

## **“What Is Your New Name?”**

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

A Sermon by Rev. Dr. Ronald L. Farmer

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When L. Frank Baum was writing his classic tale *The Wizard of Oz*, he couldn't come up with a name for that magical place where the Wizard lived. One day as he sat at his typewriter trying to come up with a name, his eyes glanced over at his file cabinet. The bottom drawer of the cabinet was labeled, O-Z. “That's it!” Baum exclaimed. “O, Z — Oz!” And that's how that magical place came to be named the Land of Oz.<sup>1</sup>

Coming up with just the right name can be a difficult task, as anyone who has struggled to name a new baby, a new pet, or a new work of art knows all too well. Many years ago, when we lived in Cincinnati, Patricia and I adopted a tiny yellow kitten from a rescue shelter appropriately named The Scratching Post. We spent several days trying to come up with just the right name for the new addition to our family. We had chosen Greek names for our other two cats: “Athena,” the goddess of wisdom, seemed to fit our beautiful calico female with the expressive eyes. “Alexander,” as in Alexander the Great, was “purr-fect” for our regal, long-haired yellow male. But none of the Greek names we could think of seemed right for this little fellow. All kittens love to jump and play, of course, but as we watched him those first few days we noticed that his leaping ability far exceeded that of other kittens we had known. That, combined with his coloring and body shape, made him resemble a miniature mountain lion. Patricia suggested that we name him “Nekay,” the Native American name of one of the mountain lions at the famous Cincinnati Zoo. And that's how Nekay, our beloved companion for 18 years, received his new name.

In the biblical world, considerable thought was given to the naming process. Indeed, personal and place names frequently carry significant meanings. They provide us insight into the convictions of those who gave the names as well as the nature of those who bore them. For example, in naming a child, parents might express a *wish*, such as Ezekiel (which means “may God [el] strengthen”), or a *conviction*, like Elijah (which means “my God [el] is YHWH [jah]”). A name might also *describe* a person or place. For example, Esau means “red hairy one,” Bethel means “house of God,” and Jerusalem means “foundation of peace.”

In today's world people sometimes change their names. Movie stars, for instance, change their names in order to create a certain kind of image or to promote their publicity. John Wayne was told he wouldn't get very far with his real name, Marion Morrison. Norma Jean Baker isn't nearly as glamorous as Marilyn Monroe. The musician most widely known as Prince went through a whole series of name changes.

Because names were so important in the biblical world, we should pay special attention to those passages in which a name is changed. Something significant is happening. In Genesis

17, we find no less than six proper names and two name changes. Let's examine this passage more closely.

The gist of the story is that God appears to Abram and renews the promise God had given him and his wife, Sarai, when they lived in Mesopotamia. In Genesis 12, God promised that if they left their homeland for a land God would show them, (1) they would have many descendants, becoming a great nation; (2) their descendants would inherit the promised land, and (3) God would bless all the families of the earth through them and their descendants. Acting on faith, Abram and Sarai moved from Mesopotamia to Caanan as God commanded. Twenty-four long years passed, but still Sarai had not become pregnant. What were they to make of God's promise now that they were well beyond the childbearing years?

Noteworthy in Genesis 17 is the inclusion of two highly significant names for God, names that serve to underscore the certain fulfillment of the promise being renewed. God's personal name *YHWH*, which typically appears in English translations as "the LORD" (in all capital letters), means "the one who causes to be" or "the one who causes to happen." God's very name indicates that God can cause the promise to be fulfilled in spite of Abram's and Sarai's advanced age.

The second divine name is *El Shaddai*. Although the name is frequently translated "God Almighty," the name literally means "the God of the mountain" or "God, the Mountain One." *El Shaddai* signifies that God and God's promises are as sure and steadfast as the mountains. Clearly the use of these two names, *YHWH* and *El Shaddai*, was intended to strengthen Abram's faith in God's promise.

But God did more than simply renew the promise and remind Abram of two of God's names. God also changed Abram's name. Now, Abram is a very good name; it means "exalted father." Such a name implies that Abram would have a child one day. But God wanted Abram to look beyond any immediate children born to him. God wanted him to look far into the future at what could result if Abram remained faithful to God. To help him grasp the possibilities, God gave him a new name: Abraham. The insertion of two letters in English — "h" and "a" — seems insignificant, but in Hebrew the change is profound. Abraham means "father of a multitude." God wanted Abram to grasp the seemingly incredible fact the he could become the father of a multitude of people, of entire nations! Abraham's faithfulness could have ramifications beyond his wildest imagination. By means of a new name, God sought to evoke Abraham's faithfulness by revealing God's own faith in him.

Likewise, God also gave Sarai a new name. Her new name, Sarah, of which Sarai is a derivative, means "princess." This is a most appropriate name for one who would become the mother of kings and nations.

As the Apostle Paul pointed out in Romans 4, Abraham and Sarah not only had their promised child, Isaac, but they also became the ancestors of a multitude of people. Paul pointed out that this vast multitude includes not only the Jews, their biological descendants,

but also everyone who shares the faith of Abraham. In this sense, Christians and Muslims, too, are children of the promise.

One of the promises that Abraham received is that *YHWH El Shaddai* would be the God of his descendants. This promise is extremely important, for it means that the same God who sought out Abram and Sarai in Mesopotamia nearly four millennia ago still encounters us today. And just as God gave them new names, so too God gives us new names. That is, God sees our potential and holds out before us a vision of what we can become. Sometimes the possibilities exceed our wildest imagination. But as was the case with Abraham and Sarah, our faithfulness can transform possibilities into realities.

We should be careful, however, not to think that Abraham and Sarah manifested a perfect faith. Even the most casual reading of their life stories reveals that their faith wavered on occasions. In fact, sometimes their faithless actions actually hindered the fulfillment of God's promise. But God never gave up on them. God continually held out before them a vision of what could be, and this vision slowly caused them to grow in faith.

We can count on God to do the same thing in our lives. God will not give up on us when our faith falters. God will continue to call us by our new names. In time, our faith will grow and the vision will become reality.

What vision is God holding before you? What possibility is God urging you to entertain? What is your new name?

And that's today's good news. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> *LectionAid* 2/1 (1994): 33.