

“A Whole New World”

Genesis 17:1-7,15-16, Mark 8:31-38

Lent 2/B, March 12, 2006

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My daughter Audrey is working on a school project that has captured her imagination. She is writing a story about Katherine Meade, her paternal great grandmother. Her assignment is to imagine Katherine as a young child living in Ireland and what it might have been like to immigrate to the United States. As part of this project, Audrey had to research the meaning of her own name. She was thrilled to discover that Audrey means “noble strength” and that “Dolan” means “challenger.” As my daughter grows and matures it seems as though her names suit her well.

Names are a funny thing. One of the most agonizing decisions a parent makes during those long months of pregnancy is what name to give your child. Will it be name that has been in the family for generations? Do you painstakingly select a name that you think is *unique* (only to find out that 5 other families that year thought they were equally unique?) Do you select a name based on its meaning as if the very name has the power to affect this person’s life? What we come to realize is that after the name is given, so much is then out of our hands. We release this child to the universe, to lovingly play one role among many in the complex drama that slowly and deliberately unfolds. What is important perhaps, is those whom we invite to be part of this sacred partnership. Do we as parents trust only in each other, do we seek the wisdom of wise friends and family or do we covenant with God to collaborate in this most important adventure called parenthood?

Our reading from Genesis this morning shares a story of the importance of naming and parenthood. In this passage, God makes a covenant with Abram and Sarai—a covenant that promises to make them the parents of a “multitude of nations,” a covenant that binds them together with God, in God’s care. This covenant makes the relationship with God and God’s people permanent and lasting. As a symbol of this covenant, God does something special—God gives Abram and Sarai new names—Abraham and Sarah. God initiates a new journey with Abraham and Sarah. God promises that even in their old age, they will become parents. In fact, the name Abraham means “ancestor of a multitude.” They may have gotten a late start, but God promises to give them what they have been longing for all their lives. Abraham and Sarah have new names to mark this new time in

their lives, to mark that they are now changed—they are no longer the same people since they have had this encounter with God.

This reading from Genesis ends one verse prematurely. Verse 17 records Abraham's response to God's promise. Does anyone know how Abraham responds to this wonderful news? Yes, he laughs. I don't think it was a chuckle, giggle, or chortle. He "cracks himself up", as my kids like to say. He laughs aloud, long, and hard, in utter disbelief. His response is entirely believable. After all if you were 90 and 99 and told you were about to become parents, you would likely do the same thing. After all, biologically, this is a bigger stretch for Sarah than it might have been for Abraham. The laws of nature dictate that this was not possible. However, we are not talking about the laws of nature, but the nature of God. With God, all things are possible if we only believe, no matter how long it takes or what form the promise takes. The believing part or more appropriately, the unbelieving part is what so often gets us into trouble.

Abraham and Sarah wanted to believe God, but even they had trouble keeping a straight face. They had journeyed with God this far. They had tried to be faithful and believe, but this seemed even beyond the power of God. When Abraham began this remarkable journey with God, he was in his seventies. God promised Abraham then that he would be the father of a multitude and yet, Abraham was still waiting for an heir. You might remember that Abraham grew impatient with God, taking matters into his own hands by fathering a child with his maid, Hagar. He thought he had taken care of things and Ishmael would be his heir. However, God had other plans for Abraham and Sarah. Ishmael was not to be his heir. Isaac was to be the heir. The promised child was on his way. Here, with this giving of new names, God keeps God's promises to make Abraham "ancestor of a multitude." How God makes this happen is up to God. Our job is to trust that God *can* make it happen, no matter how far fetched or ludicrous it may sound. This is an exceedingly difficult thing to do. If it were not easy for Abraham, imagine how much more difficult it is for you or for me.

The gospel lesson this morning also deals with identity, though in a less explicit way than the Hebrew text. Right before this passage in Mark, Peter has identified Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah, for the first time. Jesus had been asking Peter who do people say that I am? In other words, how do people name me, what do they call me, what do I mean to people? Peter tells them that people say that he is John the Baptist, or Elijah or one of the

prophets. That is all very interesting to Jesus, but he wants to know what his disciples think. People, who do not know him as Peter does, can not name him. None of them hit the mark. However, Peter gets it right when he calls Jesus the Messiah. Peter's answer shows that he knows Jesus, in deeper ways than are always obvious to the others.

