

Green Hill Presbyterian Church
“A New Name”
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Lent 2—February 25, 2018

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

I suspect that many people do not recognize the name of Jorge Mario Bergoglio. It likely won't help for you to know that at one point in his life he worked as a nightclub bouncer and a janitor sweeping floors. He also was a chemical technologist. Then he felt a call to service in the church and was ordained a priest. He became an Archbishop, then a Cardinal and now he is the pope. Most of us don't recognize his name Jorge, because when he was elected pope, he chose a new name: Francis, following in the example of Saint Francis of Assisi.

As we walk through this season of Lent, this season of reflection and repentance, of focusing on the cross and suffering of Jesus, and the crosses and suffering of God's people today, I want to reflect upon the new names and the new realities that we are given as children of God and followers of Jesus Christ. We have new names ourselves.

Those names actually go back a long way. Ours names are not only Tom and Bruce and Jane and Jason and Denise and Amy and Roberts and Daurice and Jean and Agnes. There are other names that go further back, all the way to the story we've read today from Genesis. Our true names can be found there.

Abram and Sarai were given a promise from God. It was a promise of land, a promise of greatness, a promise of blessing, a promise of reward, and a promise of descendants as numerous as the stars in heaven but Sarai bore Abram no children. Since that day when God first came calling, Abram and Sarai had likely picked up new names, hurtful names, names like forgotten, broken promise, barren, failure, mistake. For nearly twenty-five years, Sarai and Abram had lived with the promise unfulfilled. They had a dream and they also had a painful reality and that is the context of our story today. Abram was ninety-nine years old, not quite as old as Miss Kendall, but not far behind, when God came calling again and renewed the promise and this time gave him a new name.

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him, “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...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.”

The name Abraham literally means ancestor of a multitude. Sarai becomes Sarah and even God has a new name in this story. Here in Genesis 17 we encounter the very first use of the Hebrew term *El Shaddai*, translated as God Almighty or God of the Mountains. Everyone gets a new name, a name that is reflective of God's everlasting covenant. Who are you? You are a child of Sarah and Abraham.

Back when we were baptized, we were given a new name: child of God, disciple of Jesus, beloved. Along the way, a great many forces will try to give you other names, like the names Sarah and Abraham most likely were given before they discovered the promise fulfilled: forgotten, barren, mistaken, failure, loser, but those are not the names God gives. We are given a new name and with that name comes a new reality, a new purpose. You are God's child. You are beloved. You are part of God's covenant. That is who you are. In this Lenten season, we are called to claim our identity as children of God, children of Abraham

and Sarah, followers of Jesus who are called to share our identity with God's other children, God's other beloved, who may not yet realize who they really are. Go into the world and share the news with others, that they are not who they think they are, they are not the hard names they are sometimes called. They are Sarah's children. They are Abraham's offspring. They are people of God's covenant. They are of unimaginable worth. Taking up our crosses, is not so much beating ourselves up, or spending all our time focused on how bad we are, miserable offenders. Perhaps taking up our crosses involves living a life for the sake of others, that they too might know their true identity.

I thought of this special call to share the real name we all carry, our God given name, the name beloved child of God, when I rediscovered a story about a woman named Antoinette Tuff. She was a school clerk at the Ronald E. McNair Discovery Learning Academy in Decatur, Georgia. Back in 2013, Michael Brandon Hill walked into the office of that school one day armed to the teeth. He told Tuff that he had no reason to live and was going to die that day. Tuff saw Hill as a hurting young man, and she responded by engaging him in conversation. "I just started praying for him, I just started talking to him. I just kept trying to talk him down," she said, "and let him know I knew how he was feeling."

She told him about how her marriage fell apart after thirty-three years and the 'roller coaster' of opening her own business and she let him know what was going on with her and that it would be OK. And then she "let him know that he could just give himself up. "I told him to put [the guns] on the table, empty his pockets. I told the police he was giving himself up. I just talked him through it," she said.¹

Antoinette Tuff knew her God given name and she reminded Brandon Hill of his. We too have been given a new name, a name that stands in contrast to all the other names people may try to pin on us.

Desmond Tutu tells a story, I've told here before, and it is worth telling again today, about students who don't know the answers to exam questions but give it a try anyway and come up with what he calls "howlers." "Once in a scripture exam the students were asked, 'What did John the Baptist say to Jesus when He came to be baptized?' Well this chap did not know the answer but was going to have a shot at it and wrote, 'John the Baptist said to Jesus 'Remember you are the Son of God and behave like one!'"²

You've got a new name. Whatever others may say, however much your dreams may have been deferred, God has not forgotten you. You are God's beloved now. Behave like one.

Let us pray: God almighty, you gave new names to Abraham and Sarah. Remind us of the names you have given us and show us again the everlasting covenant you have established, that we might stand tall in the continuing reality of your never failing presence. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

¹ Bromleigh McCleneghan, When Antoinette Tuff saw a Gunman as a Human Being, in *The Christian Century*, August 23, 2013 © 2013; see also Mark Memmott in NPR, August 21, 2013. https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2013/08/21/214085753/school-clerk-in-georgia-persuaded-gunman-to-lay-down-weapons?utm_source=npr&utm_medium=facebook&utm_campaign=20130821

² Desmond M. Tutu, *Hope and Suffering* © 1984 William B. Eerdmans.