“What You Think it Means”

A meditation on Genesis 17: 1 – 7, 15 – 16 and Mark 8: 31 – 38

Rev. Cathy C. Hoop Grace Presbyterian Church February 28, 2021

Those of you who know my spouse, Lou, know that he and I are…well, very different. He loves sports, while I tolerate them. He adores meat, while I could live without it. He hunts game birds; I feed songbirds. I guess it is not that surprising then, that we don’t often discover a movie we can both watch time after time. To be precise, there are two: *Moonstruck*, in which Cher falls in love with the brother of her fiancé, (and her mother is portrayed by Olympia Dukakis which sounds odd when you say it out loud, but it actually works*)* and *The Princess Bride*, a fairy tale set within the context of a grandfather reading to his sick grandson. (“When I was your age, television was called books.”) *The Princess Bride* was also one of the few movies our three sons would also agree to watch. Anyway, these are the two movies you don’t want to watch with us because we will recite all the lines. It’s very annoying.

Take *The Princess Bride*, for example – there are so many classic lines.

Here’s a tricky one for our times: “People in masks cannot be trusted.”

Or these, which are embedded with theology:

Farm Boy/Westley: “Death cannot stop true love. All it can do is delay it for a while.”

Miracle Max: “You rush a miracle man, you get rotten miracles.”

There is the priest, officiating at the Prince’s wedding, uttering that line which can be said so many different ways, depending upon how you are feeling about your spouse at the current moment:

“Mawwiage (marriage), that dream within a dream.”

And there is one character, Vizzini, who, until his death, expresses his shock over unfolding events with one word: “Inconceivable!” After he has said this for – I don’t know - the fifth or sixth or millionth time, one of his cohorts, Inigo Montoya, turns to him and says, “I do not think that means what you think it means.”

“I do not think that means what you think it means.”

Let’s take that line and invite it into dialogue with both of today’s stories.

We will start with Abram and Sarai and el Shaddai.

Abram and Sarai will be given new names by God, and God tells Abram to call God by a new name, el Shaddai. What if el Shaddai doesn’t mean what any of us think it means! Or what if it means *more* than we have been told it means?

The giving of new names in scripture always marks a significant moment; it is never done lightly. This isn’t an unfamiliar experience today. Consider the Catholic tradition of the pope choosing a new name. A marriage may bring a name change for one or both of the individuals. An individual who is trans may choose a new name to signify their claiming of their true self. For Abram and Sarai, the name changes signify the “ripeness of the relationship [with YWHW] and its permanence.”[[1]](#endnote-1) God says to Abram, (“*exalted* father”), you will now be called Abraham, (“father of nations”). This all sounds like one of those backhanded compliments…no longer “exalted” or “honored,” *but* soon to become the father of generations. Maybe a little dose of humility comes along with this covenant! That would be appropriate in light of how Abram abused his wife’s servant Hagar in order to have a child, a son, Ishmael.

And Sarai? God does not speak to her directly but passes on news of a new name through Abraham: her name will become Sarah. Sarai (possibly “my” princess) to Sarah (princess). According to Jewish tradition, Sarai was a name that she had chosen for herself (her first name change), but God clearly includes her in the covenant by not only changing Abram’s name, but hers as well. There seems little change with Sarah’s name, other than the possibility of autonomy, (which is no small thing) and the promise accompanying the name change of becoming the mother of nations.

But before God offers her children new names, God introduces God’s self to Abram, saying, “I am el Shaddai, walk with me and be trustworthy.” The footnote for this name, “el Shaddai” reads, “God Almighty or God of the mountain.” If we had read this verse from the NRSV, we would see this flip-flopped. We would have heard, “I am God almighty…” with the footnote explaining that “God almighty” is the *traditional* translation of “el Shaddai.” Tradition does not necessarily equate with accuracy.

Even though the CEB honors the ambiguity and complexity of God’s name, it still leaves something out, something significant. And we just might have to say, “I don’t think this means what you think it means.” The etymology of “el Shaddai,” is extremely complex, emerging out of ancient languages and cultures, and the majority of translations will offer you “God Almighty,” but in our Tuesday Talk Back session, Avery reminded us that there is another possibility that is frequently overlooked, and that prompted me to do more reading.

El Shaddai can be translated God Almighty. It can also be translated God of the mountain, as the CEB noted. But, it can also be translated God of the plain. (Talk about polar opposites.) Or it can be translated God with breasts. So as God renews a covenant with Abraham and Sarah that they will have children of their own, we encounter an image of fertility. We encounter a nurturing God. In four more instances of the use of el Shaddai in scripture, they are always associated with the encouragement to “be fruitful and multiply.”[[2]](#endnote-2)

“Increase” and “fructify” – there’s your word for the day from the Hebrew: fructify!

We would need to spend a week at scholarly seminars to unpack the full history of the etymology of “el Shaddai” and the various influences that shape this particular interpretation of the name. The existence of fertility gods in ancient cultures is no secret, and we can readily understand how women in particular would have claimed a relationship and connection with the god who would gift them with children. As the Hebrew people came to distinguish themselves from other cultures, to define themselves as monotheistic, it is not surprising that they would have melded together the characteristics of various gods into the one.