In the passage we heard this morning, Jesus tells the disciples that being the Messiah means he must suffer and die, and that on the third day he will rise from the dead. This is too much for Peter to bear. His concept of Messiah and Jesus' clearly do not match. The Messiah is not supposed to suffer and die a horrible death. He wants Jesus to take it back, say it isn't so. Then Jesus speaks harshly to Peter, calling him the devil. Jesus tries to impress upon the disciples that the title Messiah is not simply a word—it is a title that indicates the path that Jesus must follow. If they are to be his disciples, his followers, it is the path they must take as well.

Names are powerful and not something to be taken lightly. Messiah means something, even if we living into that name makes us uncomfortable. Abraham means something even if we don't understand how it is that he will live the promise of his name. Christian means something even when it seems impossible for us to know exactly how to fulfill the expectations that come with such a name. Names are not inconsequential. Names can be life affirming or damning. Names can empower or condemn. Even if someone else chooses your name, even the name Christian, you have the freedom to live into that identity, to accept it for yourself, to willingly seek God's will to shape or reshape your life into something new. Abraham received one identity and then, through his love, courage, and fidelity, had that identity transformed into something new.

No matter what name we have been given, God gives us an identity beyond all other names. God knows us as "Beloved," and "child of God." That alone is a firm foundation upon which all other relationships are formed. That alone should empower us to face life's challenges, the unexpected surprises that are uniquely ours. You are God's beloved. God will be with you no matter where you go, no matter what you do, no matter what you know or fail to know, see or fail to see. You are whole, loved and cherished no matter what illness or troubles befall you. Like all good parents, however, that does not mean that God will let you or me off the hook. God will keep nudging us. God will keep drawing us back and pushing us to reexamine the things that make us uncomfortable, the things we want to

ignore or avoid. God will open our eyes and help us to see things as God sees them instead of the ways the world sees them.

We have something in common with Abraham and Peter. We practice what one preacher calls a “fill in the blank discipleship.” Both Abraham and Peter take matters into their own hands when they could not quite fathom the will of God. When we don’t understand God’s ways, we are prone to fill in the blanks with our own ways. However, we quickly discover this will not do. Thankfully, God is patient and keeps God’s promises, in God’s times and as God desires. It is sometimes not until we are in crisis, when we are desperate and have no place else to turn that we muster the courage to speak the truth that has kept us imprisoned. When we are faithful and put our trust in God, God will provide.

Many years ago, a group of people from this congregation had such an experience. Members of their family were suffering in silence from something people were reluctant to speak of at the time. Nearly 30 years ago, mental illness was not something people spoke openly about. People didn’t understand it, didn’t want to talk about it, hoped that it would never affect their family. However, it came to affect several families at South Church and they needed a place to talk about it. They found friendship and comfort here and thanks to the love and compassion of their pastor, a support group was born. Over time, that group grew into something much more. Today we honor and celebrate our long-standing partnership with the Inter Community Mental Health Group. A few families’ courage to name the unnamable, to speak the unspeakable has grown into a ministry that has helped thousands of people through the years. What was once a stigma hopefully is no more, because people had the courage to name their truth, and know that their illness does not define them.

That is what it means to take up your cross and follow. In the midst of profound pain and confusion, those first families trusted that God was with them and that God would make a way out of their darkness. They were not certain of where the journey would take them, yet they had the courage and faith to follow. They knew that if they did not speak and did not reach out to one another, they would remain trapped. Their way has become a life giving way for so many others who have struggled.

Jesus says “take up your cross and follow me.” When you follow, Jesus says be prepared to lose your life in the process, to have your whole self

transformed into the likeness of Jesus. The writer, Darrel Gruder in his book *The Continuing Conversion of the Church*, offers this advice about discipleship. He says, “the gospel which meets my needs must be replaced with the good news that reveals needs I did not know I had while providing healing I never dreamed was possible.” It is possible, as Abraham and Sarah discovered, as Christ’s disciples discover, as members of South Church discovered, when we resist the temptation to be “fill in the blank” disciples and allow God to be God in our lives, now and always. May it be so! Amen

## Assurance of Grace

God does not define us by our past, but by our futures.

We will try to do this, too.

God does not define us by our mistakes, but by our potential.

We will try to do this, too.

God does not define us by our problems, but by our depth.

We will try to do this, too.

God has given us a new name: "Forgiven." Amen