

Douglas Scalise, Brewster Baptist Church

In the Bible the name of a person, place, or thing is often connected to and descriptive of its essence and or personality. There are a number of stories in the Bible about significant people whose names are changed often to reflect a change in calling, character, personality, purpose, or status. The theme, *When God Changes Your Name*, will be the focus of our worship and small groups during the next five weeks.

We will learn about living a life of faith in the midst of challenges and how God uses ordinary people to do extraordinary things by examining the lives of Abram and Sarai who are re-named Abraham and Sarah (Genesis 17:1-22), Jacob who becomes Israel (Genesis 32:22-31), Simon better known as Peter (Matthew 16:13-20), Joseph whom the apostles give the name of Barnabas (Acts 4:32-37), and Saul who eventually is known as Paul (Acts 9:1-22, 13:1-13).

In each case there is a significant moment when the person's identity and destiny are altered because of what God is calling them to do or because of who they are. God's view of us is some times different than how we see our selves. God may think we are capable of more than we realize ourselves. The Lord also has expectations for each of us and work, ministry, service, for us to do that is as unique to us as is our own name.

Before I read today's scripture, it probably would be helpful to review how Abraham and Sarah reached this point in their lives. Beginning in Genesis 11:27 we learn that they were from Ur, which is in southern Iraq, then, they moved northwest to Haran which is in Turkey, just north of the Syrian border. Genesis 12 begins with Abraham hearing a mysterious voice telling them to pull up stakes and move into an unknown future. God didn't tell them exactly where they were going or what sort of life to expect when they arrived at their destination. The Voice was not terribly specific about the details, but even without knowing the details they loaded up the camels and they moved south to Canaan, no swimming pools, no movie stars. (Underneath there was a bubbling crude but they didn't know it at the time). We admire their kind of faith that hears and obeys. We want it for ourselves. Unfortunately for them and for us that wasn't the end of the story. As they move into Canaan, God promises to give this land to their children (they don't have any yet), but the land isn't fabulous, it's experiencing a famine so they journey on to Egypt. The bad news there is that Abraham didn't trust God enough to tell the truth so he felt compelled to lie and pass off his wife as his sister, to save his own skin (putting her at risk with the Pharaoh who took her as *his* wife). God

is faithful even when we are not, and bails out Abraham and Sarah and they emerge in better financial shape than they arrived in.

The chapters in Genesis devoted Abraham have two prominent themes: how God acts toward Abraham and how Abraham acts toward God. **A pattern emerges: God makes promises; Abraham and Sarah have trouble believing or waiting for the promises.** God promises to make Abram a great nation, to bless him, to make his name great, to bless those who bless him and curse those who curse him, God promises to give him land, and an heir. The difficulty Abram and Sarai have is one we frequently share – **they don't believe or can't wait for God's promises so they take matters into their own hands.** When we take matters into our own hands because we know better than anyone else, including God, how to do what God wants done, we often end up making a mess. After 10 years of being promised a child and nothing happening Abram and Sarai tire of tests and empty promises so they take it upon themselves to come up with their own plan. She suggests Abram try to produce an heir for them with her Egyptian slave girl Hagar. In a telling verse (Genesis 16:2) we're told, *"And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai."* He should have been listening to God's voice at this point.

What was the consequence of Abe listening to Sarai? A child was conceived, but so was big trouble. His wife became jealous and then furious with both her husband and with Hagar who ends up running away. An angel of the Lord appears to Hagar and tells her she will bear a son she is to call Ishmael, which means *"God hears,"* because the Lord heard her cries. **Hagar and Ishmael represent the temptation we all face to trust our own powers rather than in the promise of God.**

Thirteen more years go by, still no child for Abram and Sarai and they aren't getting any younger. **Can God be trusted or not? Will God deliver on what was promised?** That brings us to today's scripture.

"When Abram was 99 years old, the Lord appeared to Abram, and said to him, "I am God Almighty; **walk before me and be blameless.** And **I will make** my covenant between me and you, and **will make** you exceedingly numerous."
Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, "As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. **No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. I will make you** exceedingly fruitful; and **I will make** nations of you, and kings shall come from you. **I will establish** my covenant between me and you,

and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. And **I give to you**, and to your offspring after you, the land where you are now an alien, all the land of Canaan, for a perpetual holding; and **I will be their God.**”

God said to Abraham, “**As for Sarah your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her**, and moreover **I will give you a son** by her. **I will bless her**, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.” Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said to himself, “*Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?*” And Abraham said to God, “*O that Ishmael might live in your sight!*” God said, “No, but your wife Sarah shall bear you a son, and you shall name him Isaac. **I will establish** my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him. As for Ishmael, I have heard you; **I will bless him** and make him fruitful and exceedingly numerous; he shall be the father of twelve princes, and **I will make him** a great nation. But **my covenant I will establish with Isaac**, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this season next year.”

Proverbs 22:1 says, “*A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches and favor is better than silver or gold.*” How many of you picked your name? Probably not too many. My Aunt Bette, who died yesterday morning, was Bette Kilham, but she chose a name for her profession in radio and television in Boston many years ago, so people knew her as “Bette Day.” Do you know how you were given your name? Sometimes we are named after other people, perhaps someone in our family or someone well known or famous. General Douglas MacArthur died in April of 1964 and my folks also liked the name Douglas so when I came along just three months later I was given the names “Douglas” and “Victor” which is both my dad’s and grandfather’s first name. Often times, there is a story behind a name. That is certainly true with many people in the Bible. Receiving a new name as Abraham and Sarah do is a sign God is setting them apart to do something special. God is consecrating them to be the ancestors of a multitude of nations and the bearers of a special relationship with God through which all people will be blessed.

