

Message: “Say ‘No’ to Yourself”

William Shakespeare wrote, “What’s in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell just as sweet.”¹ Juliet says this when she is telling Romeo of her love. She loves the person who has the “Montague” name, and not the name itself, or the family it comes from. Who we align ourselves to in relationship matters. This shapes our identity, the way we think, how we feel, what we say and how we act. Names can lift us up to the highest heights or dash us down to the lowest depths.

Names are important. They have meaning. Our name was first given to us by our parents and carries meaning related to our family of origin. For example, Delmis named her daughter Xitlali. This name relates to her Hispanic and Aztec roots, while connecting with English-speaking people. One meaning of Xitlali is “Star of Goodness.”

Esperanza was given her first name by her oldest brother.

It’s Spanish in origin. And it means “hope.” If you haven’t had the chance to look up your name online, I encourage you to do so.

There are other kinds of names we can have. Some of us have nicknames. Nicknames are given to us by other people. They are an informal substitute for our proper name. Nicknames can express affection and care, they can be funny, they can highlight a character trait, and, sadly, some defame or bully us.

There are names related to our identity. Our proper name is how we identify ourselves. Most Native Americans are given names related to the occasion of their birth or something meaningful to their parents. Hebrew names are similar. For example, Bethlehem means “house of bread.”

God is in the name business. Not only did the angel Gabriel tell Mary to name her child Jesus, but we are also told he would be known as Emmanuel, which means “God with us.” And in Genesis 17, God appears to Abram when he was 99 years old. God reaffirms the covenant, the promise God made with Abram 25 years earlier. And God changes Abram’s name to Abraham and Sarai’s name to Sarah.

¹ William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, see <https://doorshakespeare.com/general/whats-in-a-name/>

Why would God change their name? I don't know what God thinks, but God seems to offer an explanation. Abram means "exalted father" while Abraham means "exalted father of nations." Abram has been faithful and true to God, yet he has no direct descendants. God is about to change this situation, and so Abram is given a new name, Abraham, a name of hope and promise. It's a name to live into, someone revered by billions of people today. Abraham is honored by Jewish, Islamic and Christian people around the world.

God doesn't leave Sarai out, either. Sarai is 89 years old. Her name means "princess." God changes her name to Sarah, which means "noble woman." And God promises to bless her and give her a son.

What we didn't read earlier was Abraham's response: "*[He] fell on his face and laughed. He said to himself, 'Can a 100-year-old man become a father, or Sarah, a 90-year-old woman, have a child?'*" (v17). God truly has a sense of humor. Isaac, their son, means "he laughs."

One thing I want to point out: God doesn't get angry. God reminded Abraham the covenant still stood and told Abraham to accept his son Ishmael. Abraham got up, embraced Ishmael, gave honor to God and lived according to the terms of the vow. This is faith in action. As Paul taught centuries later, "*Abraham had faith in God, and it was credited to him as righteousness*" (Romans 4:3).

Abraham's identity wasn't based on his family name, but on who he was. And Abraham was, first and foremost, someone who put God first in their lives. He did it 400 years before Moses wrote the laws. It was his way of life, a core part of his identity.

This gives us helpful background for Jesus' conversation with Peter, the disciples and the crowd, as recorded by Mark. This is a helpful stop on our journey to the cross and the empty tomb. Jesus teaches us a lesson about ourselves and about what it means to be aligned with God.

Jesus is the one we are following on our journey, but we ought to be curious about our traveling companions, especially Peter. It's easy to say, "What's the deal, Peter? A minute ago, you said Jesus is the Messiah and now you're trying to correct him. What's up?"

These questions reveal the same lack of curiosity about Peter as Peter showed toward Jesus. Instead of expecting Peter to know everything we know, how can we be curious about Peter? Because ultimately, being curious about those who travel with us isn't just about Peter. It's also about us. And it's about cultivating curiosity about those who sit worship with us, in person or online, or who are our friends and neighbors.

Peter gets a bad rap for what happens. I invite you to take another look. Jesus asks an amazing question, "*Who do you say I am?*" (Mark 8:29). Peter says, "*You are the Messiah!*" (v 20). Gold star, Peter. Jesus then begins to teach his disciples. But he teaches in a different way. For more than two years, Jesus has been teaching them by showing them what to do, asking questions and using parables. And, frankly, the disciples found the parables confusing.

