

**Re-naming**  
Menno Mennonite Church  
February 21, 2021  
Lent 2, Year B

**Purpose:** To claim the identity and presence that God's covenant creates for us, within us.

**Message:** As followers of Christ, we are invited, time and again, into the newness of covenant, moving ever deeper.

**Scripture:** Genesis 17:1-7; 15-16; Mark 8:31-38 (Secondary text, reading TBD)

**Synopsis:** We credit the great figure of faith with super human qualities, making them far beyond the mere mortals that they were. Righteousness, faithfulness, and the surety displayed by those of the bible seem out of reach for the more mortal likes of us in our time and our places. Yet he fails this test time and again. What's more, he begins believing the worst of himself, of God along the way, taking in deeply the doubts he has. Into this context, God demonstrates repeated faithfulness to the covenant, offering a new name—a new start—to accomplish that which was promised.

[evernote:///view/31369896/s249/846540b6-0b2a-4f86-ae7a-a90f32a79f13/2c0e829c-0ff5-4023-bfa0-a4ebb1ad1a14](https://evernote:///view/31369896/s249/846540b6-0b2a-4f86-ae7a-a90f32a79f13/2c0e829c-0ff5-4023-bfa0-a4ebb1ad1a14)

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to him and said, "I am God Almighty; walk before me faithfully and be blameless.

<sup>2</sup> Then I will make my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers."

<sup>3</sup> Abram fell facedown, and God said to him,

<sup>4</sup> "As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations.

<sup>5</sup> No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations.

<sup>6</sup> I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you.

<sup>7</sup> 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.

<sup>15</sup> God also said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you are no longer to call her Sarai; her name will be Sarah.

<sup>16</sup> I will bless her and will surely give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she will be the mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her."

<sup>17</sup> Abraham fell facedown; he laughed and said to himself, "Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?"

(Gen 17:1-17 NIV)

Genesis 17:1–18 (Tanakh)

<sup>1</sup>When Abram was ninety-nine years old,  
the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him,  
“I am El Shaddai.  
Walk in My ways and be blameless.

<sup>2</sup>I will establish My covenant between Me and you,  
and I will make you exceedingly numerous.”

<sup>3</sup>Abram threw himself on his face;  
and God spoke to him further,

<sup>4</sup>“As for Me, this is My covenant with you:  
You shall be the father of a multitude of nations.

<sup>5</sup>And you shall no longer be called Abram,  
but your name shall be Abraham,  
for I make you the father of a multitude of nations.

<sup>6</sup>I will make you exceedingly fertile,  
and make nations of you;  
and kings shall come forth from you.

<sup>7</sup>I will maintain My covenant between Me and you,  
and your offspring to come,  
as an everlasting covenant throughout the ages,  
to be God to you and to your offspring to come.

<sup>15</sup>And God said to Abraham,

“As for your wife Sarai,  
you shall not call her Sarai,  
but her name shall be Sarah.

<sup>16</sup>I will bless her;  
indeed, I will give you a son by her.

I will bless her so that she shall give rise to nations;  
rulers of peoples shall issue from her.”

<sup>17</sup>Abraham threw himself on his face and laughed,  
as he said to himself,

“Can a child be born to a man a hundred years old,  
or can Sarah bear a child at ninety?”

This is not the first time Abram talks to God, nor that God talk to Abram. This is not the first time that he had been presented with the singularly shock presence of El Shaddai—the Lord God almighty, and lived to tell about it. They have been down this road before with a fairly similar message: you shall be made the ancestor to many nations; more uncountable than the stars of the Sky. Abram had heard it all before. So you might excuse the fairly informal tone that is going on here.

The first encounter was a fairly simple request: get up and take all that you have and go to a land that I will show you. Do this and you will be blessed. So he does it. Years pass. Miles pass. And God leads him to a land occupied by a powerful people and saying ‘No, no, Abram, I will make you a great nation, and this too will be yours in time.’ This is the third time that YHWH has spoken to Abram and you would think that the message would be getting a bit weak by now. It has been decades since God said anything to anyone about being the father of nations, which of course has to begin with being a father at all. By now Abram is beginning to wonder if the whole thing—as well as it has gone—hasn’t gone a bit too far and a bit metaphorical by now? Abram has gone along with the story, is left with an impossible task to fulfill an impossible promise, so in a moment like that how can you not help but roll on the floor laughing. Nice try God, but seriously, really? We have already made the contingency plan of Ishmael; that can work, can’t it? You can hardly blame him if he is feeling that he is being made a fool of, and that this name of father that he had long desired was never going to appear.

We all know the playground ditty: Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me. Or, in eighties language “I’m rubber and you are glue: what ever you call me bounces off and sticks to you.” It is really too bad that these bromides don’t actually work. Names can and do hurt, even with be best self confidence. We might be able to shrug things off a time or two and keep on going, but sooner or later the corrosive impact takes hold. More insidious are the names we give ourselves. The mind altering power that they have is even more consequential. Case in point is the mystical power of how we understand our bodies. Time and again, studies have shown that people invited to draw their own body image and compare it to an honest tracing of themselves get it wrong—often times 2 or more times their actual size. Given the choice between reality and the moniker that they hold in their heads, they will almost always go with what they think over what they know. Of course it can go the other way; I never like the mirror telling me that I am not the same shape I was 15 years ago. The names we take

for ourselves become the realities into which we live, and often there is little light, little hope and rare promise once we have adopted a name for what we think we are.

