

We are continuing with our series on the life of Abram (Abraham). It all started with God calling Abram out of the blue. God came to Abram and said, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.” Abram really didn’t have much say in the matter because God had already made up His mind. From there Abram journeyed on as God had commanded. He married a woman named Sarai and found himself in many different situations and predicaments -- not the least of which was the feud between his wife Sarai and their servant-girl Hagar. If you remember Sarai was not able to have children at the time so she arranged a marriage between Abram and Hagar. Hagar conceived and then the trouble started. Abram was 86 years-old when Hagar gave birth to Ishmael.

Our story today picks up thirteen years later. Abram is 99 years-old and once again the Lord appeared to him: “I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous.” Abram must have thought to himself, “Here we go again!” Whenever God shows up and starts off by saying, “I am God Almighty...” you know something big is about to happen.

God said, “No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham.” Why on earth would God be concerned with such a thing? Why go to the trouble of changing Abram’s name to Abraham? Did God have any idea what kind of inconvenience that would be for Abram? He would have to go stand in line at the DMV for a new driver’s license. He would have to update his life insurance policy information. He would have to get a new student I.D. at the local community college. Changing a name is no simple task especially after you have had the same one for 99 years! Think about it. What would it be like to have to answer to a new name after being called the same name for nearly a century?

I have a friend who works for a company in the DFW area and this company decided that they needed a new name but not just any old name. Their new name needed to have some meat to it. It had to communicate the organization’s values and mission. The task of coming up with a new name was so important that they hired a consulting firm that specialized in this kind of thing. They spent over \$100,000 to get someone to come up with a name! I told him I would have done it in about 5 minutes for a free lunch!

Well, God didn’t hire a consulting firm when he came up with Abram’s new name. He just gave him the name: Abraham. Abram meant “exalted father” and Abraham meant “father of a multitude”. So Abram went from being an exalted father to the father of a multitude. Not bad.

Names in those days meant so much more than our names today. A name said something about a person. Our process of naming is much different. A young couple about to have their first child might go to a bookstore and buy one of those baby name books. They sit down over dinner and thumb through the book deciding what to name

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that little creature inside the womb. They don't know if the child will be a boy or a girl so they toss out all kinds of options: "What do you think about Sally?" the wife says. "I don't like Sally. I had a girlfriend in 8<sup>th</sup> grade named Sally and she was crazy. Sally won't work." "Okay, what about Cindy?" "I don't like Cindy either. My aunt's name is Cindy and she talks too much." Frustrated the expectant mother says, "Alright you come up with some names." "Fine," replies the husband, "What do you think about Megan?" "Megan won't work. You know my sister just had a baby and they named her Megan. That would complicate things at family get-togethers."

The couple ends the discussion with no progress in sight. As things turned out they went to the hospital two weeks later with no idea what to name the baby. The baby is born and turns out to be a boy. The couple looks at each other wandering what to do. So they name the boy "Al" because that's the name of the doctor who delivered him. Go figure.

It's interesting to look through one of those books that describe what our names mean. So and so's name means "brave" or "gracious" or "lovable". My name is Bradley. Bradley means "broad meadow". Not very exciting is it? I like my name but I don't see myself putting it up on the wall in a picture frame. Broad meadow? What is that supposed to mean?

Last Sunday we were eating lunch at Frankie's here in Mexia when out of the clear blue our five year-old son Benjamin asked, "Can I change my birthday?" That's not the kind of question you think would come up over spaghetti and meatballs but sure enough it did. He wanted to change his birthday. He said, "Would it be okay to change my birthday from March 8<sup>th</sup> to August 8<sup>th</sup>?" He asked this because his friend's birthday is on August 8<sup>th</sup> and August comes before March, therefore the presents would come sooner. I have to admit it was a clever question; however, we didn't change his birthday. We said, "I'm sorry but you can't change your birthday. You were born on March 8<sup>th</sup> and that will always be your birthday."

