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## *Have You Ever Had Your Name Changed?*

**A sermon by Dean Sam Candler**

**Lent 2 – Year B**

*No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham. ... As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. (Genesis 17:5,15)*

Have you ever had your name changed?

I realize, of course, that many women here have changed your names. In our Western tradition, many women take the last names of their husbands when they get married. These days, some men have added their wives' names to theirs. When I was married, I did not change my name, but my wife sure did. Sometimes, I imagine she wishes she hadn't! My lovely daughter, Sarah, was married last week, and she did not change her name.

But names change for other reasons, too. Have you ever had your name changed? Some people change their nickname as they grow older. I know my childhood name sure changed as I grew older. When I changed schools and started high school in Atlanta, my nickname changed. And when I was ordained and started a job and a ministry, my name, too, became more professional-sounding.

Strangely, however, now that I am older, my name has changed again. With grandchildren now, I have an opportunity to guide what they should call me. I find myself offering those grandchildren my old childhood name to use! Yes, my grandchildren now call me the exact name that I used to use as child. So the world goes.

Name changes are important. They signify life changes. A dramatic event changes us. A gain, a loss. Sometimes those events are so critical to our identities, that our name actually changes. Yes, the events that cause our names to change can be quite happy ones, but they can also be traumatic. Some of us call ourselves "widow" now, or "widower," or even "orphan."

Even when we don't change our names, we change our titles, don't we? We call ourselves "Doctor," or "President," or "CEO," or "Coach," or "Counselor, or "Dean."

Have you ever had your name changed? Today, on the Second Sunday of Lent, our scripture lessons – from the Book of Genesis and from the Gospel of Mark – mention a lot of name changes.

At Genesis, chapter 17, something so dramatic happened to Abram that he had his name changed. Yahweh, God himself, was speaking to him about a powerful covenant. God was promising to Abraham that he would be the father of a great multitude, because it was through that offspring that God would bless the entire world.

His name, at first, was Abram, and that name was strong and good. It meant something like "exalted father." But when he receives the promise of God, and as Abram believes God, Abram's name actually changes. His name changes to "Abraham," which means "father of a multitude."

And the promise of God, the word of God, was so important that Abram's wife, Sarai, had her name changed, too. "Sarai"

and “Sarah” both mean pretty much the same thing, something like “princess.” But it is critical here, in the early chapters of the Book of Genesis, the first book of the Bible, it is critical, that the promise of God is given to both the man and the woman, both the husband and the wife, to both Abram and Sarai. God says to Sarai, too, “I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations” (Genesis 17:16).

That promise and presence of God were so strong, that the patriarch and matriarch of God’s blessing had their names changed, to Abraham and Sarah. They were being made part of covenant with Yahweh.

Have you ever had your name changed? Today, during this season of Lent, we remind ourselves that God is in the business of changing us, sometimes so mightily, that our names change. It could happen.

In the gospel for today, the Second Sunday of Lent, we remember that the great apostle, Saint Peter had had his name changed, too. Remember when Simon first confessed Jesus as the Christ? Jesus changed Simon’s name at that point. Jesus had said to Simon, “You are a rock. You are Peter, and upon this rock, I will build my church.” Peter, we might suppose, was in awe and wonder about that change.

But, today, talk about a dramatic occurrence, Peter gets his name changed again, in quite an unfortunate way. At first, his name change is strong and edifying. He will be a rock!

But, then, he gets it wrong. Jesus starts to speak of his own death and travail. When Jesus says that he will undergo suffering and death, Peter is unable to understand, and Peter takes him aside to actually rebuke Jesus.

Uh, oh, wrong move. Jesus responds by calling him quite an unfortunate name. Jesus says, “Get behind me, Satan.” Wow. Jesus had just applauded Peter’s faith by naming him a rock, but as soon as Peter gets it wrong, Jesus calls him “Satan.”

“Get behind me, Satan,” Jesus says to Peter. Wow. Where did that come from? Well, it means that our name changes can take turns for the better, but they can also take turns for the worse. During Lent, it is good to note all our behaviors. Some of our actions can change our name for the better. But some of our actions can change our name for the worse. Have you ever had your name changed?

Our names do change, over time. It is good when those changes are signs of positive growth, signs of life. But, life changes are hard, even the good life changes are hard.

Have you ever had your name changed? God has. Did you hear that? Life changes are so hard that God, God himself, is willing to go through a name change.

Yes, there is still another name change in today’s scripture lessons for the Second Sunday of Lent. When we heard that reading from the seventeenth chapter of Genesis, we may not have caught the real name change there. It is easy to see how the names of Abram and Sarai are changed. But did you notice the very first verse!

God admits how his own name has changed!

Again, we may not notice the change in our English translations, but it sure is there. Listen again to the very first verse, “When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said to him, “I am God Almighty” (Genesis 17:1). Now, that verse probably does not seem very extraordinary to us, because we are accustomed to hearing the English word, “Lord” and the English phrase “God Almighty” as referring to the same entity. We use those words interchangeably for our sense of God, don’t we?

But in that ancient Hebrew era, those were actually two different names for God! The older name was “El,” maybe from the region of Canaan. “El Shaddai” was the name the older patriarchs had for God. The phrase means “God Almighty.” But the newer name in Hebrew religion was “Yahweh.” That would be the name that the Exodus people learned for God. “Yahweh” in our Bibles is always translated “LORD.”

So, an amazing thing happens in Genesis, chapter seventeen. Yahweh appears to Abraham, and says something like, “I, Yahweh, am El Shaddai!” Yahweh appears to Abram and says, “I am El Shaddai.” God says something like, “You knew me as one name. But I am also this other name.”

Have you ever had your name changed? God has. Of course, God is the same God. But the name change is important, important specifically for us. Our Lord God is One. But God is known, and God has been known, by lots of different names. *El Shaddai*, *El Elyon*, *Elohim*, *Yahweh* all became understood as the same God in the Hebrew scriptures, and that was quite a revelation. The history of the changes in God's people came to be understood by the way those people used different names for God.

In this season of Lent, then, we might prepare ourselves for name changes in several ways. Perhaps our striving for holiness will have the effect of changing our very names. Maybe our own names will change. But perhaps our striving for holiness will teach us a new name for God, as well. Perhaps we will learn that a new experience of God, a *Yahweh* sense of God, maybe someone else's experience of God, really can be reconciled with our experience, and with our old name for God, with our *El Shaddai* sense of God.

God is so much greater than we are, that God can appear to us in a variety of ways, and with a variety of names. When we realize that truth, then we are surely growing in faith, just as Abraham and Sarah grew in faith. Have you ever had your name changed? Yes, in our spiritual growth, our names do change, and our names for God change, too.

AMEN.