I think this is what is eating Abram here. He had believed God, sure. He had jumped in and followed God, and done pretty well for it. But now he has taken names for himself and for Sarai. Abram the childless; Sarai the barren. Believing those names together they reach out and try to make things right and beget Ishmael. Close, God says, but still not what I had in mind. As faithful as Abram is and consistently as they have followed, they have always found the best way to follow and make things right. But now God says: 100 and 90 will make a child who will bless everyone. The impossible will happen and the world will be better for it. And all they could do is laugh at the prospect.

They reach this point because they forget that it is not their name, their ability with which they are dealing. They had forgotten that theirs is not the primary portion of covenant; instead it was God's covenant and God's portion within it that would hold sway. Their names, their efforts, were not the point. What was really important was the working of God in the scenario beyond the names that they had given themselves. What's more, it is God's knowing and naming of those with whom the covenant is made—really knowing them, really understanding them—that gives the power even to override the body-deep despair of an old couple on their last legs. These people weren't barren, weren't impotent—they were just extraordinarily late bloomers. They were just waiting for the time to be ripe. The covenant of God that seemed abandoned, seemed broken, seemed laughably out of touch with reality could not be broken, remained full of promise and hope, and ended up defining reality and life not just for Abram and Sarai, but for the world as a whole. God gives these faithful ones new names because their old names, and the baggage that went with them had to be let go before the next chapter could begin, no matter how ludicrous it might sound along the way. They had been living in them, and seeing the world through the lenses that those names of experiences provided that they could not imagine something new, even if it was the same old covenant that they have heard time and again.

How easy it is to take on names for ourselves. Names that are not ours, yet they are what we live through. We see the world through the definitions of others, and the expectations of ourselves and slowly but surely it becomes our truth; our reality. This is true for individuals, it is true for groups. If we think of ourselves as only a tiny church, with the baggage that holds, then

we are going to think tiny thoughts. Not that size doesn't matter, but it is not the only way to think about the work of the church. Especially when the church is not ours in the first place. Individually, we can carry our names—shameful, lazy, broken, not good enough, incomplete—and wear them as badges of identity.

But here is what I want you to hear today above all else: God knows who you really are and that is GOOD news, not bad. For God knows us and calls us by the only name that is ever truly relevant, or fully impactful: Beloved child whom I love. God comes and renames us, all of us in this room and beyond, and names as holy what we presume is dirty. God makes worthwhile all that the world would name worthless. God comes in love and hope and promise and names us again, reminding us that when God comes in covenant love, that never changes.

I think that can be one of the greatest challenges of faith: to take up the name we are now given. It is hard to take on our names when we are far more given to only protesting meekly: “Surely not I Lord.” YHWH re-names all of us, even when we do not take that name as our own, even when we fail to live up to the name that we have been given, even when we fail to see that which God sees within us—the very spark of the God's creative power active and at work in our lives, in our world, the covenant of God's blessing being lived out each and every day as God names our world into being, and names us beloved children.

One of my favorite movies is *The Princess Bride*. It is a fairy tale off the rails from the eighties and a cult classic of sorts around. One of the main characters is a swordsman whose whole reason in life is seeking revenge against the man who killed his father—part of an ongoing quest of his for as long as he can remember. As the movie winds up, his opportunity comes to confront the villain in a classic chase where he is cut down just short of his goal. As his enemy stands over him taunting him, he remembers his long standing plan to find this man and introduce himself with the greeting: “Hello, my name is Inigo Montoya. You killed my father. Prepare to die.” As he remembers this name, and keeps saying it over and over, his strength is found and he is able to rise to the occasion and defeat his enemy, drawing strength from this basic knowing of who he was and his purpose, even if it is one bent to revenge. Not the most pacifistic sermon illustrations, I will grant you, but stay with me here.

I wonder what it might be like were we to take a similar approach to our truest names. That we are children of covenant, and heirs to the working of God with us? What would it be like, I wonder, to be able to proceed into life with the drone in our ears to be one of claiming that

identity time and again: “I am a child of God; I am a child of God; I am a child of God, and what’s more, so too are you.

I think we get lost in the grand narrative of the single hero of Abram as the untouchable person of faith. But in the end, there is much about this story that is about us. The covenant of a great nation is defined much more by the failures of covenant keeping in the world than by the success we have in getting it right. God changes Sarai and Abram’s names, and opens up a future that they could barely imagine. This is the future, promised them, that embraces us today. We are participating in the transformation of the kingdom, and we are invited into our true names, our full identity. Those barren at the beginning are fruitful at the end. Those abandoned have become cared for. Those displaced have become royal. Those alone have come to covenant.. We are invited to lay aside the names we take to ourselves, and step into the true identity, being named as God knows us and God names us. May we each be given new names as we remember both who we are and to whom we belong, always, in God’s covenant of Love.