



## “Old Promises and New Names”

Text: Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

*a sermon by Kevin Fleming*

February 25, 2018

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

There is nothing quite like the conversations that take place regarding the name of a baby that is to be born. Never have more suggestions been offered – solicited or not – on any subject. Tell people that you are expecting a baby and all kinds of ideas pour in about what you should – and even what you should not – name the new child.

There are always the suggestions that draw on family heritage. Names of long dead ancestors are revived and offered as possibilities. Trendy names are offered with suggestions for immediately creating a nickname. One might wonder why name a child by a name you don't intend to use. Some go immediately to the pages of Scripture in search of ideas. We did that. It's hard enough finding one name, let alone three. There was a moment when we considered naming our girls “Lot's Wife,” “The Widow of Nain,” and “The Other Mary,” but we figured they would never be able to find personalized chachkas at the vacation spots, so we went in another direction.

There was a study many years ago that offered the observation that people who like their names have a better outlook than those who don't like their names. It's a conclusion that tends to make sense. I suppose that's why some people abruptly change their names and some go so far as to legally change their names.

There was a tradition in some Indigenous American tribes to wait to name a child until something happened that might portend what a child's life might be. The story is told of the great Shawnee warrior and chief, Tecumseh. A few nights after his birth, a comet streaked across the sky in southwest Ohio, near Dayton, where he was born. The name “Tecumseh” means “shooting star” or “panther in the sky.”

So, names are important. That's true in the pages of Scripture as well. Names have meaning and often describe the person. Mary's son is given the name Yeshua - Joshua - Jesus - because "he will save his people," which is what the name means. Elizabeth's son is named John, not because anyone in his family ever bore the name, but because it was given to Elizabeth by the angel. Simon became Peter. Saul became Paul.

In the pages of Genesis, we read the story of Abram - Avram, if you prefer, and his wife Sarai. Wait, you say. That's not their names. But they were their names. But because of an old promise, they were given new names.

There is an enormous change when we go from Genesis 11 to Genesis 12. Up until the 12<sup>th</sup> chapter of Genesis, we are in writings that are about "pre-history." Strange stories of equally strange happenings are recorded and we are under no obligation to read this material as a record of actual happenings.

But when you get to the 12<sup>th</sup> chapter of Genesis, there is a remarkable change. Now, we are grounding the story of God and God's people on far more solid ground. God speaks to a fellow from Ur of the Chaldees named Abram.

Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, I will bless you, and I will make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. (Genesis 12:1-3)

God chose Abram and promised Abram that God would make more of him than he could imagine. God is offering Abram a covenant - a special relationship - a connection with God that is grounded in God's promise of presence and blessing.

To accept this covenant from God will not be easy for Abram and his wife Sarai. As Walter Brueggemann tells us, "The speech of God to this barren family, then, is a call to abandonment, renunciation, and relinquishment. It is a call for a dangerous departure from the presumed world of norms and security." To be sure, they have God's promise. But the world around them, their family, their friends, anyone who knows them, will most likely think them mad. Abram was 75-years old and Sarai was 66. A little long in the tooth to be taking on such an adventure and, even more, a little past the time when parenthood is a possibility, but there they were and they listened to and obeyed the Word of the Lord. Their trust was in God.

When you read Abram and Sarai's full story, you see that, over and over again, God reiterates the promise. Again and again, God reminds them of God's covenant. Even when they pull some pretty bone-headed moves and even when they take matters into their own hands to help the promise come true, God doesn't abandon them or withdraw the covenant.

When you get to our passage for today, 24 years have passed since God first spoke to Abram. Abram is now 99-years old and Sarai is 90. Once again, God speaks to the barrenness of Abram and Sarai. God said:

“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...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...As for Sarai 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.”

God's promise has not changed over the 25 years that Abram and Sarai have kept faith with God. God promises to do what God has always promised to do: to make of them a great nation, to give them offspring that will outnumber the number of stars in the sky, to bless the families of the earth through them.

What changes is their names. Abram becomes Abraham and Sarai becomes Sarah. Abram meant “exalted father,” something of a cruel irony for a fellow who had made it to 86-years old before having a child named Ishmael. But now, Abram would become Abraham - “the father of nations.” Sarai would no longer be known as “quarrelsome” or “contentious,” as her name implies, but would be known as Sarah, “princess” or “noble woman.”

God's promise remained the same and God was faithful to the covenant. Abraham and Sarah were new people, called to new life, called to a new purpose. A baby was born, named Isaac, which means “giggles,” because Sarah giggled at the thought of being a mother. To Isaac was born Jacob, whose name was changed to Israel because he has struggled with God. to Jacob was born twelve sons, and to those twelve many more children, until they became a nation so great, that while in exile in Egypt, the Egyptians worried they might try to take over. God's promise was kept and continues to be kept. When God makes a covenant, God keeps the covenant.

When we embrace the covenant that God offers us, we have a new name as well.

Have you ever noticed that when a child, or a young person, or an adult is baptized, we don't use the last name? I was not baptized Kevin Scott Fleming. I was baptized Kevin Scott. And then I was called "child of the covenant." The implication is that we have a new name and that name is Child of God.

When you travel over to the Book of Revelation, there is an interesting passage. In the second chapter, in the letter to the church in Pergamum, we read: "To everyone who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give a white stone, and on that white stone is written a new name that no one knows except the one who receives it." (Revelation 2:17b)

The promises of God are unchanging. When God makes a covenant, God keeps the covenant. When we embrace the covenant God offers, we are changed – changed right down to our names.

The promises remain the same. Only the names change.

The promises go on. For now and evermore. Amen.

---

1.) Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, p. 118



609 South East Second Street  
Evansville, IN 47713  
(812) 423-6297  
[www.firstpresevansville.com](http://www.firstpresevansville.com)

First Presbyterian Church  
is a partner congregation with  
the Covenant Network  
of Presbyterians.

