

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
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What's in a Name?

Genesis 17:1-27

Names matter. For one thing, they help launch relationships. I was digging through some of my church newsletter articles, including my first one as your pastor. It was the May 2001 issue. We were just beginning our covenant as pastor and congregation, and I was addressing one of your basic questions: What should we call you? Do you want to be called Rev. Holder, Rev. Kevin, Pastor Holder, Pastor Kevin, Kevin, or maybe something else? My answer was pretty basic. You can call me Pastor Kevin, or just Kevin is fine too, whichever you prefer. Compared to Reverend, which has more the feel of a religious title, Pastor has more of a relational feel to it. If, as we believe, God is fundamentally relational and personal toward us, then we who serve as shepherds should embody the way of God in every way possible, including what we're called.

As I said, names help launch relationships. I began working on learning your names, and you were asking about my name. That's part of how we got started. And over time, in our partnership as pastor and people, we've had countless opportunities to take one another's names and fill those names with meaning, based on our experiences together. What began primarily as a way of differentiating one person from another becomes a long-term process of attaching significance to a name. The person who bears that name, what is he or she like? What's their background and history? What's their personality? What do they do, and what do they hope to be? Names matter.

In today's text from Genesis, when God appears to Abram, the first thing God does is reveal a new name. "I am God Almighty" (v. 1). The Hebrew term is *El Shaddai*. In the ancient Middle East, *El* was a general term for a god, a common word for "deity." The singular name *El* is rarely used alone in the Old Testament. It's usually found in compound constructions like the one in our text, *El Shaddai*. The precise meaning of this name is uncertain. It's sometimes associated with mountains, perhaps as an image of strength. Other times, it's associated with God's promises of children, which certainly figures heavily in our Scripture passage.

Whatever the exact meaning of *El Shaddai*, we can be sure that it's more than just a way of putting a name on deity. This name, like other biblical names for God, is a means of self-revelation. God uses it to disclose or unveil who he is, and what his will is for Abram. For God to announce his appearance with a name shows that he wants people to understand his character. He doesn't want us to be in the dark about his nature and his purposes. He wants us to know him more intimately and fully. Disclosing a name is part of building a relationship.

Keep in mind that this isn't the first time God has made himself known to Abram. In Genesis 12, God calls Abram to leave his country and kinship network and go to the land that God will show him. God promises to make of Abram a great nation, so that he and his descendants will be known as a blessing to all nations. In chapter 15, God repeats these promises and makes a covenant with Abram, emphasizing that it will be Abram's son, and not the son of his one of his slaves, who will be his heir. So by the time we arrive at chapter 17, appearances from God, and promises from God, are nothing new to Abram.

What's new in today's text is the way God drives home the importance of Sarai, and how she and Abram will be the parents of the heir to God's promises. These promises may start out local, but in God's time, they'll have a worldwide impact. In other words, *El Shaddai* shows up to reiterate and reinforce the message that his plan has always been to go global.

Then, in keeping with what's reflected in God's name, Abram gets a new name. The Lord says, "No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham... (v. 5). The name Abram means "exalted father." Abraham is a dialectical variation of it, and essentially means "father of a multitude." God doesn't change Abram's name because there has been a change in Abram's personality or character. The name change simply marks a new stage in Abram's identification with and participation in God's purposes. In addition to being in personal relationship with God, Abram is also in relationship with the nations. His life has an outward orientation. His mission is driven by God's mission.

The same is true for Sarai. She too is a full-fledged participant in the mission of God. Her name gets changed to Sarah, which is a less archaic form of Sarai. Both Sarai and Sarah mean "princess," possibly connected to God's promise that she will be the mother of Israel and other nations, including royalty. The bottom line is that for both Abram and Sarai, new names signify a new stage in their relationship with God and their parts in God's mission to the world.

Names matter, not only in launching a relationship but in cultivating that relationship and growing further into what the relationship means. Yes, Abraham and Sarah were old. They're the last two whom you would expect to announce, "We're having a baby!" But remember that the life-giving power of God isn't restricted by the state of Abraham and Sarah's bodies. This story isn't about their capacity; it's about God's capacity. And along with God's capacity, God's calling, God's commission. Abraham and Sarah still have a long way to go in living into that commission and living up to their new names.