If you’re God and your task was to create a whole new nation, would you begin with a 75 year old man and his barren 66 year old wife? Especially when you’ll be asking these folks to live in tents, move repeatedly, possess a land, and have more descendents than you can count? Get serious. Yet God begins with a family that is

mired in old age and barrenness, which means from a human point of view - a family with no future. **God's future is shaped through people who humanly have no future. One of the major messages of the Bible; however, is that human hopelessness doesn't necessarily have the last word.** The last word always belongs to God; whose life giving grace can overcome any obstacles, including old age and barrenness when it comes to producing a child. Abraham and Sarah were without potential, they lacked the physical ability to do what God was promising to do through them. There was no fertility clinic for them to go to, no little blue pills to take, if they were going to have a child it was going to be nothing short of miraculous. God uses a couple like this so that when God's promise is fulfilled there can be no claiming of credit for our success, the praise and the glory belong to God alone.

Like Abraham and Sarah, we are expected to hear the word of God and to believe it is true. We are also invited to walk with God and to be blameless, to live lives of integrity, trust, and faith. **As they journey on in life, Abraham and Sarah, like us, continue to learn the important lesson that faith is difficult; faith demands perseverance, obedience, and trust even when the available evidence gives reason for doubt.**

The movie we'll be watching this afternoon, *Field of Dreams*, is also about a man who hears a Voice telling him to do something that requires risk, and demands faith and trust even when the available evidence gives reason to doubt. Maybe a brief clip of Ray and Annie helps us to imagine some of the conversations Abraham and Sarah might have had. (SHOW MOVIE CLIP)

Annie: "Are you really hearing voices?"

Ray: "Just one."

Annie: "What did he say?"

Ray: "If you build it he will come."

Annie: "If you build *what*, *who* will come?"

Ray: "He didn't say."

Annie: "I hate it when that happens."

Ray: "Me too."

In the film, Ray and Annie have to be willing to trust what they do not see until it is revealed. Abraham and Sarah have to overcome the temptation to doubt the promise of a son they have not seen, and to rely on the son, Ishmael, that they already possess as an alternative to God's promise. Abraham's prays in his desperation and heartache

that Ishmael “*might live in*” God’s sight (Genesis 17:18). Agreeing to answer that prayer and to bless Ishmael reveals that God’s concern is not limited just to the descendents of Abraham and Sarah. It is also interesting to ponder that the descendents of Ishmael, the Muslims, become the enemies of the descendents of the child of God’s promise, Isaac, the Jews. God promised Abraham and Sarah they would become the ancestors of a multitude of nations and today Abraham is significant to Christians, Jews, and Muslims. God establishes a covenant, a relationship, with Abraham that has implications right down to our time.

Both Abraham and Sarah laugh when they hear that a 99 year old man and his 90 year old wife are going to have a baby. When you get right down to it, we all end up choosing what we will believe about the power of God. We can doubt God’s power, be impatient, be controlling and take matters into our own hands to manipulate people and events to make things come out the way we think they should. This rarely turns out as well as trusting in God even when it may appear illogical, crazy, or downright silly. The promise that confronts Abraham and Sarah exceeds and defies their expectations and the available evidence. God tells them to name the child they end up having, “Isaac,” which is Hebrew for “*he laughs*,” as a reminder that often the joke and the joy is on us when we trust the Lord.

Frederick Buechner sums it up well,

“Why did the two old crocks laugh? They laughed because they knew only a fool would believe that a woman with one foot in the grace was soon going to have her other foot in the maternity ward. They laughed because God expected them to believe it anyway. They laughed because God seemed to believe it. They laughed because they half believed it themselves. They laughed because laughing felt better than crying. They laughed because if by some crazy chance it just happened to come true they would really have something to laugh about, and in the meanwhile it helped keep them going.

“Sarah and her husband had had plenty of hard knocks in their time, and there were plenty more of them still to come, but at that moment when the angel told them they’d better start dipping into their old age pensions for cash to build a nursery, the reason they laughed was that it suddenly dawned on them that the wildest dreams they’d ever had hadn’t been half wild enough.”¹

¹ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1973), p. 25. *Peculiar Treasures* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1973), p. 153.

Abraham in Genesis and Ray Kinsella in *Field of Dreams* both know hearing God's voice is not easy and obeying that voice comes with some risk. Thomas a Kempis wrote in *The Imitation of Christ* (p. 95), "***Blessed are the ears that catch the pulses of the divine whisper, and give no heed to the whisperings of the world.***"

To hear God's divine whisper requires turning our attention from the shouting voices of the world as well as the doubting voices which arise from our own hearts and minds. Whose voice are you listening to? People have all kinds of ring tones on their cell phones, and song lists on their IPODS – there are all kinds of voices clamoring for our attention. There is only one voice that will give us something lasting to believe in, something eternal to look forward to, and someone we can love for a lifetime.

That voice belongs to God.