Peter and told him that they had met the Messiah and then introduced Peter to Jesus. We are told in John 1:42 that “Jesus looked at him and said, “You are Simon son of John. You will be called Cephas” (which, when translated, is Peter). Cephas is Aramaic for Peter meaning “rock”. Yet once again something new was about to happen and a name changed. Peter was being called to be Jesus’ disciple.

The changing of a name carries significance. It can indicate the change in a relationship. Abram became Abraham a covenant carrying father of many nations. My wife and I became a covenant two becoming one flesh. Changing a name can indicate a change in a person’s status. Martin Luther, a lowly monk teaching at a small-town university in Wittenberg nailed his 95 theses to the church door and became a reformer. The son of a Baptist preacher, Martin Luther King Jr. would become the name most associated with civil rights. A change in name may also indicate a place for which a person belongs or lives. To this last point; when I was in Spanish class my name was Mateo instead of Matt. If I lived in Puerto Rico that may be how I would be called. Where once Abram’s home was Ur, Abraham’s home was in Canaan a land that would also come to be known as “The Promised Land.”

So, what does this mean for us? Think of it this way. When a child was named by His Father in Biblical times under the Law the Father was claiming that child for themselves. For example, when Joseph pronounced the name of Jesus, Joseph was making claim to him as his legitimate son even though it was not his child but from the Holy Spirit. This by the Law would establish Jesus’ legal status under the Law as a descendant of David. When our names are called in Baptism something new is given and established. Galatians 3:26-27 tells us that we become children of God through faith in Christ Jesus and in our Baptisms we are clothed with Christ. And in vs. 29 we are called true descendants of Abraham and heirs of the promise established by the Lord long ago.

And yes, our name changes in this just by being called out in Baptism. When the Lord calls us by name, a legitimate claim takes hold. We are His because our relationship has changed from lost to found in Jesus. We belong to the Father as Jesus does; as family. It indicates that our status has changed from an enemy of God to a child of God in Jesus. It also indicates that we are citizens of heaven and that we have a place in the Father’s house. Most importantly when the Lord calls our name as He did Lazarus’ at the tomb, we will be raised to something new, no longer a broken vessel but eternal; fully transformed into the likeness of Jesus. Our legitimacy as God’s children is established and settled forever (Read more on this from Romans 3).

What this means is that our citizenship is in heaven. This also means that our joy is to bring a little heaven down to earth. May this be our legacy to those who remember our name.

Now the Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make His face to shine on you and be gracious to you. The Lord look on you with His Favor and give you peace in Jesus. Amen.

Pastor Matthew Woods
John 3:30