

Back in the days of Jesus, names were given as descriptions of character, past events, and hopeful future aspirations. These meaningful names can be seen from as far back as Abraham and Sarah (father of multitudes and princess), and even Adam and Eve (Adam shares the same root as *adama* = *rich fertile earth*) and Eve (1<sup>st</sup>).

We know that Isaac's name means *laughter*, because Sara laughed at the prospect of pregnancy at her age, and Jacob's name was changed from "*the usurper*" to Israel, which means "*wrestled with God*." Even Jesus' name – foretold to Mary by the angel – means *Yahweh is salvation* – this name share the same root – Yeshuah - as Joshua and Hosea – both Old Testament heroes.

Hebrew literature is full of these kinds of names! Some familiar strong women in the Bible, like Esther, Susannah, Ruth, Jael, and Tamar have beautiful names that give testimony to their character and contributions. Esther means *star*, Susannah means *lily*, Ruth means *compassionate*, Jael means *strength of God*, and Tamar is a *sweet-smelling spice*. These are shrewd and strong women who break stereotypical roles and are participants of bringing forth God's justice.

But in today's scripture one character is distinctly not named – at least, not until the very end.

Let's hear the story

<sup>NRS</sup> **Luke 13:10**

Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath.

And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight.

When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said,  
"Woman, you are set free from your ailment."

When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God.

But the leader of the synagogue,  
indignant because Jesus had cured on the Sabbath,  
kept saying to the crowd,  
"There are six days on which work ought to be done;  
come on those days and be cured,  
and not on the Sabbath day."

But the Lord answered him and said,  
"You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the  
Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the  
manger, and lead it away to give it water?

And ought not this woman, a daughter of  
Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long  
years, be set free from this bondage on the  
Sabbath day?"

When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing.

Today's story of the healing of an unnamed daughter of Abraham is often overlooked when held together with all the other amazing characters and stories in the Bible. In some Bibles she is identified as "the bent woman." How would you like to be immortalized in Scripture that way? She was bent over, had been bent over, staring at the ground, back terribly contorted, for many, many years.

When they saw her, creeping down the street, body bent, eyes attempting to lift up from the ground, they probably said, "Here comes that bent woman, the crippled woman" They didn't say "Here comes Susannah," or "Look, its Tamar." instead of "star" or "compassionate" or even "laughter."

The woman doesn't have a name, other than the one given to her by the town, a name based upon her disability. She doesn't have an identity other than that of a victim. She doesn't have a family, it seems, no occupation, nothing other than her deformity. No name meaning laughter, compassionate or star; but crippled, bent over into herself.

So, the bent woman, the crippled woman just appears there in the crowd. The gospel writer portrays her almost as a passive object – almost as if her physical weakness had drained her of all other action.

And why wouldn't she be passive. It seemed as if she'd been given a huge blow – 18 years, it says she had been living with a spirit that had crippled her. Subsequently she was bent over into herself. We do not know whether this was a physical ailment or a mental illness – possibly a combination of both – each brought on by a bit of the other. Either way it doesn't lessen the pain or the isolation that she must have felt.

I think it's easy to overlook the power of medicines and nutrition in today's world. We rarely see scurvy today because most people eat just enough fruit to get by. Likewise, dairy, protein and even carbohydrates are commonplace and easy to get – even if the end results lead to bigger bellies and tighter pants. When I have a headache, I take 2 Advil and drink two or three glasses of water and 2 cups of coffee. When my stomach is upset – Pepto Bismol. We take antibiotics, calcium, anti-depressants, blood pressure medication, hormone treatments and what not else, and still we manage to be sick.

This woman – this woman who was suffering from a crippling spirit for eighteen years had nothing – no pills to swallow, physiotherapy, and no disability insurance. She lived in a day where any kind of physical or mental ailment would isolate you from the rest of the people in town. She could not do all the things that others around her could do and her welfare was probably taking a toll on her family – sons, uncles, husbands, fathers, or cousins – whoever it was that was head of the household at the time. She probably learned early in her illness not to make a fuss but be grateful for the help that she was given out of pity.

Back then, and today too, people asked "Remember what so and so, or so and so's parents did – remember that sin that caused them to be struck with such a punishment."

We might hear it as, "What have I done to deserve this!" and "I should have..." Or even, "serves them right..." or "You are what you eat."