But here, it is to a man, that God introduces God’s self in a feminine, motherly image. Here, God renews the covenant with Abraham and Sarah, making it clear that nations will be born from *them*, not from Abram’s abuse of Hagar. God loves, protects and provides for both Hagar and Ishmael, but their story will be their own, and is given particular reverence within the Islamic faith.

The deeper mystery is not that our own faith had vestiges of a fertility god, but that our tradition needed to whitewash all that is holy and beautiful about that image. How did a motherly image of God get replaced with an image of power and, even violence? Other interpretations of el Shaddai as God almighty refer to self-sufficiency rather than domination, which of course is true. God is self-sufficient. God doesn’t need us. No God doesn’t need us, but God *wants* us.

David Biale, writing for the *History of Religions* journal, suggests that there may have been a push back against any images of fertility gods. In the need to consolidate the image of God within the Hebrew tradition, the need to remove traces of gods from neighboring cultures, the authors of the Hebrew texts in the Priestly tradition “suppress one interpretation of a god…by substituting its opposite.” We are left with the image of a male god of war, rather than a God beyond gender, a God of all genders.

El Shaddai…god of the mountain, god of the plain, god with breasts. Nurturing and strong. “Walk before me,” God says. Walk before me in faithfulness, in wholeness. Walk before me and know me, the God who gives life, the God who births generations.

Why does this matter? Probably because our culture still objectifies the feminine form. We still treat it as less than, and especially as less than holy. Reclaiming other dimensions, aspects, and names of God and calling them holy is vital work.

Let’s do a 180 and move from this nurturing God, to the Son of Man who is feeling less than loving at the moment. Instead of gifting names that offer a future and a hope, Jesus takes Peter’s name away from him and renames him, “Satan”! “Get behind me, Satan!” Jesus shouts at Peter. Why? Why does he do this? Probably because Peter, who only moments before had identified Jesus as the Messiah, the anointed one, doesn’t get it. Messiah “doesn’t mean what Peter thinks it means.”

Anointings celebrated prophets, priests, and kings. Important people. An anointed one is someone special, someone to be honored, to be respected. (Or course, it didn’t usually go that way for prophets…) So in Peter’s mind, in his human way of thinking, if Jesus is the Messiah, he should be far removed from suffering, and even farther removed execution by the state. The Messiah, the one for whom they have waited, rejected by all the religious leaders? That alone is deeply disturbing news. The Messiah, the one for whom they have waited, the one who is to bring restoration, executed? How could this be possible? And so Peter takes Jesus aside, and we can imagine him grasping Jesus by the shoulders, looking him in the eye, and scolding him. The audacity and the humanity of it all. Jesus turns it right back on him, but to make his point, he calls Peter by a name, and no one will ever forget this moment: the moment when Jesus says, “How dare you urge me to deny who I am? How dare you push me to deny *my name*?” And Jesus denies Peter his name, and instead calls him Tempter.

In the wilderness, after his baptism, Jesus encountered and rejected the temptation to walk away from pain and suffering. He rejected the temptation to walk apart from humanity and chose instead to live into the worst that humanity could offer. His identity would not be with the privileged and the powerful but with those who have suffered every injustice the world can offer. The wilderness was not the ending of his temptations, as we sometimes like to think. His temptations continued: they came from his closest friends, from strangers, from religious leaders. Friends, Jesus understands temptations – he faced them every single day, not just those 40 wilderness days.

Peter believed his community was so close to realizing God’s dream. So close to a life free from Roman oppression. So close to seeing God’s messianic promises fulfilled. Well, no, to the first, and yes to the second, but not in the way that Peter imagined. As Peter professed, Jesus was the anointed one, but anointed like this: anointed in compassion, anointed in solidarity with the oppressed, anointed in mercy. Jesus needed Peter to understand this, for this would be the way in which he would be called to walk. The way to walk before God as God had said to Abraham. As God says to us.

Abram and Abraham

Sarai and Sarah

Peter… and Satan?

How do these naming stories speak to you during this Lenten season?

By what name do you want to be called by God?

Do you need the assurance of God’s promises?

A sense of renewal within God’s faithfulness? Do you need that shocking reminder of what it means to walk in the way of the Messiah?

And what name for God do you need to hold in your heart? `

Are there names for God which you would like to explore?

However you continue your journey through this Lenten season, know that you are God’s beloved, and God longs to nurture you with a mother’s love, that you might walk in the way of the servant Messiah.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

1. Taylor, Barbara Brown. *Feasting on the Word*, Year B. Vol. 2, David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds., Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 2008, p. 53. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Biale, David. “The God with Breasts: El Shaddai in the Bible.” *History of Religions*, vol. 21, no. 3, 1982, pp. 240–256. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/1062160. Accessed 28 Feb. 2021](http://www.jstor.org/stable/1062160.%20Accessed%2028%20Feb.%202021).) [↑](#endnote-ref-2)