

November 23 & 24, 2024

Lost in Translation | *What's In A Name?*

Genesis 14:4-5, 15-16 | Matthew 2:1-4

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Today, we heard about the name change of Abraham and Sarah and what that means going forward for them, but we also celebrate and recognize that today is Christ the King Sunday, Reign of Christ. The turning point in our religious systems. A liturgical hinge between the seasons from Pentecost to Advent. We pause this week to reflect on the meaning of Christ's reign over the Church, the world, and our lives. What kind of king is Jesus? What does his rule look and feel like? What does it mean to live and thrive under his kingship? What is in the name of Christ the King?

But first a reflection on what's in a name or most importantly what's in my name? I know for me, I remember when I was little I was told that all children's names were in the Bible mostly because we are all God's children. But being the extremely smart and humble child that I was, I quickly realized that not everyone's name was in the Bible, but mine was.

This led me to believe that I was so special and it must mean that I am God's chosen child. Like I said humble! Even more, in elementary school, we had a female pastor named Sarah serving our church. So not only was I God's chosen child because my name was in the Bible, but because of this pastor named Sarah, then this must be my chosen path in life. That nonsense quickly faded for a period of my time.

However, you see names provide us with a sense of identity. The renaming in the bible was done purposefully, to show sometimes destiny or growth. So Abram becomes Abraham and Sarai becomes Sarah. We have been hearing about God's covenant and promises to Abram for the weeks leading up to this Sunday. This back and forth of Abram exercising trust in God's faithfulness. In the chapter right before the name change, we learn that Abram does become a father with Hagar to a

son named Ishmael. The worry that Abram has had to being a father is now solved. He has the heir that God promised. So, God coming to Abram isn't to calm Abram's fears and doubts over God's promises. But we missed an important detail. That when God made these promises to Abraham, God didn't just make them with Abram. NO, he also made them to Sarai by way of Abram. So far, we haven't seen her interaction with God and so it seems that God has forgotten her, given up with her old age. However, this text isn't really for Abram, it's for Sarai. The promise has already been fulfilled to Abraham but it hasn't for Sarai until now. God directly addresses Sarai and changes her name because the promise is also for her. God explicitly names Sarai crowning her with a new name as the mother of nations and kinds. God makes it clear that there is no covenant without her.

And this news seems to catch Abraham off guard, and he laughs in disbelief and gently corrects God. Surely God does not mean his really old wife, Sarah, but Hagar, who has just borne Abraham a son, Ishmael. In response to this, God doubles down and reiterates how the ancestress of the promise will indeed be Sarah, with her son, Isaac.

These names redefine their identities, give them a calling, and reorient their lives. These names stick; they will never be lost. It is their names that identify Abraham and Sarah as righteous before God, their true identities that God has given them.

What's in a name?

It seems almost laughable that Christ would be called a king. We see the threat Herod feels hearing of the Messiah's birth, but even at Christ's crucifixion, the sign king of Jews is hung to mock Jesus. He doesn't look like a king, he doesn't talk like a king, he doesn't live like a king. The leaders of Jesus' time are different and are named Tiberius, Pontius Pilate, Herod, Philip, Lysanias, Annas, and Caiaphas. They are the image of Kings that we have been given.

So, we should be expecting something about Jesus being decked out in splendid robes and a jeweled

crown. Or something majestic like from Isaiah: "A son will be given to us, and the government will rest upon his shoulders." A strong Jesus, a powerful Jesus. But no. The royalty Jesus portrays is of another order, entirely. It is homeless Jesus. Sick Jesus. Imprisoned Jesus. Hungry Jesus. Naked Jesus. It is, in the words of Episcopal theologian Fleming Rutledge, the "royalty that stoops."

We have a tendency to immortalize our influence with names on towers, to surrendering to people who wield power with their wealth alone, to bank the promise of our future on those who have only themselves on their minds continues to this day. I guess the irony still stands of the mention of the powerful names in the face of the most powerful in Jesus.

Because in Jesus, power is reoriented. The name of Jesus demands us to view power differently. The rulers of Jesus' time raising up Empires stands in stark contrast to the coming of the kingdom that Jesus is raising up.

Because an elderly, barren woman who is then blessed with a child, a teenager who gets pregnant, and a birth in a stable with only animals and shepherds as witnesses. The contrast is striking -- and perhaps that is the point.

Both seem no match for these rulers of the world. However, it will be Jesus' reign that will bring down those very political leaders named in Jesus' time. It will be the name of Jesus that will tear down the grandest of kingdoms and expose the hypocrisy and imperial lust of those leaders.

By naming these people of power not only underscores their actual lack of power in contrast to the power of Jesus, but it also points us to recognize these leader's temporary reign compared to the reign of Jesus which is all of eternity. Tiberius, Pontius Pilate, Herod, Philip, Lysanias, Annas, and Caiaphas are powers in time only and not forever.

There within that knowledge lies the promise in this "people in time" reference -- that their time will not last. That these horrific leader's reign are

only temporary. We should hear hope in this promise, that those who have claimed power now, and especially who have claimed the kind of power that actively works against the Gospel, will not be in power indefinitely.

And more importantly, what does the name of Jesus mean? What does it mean for God to reveal the Word becoming flesh in Jesus?

Consequently, God reveals the promise in those we least expect it. Because what's in a name is the name we are given in our baptism, our calling by God as a child of God. That is our name, in whom the promises of Christ, the promise of God is being revealed in the least expected. One voice joining in a choir crying out in the wilderness to prepare the way of the Lord.

As God did for Abraham and Sarah, God names each of us for who we truly are. Let us live as named and claimed children of God proclaiming the reign in the name of Christ the King.