

Trinity 5 (2020)

What's the big deal about a name? Or, is there a big deal?

If you think there isn't, you might want to seek counsel from the celebrated War Between the States General Robert E. Lee.

Following the war, he was offered what was then a huge sum of money by an insurance company for the use of his name.

He turned down the offer. He did so for the sake of honour. His name defined him. It was all he had left after the war. It was not for sale.

But what about in the Bible? Are names a big deal there?

Yes, they are. As with General Lee, names define people.

More than that, when a person has an encounter with God, he often gets a new name, as was the case with Abram in this morning's Old Testament reading

“Thy name shall be Abraham,” God tells him.

Abram means “father of many,” while Abraham, means “father of many nations.”

In this encounter with God, the scope of Abraham's calling gets enlarged.

But there was just one problem. He and his wife Sarai were old, very old, and childless.

If our reading from Genesis chapter 17 had continued, we would have discovered that Sarai likewise gets a new name from the Lord. She becomes Sarah.

Sarai means something like princess (presumably over her own household), while Sarah means ‘princess of a multitude’, says Bible commentator Matthew Poole.

So, the thought is the same as with her husband. The scope of their calling gets enlarged.

At first glance, it seems cruel that God would saddle this old couple with such names. Again, they were childless, which was a real cause for shame in the ancient world.

Giving them such names would be like children on the schoolyard calling an enormously fat boy, “Tiny”.

But that was not God’s intent. It wasn’t to ridicule, but to foretell blessings . . . blessings He planned to bestow on them.

Abraham did indeed become a father of many nations, and Sarah, a princess of a multitude.

But they had to wait a long time.

From the time they began their journey from Ur towards the land God promised to give them and the birth of their son Isaac was around 25 years.

Why do you suppose that God made them wait?

My answer would be: He was preparing them to receive the blessing. This quarter of a century was an incubation period for their faith and commitment.

Sometime we are not ready to receive God’s blessings. So, God says ‘wait’ and allows us to pass through some deep valleys before going on to the place He wants to lead us.

Why? To defeat us? No, to make us strong.

The Italian mystic Padre Pio put it like this:

“Jesus permits spiritual combat as a purification, not as a punishment. The trial is not unto death but unto salvation.”

Well, something like that was true with Abraham and Sarah.

Perhaps you are going through one of those periods of spiritual combat or a period of waiting.

If so, don’t despair. Remember Abraham and Sarah.

Commit all your ways to ‘the God whose hand is over everything’.

Now, where did that little phrase come from -- ‘the God whose hand is over everything’?

Well, from another *name* found in this morning’s passage. This time one God gives Himself. “I am *El Shaddai*,” God tells the patriarch.

This name is translated in our English Bibles as God Almighty. But what does *El Shaddai* or God Almighty mean?

One attempt to unpack its meaning is the little phrase I just used: **The God whose hand is over everything.**

And, what a comforting thought that is, not just for Abraham in the long ago, but for ourselves right here and now.

For Abraham, that meant that God could open the dead womb of Sarah his wife and bring forth a son and heir.

It also meant that God could and would make good on His promise that Abraham would become the father of many nations.

Around 2000 years later, it meant God making good on another promise He had made to Abraham. That promise was that through Abraham’s offspring blessing, salvation, would spill out to the whole world, even to those who were not his physical offspring.

This promise was fulfilled with the coming of Jesus and with His death and resurrection.

The God who has His hand over everything, moreover, remains on the job today.

When we look out and see the world with all its problems . . . at the moment the coronavirus pandemic and societal unrest not far from our own doorsteps . . .

I don’t know if you saw it on the news but 30 miles east of here in Hiawassee, last weekend, a number of signs were defaced with such slogans as:

‘Kill all cops’ and **‘Death to America’**. We are no longer isolated from goings-on in Atlanta and other big cities.

In times like these we need an anchor. We have One. It is the “God whose hand is over everything.”

This is not to say we can sit back and do nothing. No, we must be willing to dare and do, to speak out and be counted, to fight and maybe even to die.

Even so, this lovely description of God reminds us that ultimately the victory belongs to Him. Our future all unknown to us is known to Him. He remains at work.

This is true in own lives. Whatever we are facing at the moment we don’t face alone.

In the words of the old spiritual: “He’s got the whole world in His hands” . . . the little biddy babies and everybody else.

It doesn’t matter if the problems we are facing pertain to finance, to health, to inter-family turmoil, to addiction, *whatever*. “God’s hand is over everything.”

Let this be your first thought when you get out of bed and your last thought when you lie down to sleep.

I can think of no thought more powerful. Put it to the test in your life this coming week.

Are names a big deal?

You bet they are, especially when that name is *El Shaddai*.