

**A sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Jason Cashing at
Clarence Presbyterian Church on February 25, 2024.**

DIVINE PERSPECTIVE

<Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Psalm 22:23-31; Mark 8:31-38>

Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O Holy One, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.

Three days after my college graduation I traveled with our college's chaplain and several of my fellow students to Southwestern Pennsylvania for a week-long mission trip. These were people with whom I had studied, fellowshiped, eaten, prayed, worshiped, laughed and cried over the past four years. I had grown with these people, emotionally and spiritually, and developed as a person; it was with them that I realized God had a particular call on my life toward ministry. These were people whom I knew, and to whom I was known.

During that week, we were engaged in the usual jobs and tasks that you might imagine of a mission trip. We were all amateur carpenters and engineers during that time, and my skills with carpentry and home renovation likewise grew. One morning, shortly after arriving to the site of our work, our little group huddled up to talk over the tasks of the day, led by our chaplain. He had been integral in many of the seminal conversations and growing-points of my four years of college, and had even been one of the readers for my senior project. This man knew me. And as we were each assigned tasks, it was clear how much he knew all of us, as the tasks we were receiving reflected the gifts we brought to the project. Finally, he looked to me, making eye contact, and without missing a beat said, "Justin, you're going to work on putting together the wall braces for this part of the house." And without a moment's further hesitation, he dismissed our group to our tasks.

Now, I realize that we are still getting to know each other as minister and congregation while we look ahead to the years of shared ministry to come, but I think you already know: my name is not Justin.

Nor did we have a "Justin" in our group, let alone on that trip.

Shakespeare famously posited in *Romeo & Juliet* on the meaning of a name, and whether a name, applied by humans and agreed upon, actually has any direct impact on the nature and constitution of an object. "What's in a name? A rose, by any other name, would smell as sweet." And many of us likely have had different names throughout our lives - job titles, nicknames, middle names. Sometimes, a life change necessitates a name change, such as when you become a parent and take on the name "mommy" or "daddy." Sometimes, we need a good friend to remind us of what our name actually is, who we actually are.

Any of us would be able to tell you, I think, that names do have meaning, and to call something by its true name is to grant it the power and agency of that name. And sometimes, we discover that the name we've begun with is no longer the correct, or most accurate and fulfilling name for what is to come.

Today, as we continue in the season of Lent, as we continue our journey into the fullness of the covenant of Life, we are invited to ponder the nature of our names. There is a long history

in the church of re-naming, though practiced more in the Catholic Church these days than not. When a bishop ascends to the papacy, for instance, they take a new name, usually the name of a previous pope whose ministry and perspective on the Church they wish to emulate. When a young person is confirmed into the church, they are given a new name, a Christian name, chosen in the same fashion.

This practice traces its history all the way back to Abram and Sarai who, being called by God and given instruction on where to go as people of this new covenant, are then renamed in the spirit of this new covenant. Their old lives, as they have been, are no longer fully accurate, fully representative of their new lives in this covenant. Now, they are people of Life, people of the Living God. And so their names must change to reflect who they have become and continue to become.

But it is not just a matter of choosing a new name that they like. Rather, they are renamed, re-identified, in the perspective of the One who will now be leading them toward Life in this covenant. The One who has called them is the One who now re-names them. God's perspective is now the source of their knowing and being known; they are no longer Abram and Sarai but Abraham and Sarah. This change means everything.

Shakespeare may posit that regardless of the name, the object is the same, but when we set ourselves - or when we are set upon - the path that leads to new life, then our names mean everything. And the only true source of our name is the One who invites, leads, and authors our faith in this journey.

Abram and Sarai become Abraham and Sarah. Simon becomes Peter. Saul becomes Paul. These are the extreme and literal examples, but they represent the same concept: when we are set upon the journey of the covenant of Life, then our identity shifts, as well. Even if we don't legally change our name, our identity, our understanding of our selves, of others, and of God develops and grows accordingly. It is not matter of us growing our own understanding, but allowing our understanding to grow in the Spirit of God, who brings us to Life in the first place.

But that doesn't mean that we always get it right.

I always feel a little bit sorry for Simon in this reading from Mark's gospel this morning. In the verses immediately preceding the beginning of our reading, and connected to the conversation of our reading, Jesus asks the disciples who they think he is. In the days prior to this question, the disciples have been with Jesus as he has fed several thousand people, and then healed a man born blind. They have been traveling with Jesus and listening to his teachings, witnessing his miracles, and learning of the Kingdom of God, of the covenant of Life. On the heels of all of this, and in response to Jesus' query, Simon gets the answer correct: "You are the Messiah." Simon, living into his new name of Peter and the fullness of the calling placed upon him, is firing on all cylinders. And then it falls apart on him.

Upon the proclamation that Jesus is the Messiah, the Anointed One who will bring about Life and freedom for the people and all humanity & creation, Jesus continues to elaborate on how that will come to be: he will undergo great suffering and be rejected by the religious leaders, be killed and three days rise again to life. This was not the common understanding or perspective of what the Messiah coming into the world would look like. And upon hearing this,

Peter, who has been getting it all right recently, takes Jesus aside to rebuke him, and thus gets it wrong. As well-intentioned as Simon Peter may have been, he missed the point.

I can relate. Perhaps you can, too.

But the mistake was not in rebuking Jesus or telling him that he must not say such things. That is not what earns Jesus' response of, "Get behind me, Satan." Rather, the mistake is one which we are all capable of, particularly as we imperfectly make our way through this covenant of Life: we misplace our focus. We keep our eyes and attention fixed on earthly realities and dynamics. We define things - aspects of creation, other humans, situations around our world - only in terms of our limited human understanding.

This does not lead us further into the covenant of Life, or help us draw closer to God, let alone to the promise of Abundant Life in the resurrection. But it is a completely human thing to do. Rather, in the season of Lent and in all our faithful living, our call is to look for and lift up the perspective of God.

As we take on this journey, whether anew for the first time or renewed for the untold time, it is imperative that we journey not with our human perspective alone but with the attempt to align with God's perspective. Through prayer, the reading of Scripture, and practicing mindfulness in our daily lives, through discerning conversation with each other in the communion of faith, we are able to seek God's perspective. In short, through these practices of the faith, we remember who we are and who we are called to be. We remember our names, our identities, given to us by the One who calls us.

We still may not get it right all the time; in fact, we're likely to mess up more often than we'd like. Being perfect, while an ideal to look to, is not the goal (apologies to any Methodist friends who may be hearing this). Rather, our goal in this journey is to dedicate and rededicate ourselves to the journey, to the path, to the covenant that has been established. Our goal is to open ourselves to the grace which brings us past our wayward steps. Our goal is to proclaim the good news of the resurrection with the very living of our lives. Throughout it all, remember that you are known, and in the Divine perspective, you are fully known, fully loved. Let us then fix our eyes and our direct our steps in this perspective. Amen.