Several years ago, a Swedish couple's son was born with one arm pointing skyward, so they decided to name him Superman. But authorities declined the request, following legislation that gave them veto power over names. They nixed Superman, citing its potential to attract ridicule later in life. There were complaints about how the authorities were applying the law, since they had previously approved names such as Batman and Tarzan. Even so, they stood by their decision, and the boy's parents planned to reapply. Imagine going through life trying to live up to the name Superman.¹

Some of you may have grown up with a nickname. When I played on my seventh and eighth grade basketball teams, I was known as "Tree." As you might guess, it was because of my height, and the skinniness that came with it. I can't really claim too much credit for the name. Friends applied it to me after they copied it from a former Clemson University player named Wayne "Tree" Rollins. He stood 7 feet 1 inch, and weighed 235 pounds. That "Tree" went on to be a first-round draft pick, and played for 18 seasons in the National Basketball Association. This "Tree" eventually got drafted by God and assigned to pastoral ministry, where I've spent most of the past three decades. Over time, the name "Tree" faded some from my identity, as did my basketball talents. But the name "Pastor Kevin" has stuck, and to this day I'm still growing into and living into what that name means.

Some researchers speak of "nominative determinism," which literally means "name-driven outcome." In other words, the theory that names have the power to shape destiny. One frequently cited example is the Jamaican sprinter Usain Bolt. He's a world record holder in the 100 meters, 200 meters, and 4 x 100 meters relay. One person has asked, "Would he run just as fast if his name was Usain Plod?" According to professor Adam Alter,

"Researchers have shown that our names take deep root within our mental worlds, drawing us magnetically towards the concepts they embody."²

I'm thinking that with time, the new names that God gave to Abram and Sarai took deeper root within their mental worlds. No doubt it took further experience with God, and ongoing engagement with his promises, for Abraham and Sarah to keep growing into their identity as the forebears of multitudes. God had shown up, gathering their lives into his great mission to bless the world. And now, they had to keep being responsive to God's calling. They had to keep becoming what their names said they were.

At every step in their pilgrimage of faith, Abraham and Sarah's identity was tied to God's identity. Remember that today's text starts with God revealing a new name to Abram, a name that discloses more about who God is and what God is doing in the world. We ourselves know how the various names we use for God reflect various parts of God's identity and purpose. In the Scriptures, the name Yahweh is probably the closest thing we have to a proper, personal name for God. The Hebrews avoided speaking the name for fear of profaning its holiness. When they came to the name Yahweh in a text, they would substitute the word *Adonai*, the word for "Lord," which is how it gets rendered in most English Bibles.

So we frequently speak of and address God as "Lord." We speak of him as "Creator," acknowledging him as the source of life, the maker of the world. We speak of him as "King" or "Ruler" in order to emphasize his sovereignty over the world and our lives, his promised reign of justice and peace. We often call him "Father" or "heavenly Father," which accents his identity as one who relates to us as children and forms us into his people, his family, practicing oneness in the love that he has shown us. And along with Father, we confess God in trinitarian terms—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

One mother tells about the time her four-year-old son asked her about God's name. She explained that God had many names including Father, Lord, and Jehovah. After listening to her long explanation, the son asked, "Can I just call him Steve?"³

We don't really have any biblical basis for addressing God as "Steve," but we do, as you can tell, have plenty of other names for understanding who God is. And in every case, it's important to remember that the various names and titles we find throughout the Scriptures are not human inventions that come from men and women who were struggling to come up with some way of defining the undefinable or knowing the unknowable. Rather, the names are a gift of God, a sign that God desires to express himself to us, to be known, to have us as humankind live in relationship with him, and to worship him.

After almost twenty years of partnership and ministry with you, we've pretty much mastered one another's names. We've learned new names when folks have been added to our fellowship. We've cherished the names of those who were once with us, some who have moved to other places, and some who have died and are with the Lord. At every step in this pilgrimage of faith, we've grown in knowing the God who promised Abraham and Sarah that he would use them to bless the world. He gave them descendants and created a people, and through his people Israel sent Jesus the Messiah, whose name means "the Lord saves." And now, we're called to be witnesses to God's blessing of the world through Christ. Our words and our deeds determine what other people think of when they call to mind our names. May our names point others to the Lord, name above all names.

¹ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/3701802.stm> (9-29-04)

² Adam Alter, "Would Usain Bolt Run More Slowly with the Name Usain Plod?" *Science Friday* (April 4, 2013).

³ Vicki Crooks, *Christian Reader*, "Kids of the Kingdom."