There are some things in our lives that we cannot change, with our birthdays being a perfect example. Those kinds of things are set in stone, but there are a lot of things about us that can change and our God is in the changing/transforming business. When God changed Abram's name to Abraham he was once again transforming and molding Abraham. He was giving Abraham a new identity. Keep in mind that all of this was God's idea. Abraham didn't have anything to do with the decision at all. God said Abram's new name would be Abraham and that was the end of that.

Remember the account of creation in the first chapter of Genesis? God literally spoke things into being. God said, "Let there be light;" and there was light. God said for the sky to appear so the sky appeared. God said for the waters to be formed so the waters were formed. God said, "Let the earth put forth vegetation;" so the earth put forth vegetation. God said, "Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind;" so the earth brought forth animals. Finally, God said, "Let us make humankind in our image;" and presto here we are. God names it and it happens. When God starts talking you don't

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know what's going to happen. The power of God's Word is beyond our ability to comprehend. Remember the old E.F. Hutton commercials? You know the tag line: "When E.F. Hutton speaks people listen." Well, when God speaks things happen and people change.

You know Abraham wasn't the only person in the Bible to get a name change. I think of two examples from the New Testament. There was Saul – who once made a career of persecuting Christians. He was so bad that he almost seemed to take pleasure in it. Then one day Jesus got a hold of him and changed his life forever, and in the process, changed his name to Paul. I guess Jesus figured that since everything else about him was different his name might as well be too.

Then there is that story about the time Jesus came into Caesarea Philippi and asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" In other words, "Who do people think I am?" And they answered, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." Jesus said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter was the first to answer, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you Simon son of Jonah! You are now Peter, and on this rock I will build my church." The moment was so significant that even a name-change was in order.

Can you think back to a time in your life when something so significant happened that you changed forever? It could be anything – something tragic, something profound, something beautiful – but whatever it was it transformed you. You didn't change your name but if you could have you would have. God has a way of speaking a word to us sometimes in the most unexpected places and through the most unexpected people.

Eddie Fox and George Morris are involved in the World Methodist Evangelism organization. I had the opportunity to go to one of their conferences in Georgia last year. It was outstanding. This group's main task is to remind Methodists that we are Christians first and foremost, and that we should be more intentional about sharing our faith in Christ. By the way I think they are right, and that the reason many of our United Methodist churches are not growing is because the members and pastors have forgotten why they exist in the first place.

At this evangelism conference they told about a time when they were teaching at a seminary in Monterey, Mexico. The institute had employed a professional translator to interpret the lectures simultaneously over electronic headsets. In a lecture they were using the legendary story "Tie a Yellow Ribbon 'Round the Old Oak Tree":

A young son leaves home and lives a life that results in him being imprisoned. As the time comes for him to be released, he writes his father and mother a letter in which he tells them that he knows that he has brought shame to them and the family. He states that he would understand if they would not want him to come back home. The letter then tells them that on a particular day he is planning to be on the train back to their hometown. Because the train goes by the family home,

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the boy writes his mother and father, "If you want me to come home, tie a yellow ribbon 'round the old oak tree."

The day arrives and the boy's heart is pounding. Finally, he relates his story to the man sitting next to him on the train. He points out that they are almost there and that he is unable to look for himself. He requests that the stranger look for him. As the train rounds the bend, the man lifts the boy's face and declares, "Look, boy, look! There's a yellow ribbon on every limb!"

Until this moment Eddie and George could hear the translator's voice through the headsets, but suddenly the headsets went silent. Thinking he did not understand, the last statement was repeated more loudly, "Look, boy, look! There's a yellow ribbon on every limb." Still there was no sound. Again, the final line was repeated only to notice the interpreter had removed his headset, and he was weeping. He had heard a new word about the God who forgives and reconciles. The setting was a lecture hall, but in a moment the Spirit had led a person to encounter the reality of God.

I don't know what the translator's name was, but I do know one thing for certain – God knew his name and he knows yours too. By the way, what's your name?