

“A New Name and a New Identity”

Date: February 28, 2021

Place: Lakewood UMC

Occasion: Lent 2, Year B

Theme: Transformation

Texts: Genesis 17:1-10, 15-19; Mark 8:31-38

Three-year old Ryan and his five-year old sister Lisa were playing on the floor after dinner one night. The adults were trying to have a conversation. Lisa opened her toy nurse’s kit and convinced Ryan to be her patient. She took the toy stethoscope and placed it on her brother’s heart and listened intently as nurses do.

Suddenly she announced, “I hear somebody walking around in there.” The adults smiled at this, but Ryan matter-of-factly said, “Why that must be Jesus.” Well, that’s cute. He had obviously heard the adults around him talking about having Jesus in their hearts.

To all who claim to have had a spiritual awakening, or as some call it the born-again experience, this is the reality. The spirit of Jesus is in us, making us new people. Not all who claim to be Christian have had this experience, but to many, Jesus *is* an active presence in their life, continually at work transforming them.

On this second Sunday of Lent we want to explore this experience of change and transformation. We begin by looking to the Old Testament. When God came to Abram, God made a covenant with him, asking him to become a new person and to change direction in his life.

Did you notice? God didn’t come to Abram when he was 25; God came to Abram when he was in his nineties. Advanced age has never been an excuse God would accept. God was calling Abram to leave his identity as a shepherd and become a leader, a leader of God’s people. He would become the father of many nations. His destiny is God-given.

Though advanced in years he was not to be content by looking back; he is to be focused on the future. And as a sign of his new identity, Abram is given a new name; from then on he shall be known as Abraham.

A new name and a new identity. My, my! Is it possible to teach an old dog new tricks? Or, to phrase the question differently, can people actually change? Can we continue to learn, grow and change?

According to the gospel, the answer is a definite “Yes!” People can change. The truth is no one is ever too old to change. The body may reach a point where it is no longer able to rejuvenate itself. But the mind and spirit can always be renewed, even till the day we die.

O how wonderful this news is. People **can** change! The mysterious grace of God can change even the most unyielding, frozen human hearts. God can do miracles, especially when it comes to the human spirit.

Now Abraham is cited in both the Old and New Testament as a model of what it means to be *a man of faith*. What was it about him that so exemplifies faith? What can we learn from this senior citizen?

Well, Abraham left the familiar for the unfamiliar, trusting in God, which is simply another name for faith. Abraham left the familiar for the unfamiliar, trusting in God. God’s promise to him required that he realign his life and journey into the wilderness. Devoted to God, Abraham does what is asked of him, leaving the familiar for the unfamiliar.

This is what faith looks like. It’s being able to say, “OK, God, you know what’s best for me, you run my life now. You’re God, not me. You decide what’s best and what’s right for me. And I will surrender my life to you – my will, my choices, my desires. God, I don’t know what’s ahead, but I’m trusting in your goodness. Lord, this is kind of scary, but I trust you.”

Do you see what’s happening here? You’re stepping out in faith and

trusting God with the future. You're willing to leave the familiar (when you're in charge) to travel into the unfamiliar (when God is in charge). This is unfamiliar territory for most of us.

But this is the essence of faith, trusting God in times of unfamiliarity, when we don't have all the answers. Surely that is a description of the times we're living in. We don't have all the answers – when will the pandemic be over? When will there be an end to racial injustice? When will there be an end to poverty and homelessness, war and violence? What lies ahead for us?

Surely this is unfamiliar territory. I can certainly identify with Abraham. Living in times of uncertainty certainly calls upon our faith, our deep trust in God to lead us and to show us the way into the future.

In the Gospel lesson we hear these words from Jesus: If anyone would come after me, let him or her deny herself, take up their cross and follow me. For whoever will save their life will lose it and whoever loses their life for my sake will save it.”

Jesus is asking us to leave our old identities behind; dying to self in order to rise in Christ. Such a willingness to trust gives us a new identity; we no longer belong to ourselves, we belong to God. Such a deep trust to be able to let go of our egos and everything we hold dear is a kind of dying. We surrender our will by simply praying, “Thy will be done, not mine.”

When we focus only on ourselves we lose sight of God's plan and we lose sight of the others around us. I've heard this little moniker, “At the center of the word sin is the letter “I.” Reminding us that when we focus too much on *me*, *I*, *mine*, we are leaning into sin.

Jesus died on the cross for the forgiveness of sin, but calls us to take up our own cross, allowing sin to die. We leave the old life behind and take

on a new life in Christ. So listen, when talking about sin, Jesus didn't beat people over the head with how bad they were. Instead he was more likely to say, "Your sins are forgiven. Judge not. Take heart. Be free. Rise up and walk."

His message was always one of new life and new hope. Everything about him said, "Friend of sinners." Jesus was and is a friend to those who wonder if they have any value or worth. His message and his actions loudly proclaimed, "You matter to me, and you matter to God. I'm here to set you free."

We began this morning by asking if it was possible for people to change. Jesus surely believed it. But he didn't begin by reminding people of their mistakes or their shortcomings. There is an old Scandinavian proverb which says, "In every person there lives a hero. If you speak to the hero, the hero will come forth."

That is exactly what Jesus did. When he tells people to deny themselves and take up their cross, Jesus is calling to the hero in each of us. He is calling to that part of us which is even better than we know. There is a praise song called "Mercy Saw Me." I want to share with you the beautiful refrain to this song:

"Beautiful, that's how mercy saw me,
Though I was broken and so lost,
Mercy looked past all my faults;
The justice of God saw what I had done,
But mercy saw me through the Son,
Not what I was, but what I could be,
That's how mercy saw me."

God can change lives. God surely can and God surely does. God calls to the hero in each of us, calling forth the best of who we are, giving us a new name and a new identity. Thanks be to God. Amen.