No more. Jesus is teaching them clearly, even bluntly.

He's preparing them for what will come in a few months. Jesus teaches them about his terrible death on a cross and what will come after, which means a difficult life for many who follow.

That's when Peter does something many of us would do. He takes Jesus by the arm, steps aside and warns him to prevent something from going wrong. The word "rebuke" also means "warning" or "re-directing." We often read a lot of shame into this, when it seems to me more like warning a friend and their subsequent embarrassment. Jesus then turns from Peter to the other disciples and re-directs them. They're speaking from their own desires, not from a place where they put God first and the needs of others first.

What did they imagine when they heard "Messiah"? What do we imagine? And how does suffering and dying fit into the image? We might prefer a different reading, but Jesus' own understanding helps us correct our course, so we stay aligned with God.

What happened to Jesus is going to happen to us. We will die. We will suffer. We will live with our brokenness. Pick up that cross. Jesus tells us it isn't just a possibility. He says we ought to choose it. This is the meaning of life. Uncommon grace is the only thing which can save us and show us the way to life after death. We have to choose to receive it.

Do you hear, or do you turn away because it's too hard? Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their lives for Jesus' sake, for the sake of the message of love, grace and forgiveness, will save it. This makes no sense to those who are insensitive to their inner being, their soul. This reverses the "make all you can" view of the world. Heaven is a "give all you can" kind of place. Yet we can embrace it here and now.

What are you willing to lose your life, your soul, for? This isn't necessarily a risk-yourself-to-death kind of call. It might be that. It has been for many people, and still is today. But that's not the only way.

What are you willing to lose yourself into? You know what it's like. You know what it's to be so focused, so wrapped up in something or someone you don't notice time passing, you don't notice you're hungry or sleepy or exhausted. You don't notice anything but that thing, that activity, that person. You've lost yourself. We can't live this way always. But when we find something or someone for which we are willing to lose ourselves, we are on our way to the kingdom Jesus talks about.

And what if that thing, that one, was the person, message and mission of Jesus? Not the words in the book. But the life of fully living those words. What if loving one another as we've been loved became something we invested our whole self into? What if the church decided to do this? Imagine the transformation that could take place in our community. It boggles the mind.

Jesus says, "*Take up your cross and follow me*" (Mark 8:34).

This comes as a surprise, but a surprise we're ready for once we've set aside our expectations and chosen a posture of openness and curiosity. To those gathered then, his words were a slap in the face. Today, the cross is such a ubiquitous symbol we lose the absurdity of Jesus' words.

Lent offers us the opportunity to reorient ourselves toward God.

So, place the cross front and center in your lives if it isn't already. It may not be comfortable, but it's part of his story and ours as well. I invite you to surrender your expectations for who Jesus should be, so you are released to follow Jesus as the true Messiah - even when following leads to the cross. Amen.

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16 (CEB)

When Abram was 99 years old, the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him, “I am El Shaddai. Walk with me and be trustworthy. I will make a covenant between us and I will give you many, many descendants.”

Abram fell on his face, and God said to him, “But me, my covenant is with you; you will be the ancestor of many nations. And because I have made you the ancestor of many nations, your name will no longer be Abram but Abraham. I will make you very fertile. I will produce nations from you, and kings will come from you. I will set up my covenant with you and your descendants after you in every generation as an enduring covenant. I will be your God and your descendants’ God after you.”

God said to Abraham, “As for your wife Sarai, you will no longer call her Sarai. Her name will now be Sarah. I will bless her and even give you a son from her. I will bless her so that she will become nations, and kings of peoples will come from her.”

Mark 8:31-38 (CEB)

Then Jesus began to teach his disciples: “The Human One must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and the legal experts, and be killed, and then, after three days, rise from the dead.” He said this plainly. But Peter took hold of Jesus and, scolding him, began to correct him. Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, then sternly corrected Peter: “Get behind me, Satan. You are not thinking God’s thoughts but human thoughts.”

After calling the crowd together with his disciples, Jesus said to them, “All who want to come after me must say no to themselves, take up their cross, and follow me. All who want to save their lives will lose them. But all who lose their lives because of me and because of the good news will save them. Why would people gain the whole world but lose their lives? What will people give in exchange for their lives? Whoever is ashamed of me and my words in this unfaithful and sinful generation, the Human One will be ashamed of that person when he comes in the Father’s glory with the holy angels.”