These phrases, if said too often, and believed too often lead to shame. So, not only was the woman bent over, in possible mental and physical pain, but also probably seen as a burden by her family and ashamed that she could do nothing about it. What a burden to bear alone.

But Jesus sees her and has pity on her – but not a “poor thing – lets ignore her and maybe she’ll go away” kind of pity, but more of a “oh, that poor woman. I can, with the power of God, heal her.”

And then Jesus spoke to her and touched her. He called her over and said, “You are set free” – not, “you are now set free,” or “you will be set free”, but “you ARE set free” (the Greek makes that sentence in perfect tense – for all you linguistical scholars – that means it’s tense is both past and present). What does this mean? Jesus’ proclamation of the woman's freedom refers to a status of being healed that already exists: “by being in the midst of the process of being set free you are set free.”

Confusing? Yes. But we can also think this way when we think of the Realm of God, “the Kingdom is coming, the Kingdom is now! Your kingdom come and God’s kingdom is now and not yet.”

She stands up straight. Even if her back had not been healed by Jesus, I think she would now have stood up straight.

Now, bear with me a stretch because this is where we bring up the context of Jesus’ healing.

Jesus healed her on the Sabbath and the synagogue leader was having nothing of it. After all, what is the Sabbath for? But to rest with family, worship God and practice gratitude. He, the leader of the synagogue, told the crowd that the six days for work – not the Sabbath - are the days when they should look for healing.

But the Jesus answered him and said,  
"You hypocrites!

Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger,  
and lead it away to give it water?

And ought not this woman,  
a daughter of Abraham  
whom Satan bound for eighteen long years,  
be set free from this bondage on the Sabbath day?"

No, Jesus isn’t comparing her to the ox or donkey – but in a way he is. You see, exceptions to Sabbath rest can be made in animal husbandry – after all, they’re useful animals. But by saying she ought not be healed on Sabbath is like saying she is worth less than these farm animals.

And healing...well, healing anyone is a bit edgy. Healing...freeing others from bondage – that breaks the social rules – rules disguised as religious laws. Now she is healed, now she is useful, now she has rights, now she is part of the family again. Now everyone has to figure out again how she fits in – and maybe see how they’ve been treating her – and, well, changing how you think about someone...that’s just too much work.

But Jesus saw her worth. “[Jesus] does not call her disabled, or hindered, or a victim of life’s unfairness. Rather, Jesus calls her – no re-names her as part of the great drama of God’s redemption. “a daughter of Abraham (Yamasaki, Remember, p. 87).

Remember, Abraham was the one to whom, God promised to make a great nation, a nation through which all the nations of the earth would be blessed.

As a daughter of Abraham, she is called to be a blessing to the whole world. She is meant for more than superficial, cruel, limiting labelling. She is part of God's great salvation of the whole world.

By renaming her, Jesus is placing her within the covenant God has with the descendants of Abraham; she is an heir to the blessings of God. She is NOW a part of the family. April Yamasaki says that when Jesus healed the woman, he broke her isolation and brought her back into the community. (Remember, Yamasaki, 87) Her healing – being able to stand straight – with dignity – renewed within the community – is, thus, a direct result of being touched by Jesus – the reminder of God's covenant with us.

Let's, therefore remember her, not as just one more sad victim, not as the woman with a bent back, but as a daughter of Abraham who praises God for healing, who praises God for reminding her of the blessing that is hers, and for reconciling her to her community.

Like this daughter of Abraham, the present-day injustices in our lives can be transformed into new creations. It is a journey of growth and all the old has passed away. With Christ we are a new creation.

Today, I am more aware than ever that God is calling out to us – some of us are the daughter of Abraham – newly named and claimed - and some of us are the synagogue leader – reluctant to reclaim that which was lost. Either way, Jesus is working with us and within us to bring forth the kingdom of God...a new creation.

If we are a new creation, should we not also have a new name like this daughter of Abraham? Our new name should be one that describes us – our character, past events, and future aspirations – one that holds on to the promise that God is for us.

God's name for you is not the names that the world gives you. NO. We are children of the Most High. Perhaps your name is "forgives others" or "brings joy to every room she enters." Maybe it is "speaks the truth" or "exudes joy." Perhaps your name is "prays for others" or perhaps it's "learns something new every week". Perhaps it is "Works hard" or even "Pure of heart." Whatever your new name is, I pray that it is one of hope, of real-life pains and joy that comes from being part of the promise God has for us.

Stand up straight, embrace your new new, praise God!