Genesis 17:1-7,15-16

Mark 8:31-38

*What’s in A Name?*

T.S. Eliot once wrote that a cat has three names: the species name that describes the breed, the name the owner gives the cat (this one is often a source of great embarrassment to the cat), and finally the name the cat gives itself. If we’re to think about names from the perspective of our Hebrew Scripture reading – we might add yet another category – the name that God gives us.

Naming is important. As Abraham and Sarah learned – and their grandson, Jacob, would learn after them – when you’re given a new name by God – nothing can ever be the same again. As Abraham and Sarah began their journey – they were already “up in years” – about 75 for Abraham – they hear God’s call and set off on an uncharted course, but their journey is in response to God. How much easier would it have been to just grow old in Ur where their relatives and ancestors were? But God calls them to a new future – and they respond by following even though some of their following made them laugh out loud (especially the part about future generations springing from them).

As these ancient stories have been shared over time, Abraham’s faith has been celebrated for following God into a future that wasn’t really clear. Just thinking about welcoming a child when you are up in years doesn’t sound too appealing though I know there are many grandparents who are raising their grandchildren. I don’t know how people in ancient times thought about their future – what their equivalent of some kind of security might look like – but I’m sure there must have been some who didn’t see “faithfulness” as the term they’d use for this aged wandering pair. And what about Sarai? The apostle Paul later gives the credit to Abraham for being faithful – but would Abraham have gone off on this adventure without Sarai? And what of the future generations God had promised through her? Sarah had to leave behind whatever life she had known before – uproot – and embrace not only the possibility of parenting in her advanced years – but parenting without the support of extended family. Her role – and her commitment to a new future was no less difficult than Abraham’s. God recognizes their faithfulness with new names – signs of their new identity and covenant relationship with God. For Abraham and Sarah their new names help shape their future.

This may all seem just an ancient story, but I began thinking about this church’s situation and you all facing a new future that isn’t really defined. I know that makes some people really uncomfortable. But there were Abraham and Sarah and this seemingly impossible promise, yet they went ahead believing in God’s promise to them. Walter Brueggemann notes that the church lives by the surprises of God, ie. that baby born to Sarah; a dead man raised to Easter life – even the wonder of creation itself. The long history of faith is walking into a future given by God. Lent is for seeing how to step into God’s future, so we are no longer defined by what is past. It’s not allowing our future to be defined by old agendas or fears. This is an opportunity to use our imaginations for determining a preferred future.

Just as Abraham and Sarah accepted their new names and their new roles from God, most of us have claimed the name “Christian” either at our baptism or confirmation. Perhaps some even have other names assigned to them indicating that they seek to follow Jesus. I recently came across an interesting comment by Kierkegaard who draws a distinction between an admirer and a follower. An admirer looks at Christ’s life and sees value in that life – but keeps a distance from it. A follower, on the other hand, strives to be what he or she admires. Jesus was looking for disciples – followers – people who would do more than admire what he was doing. He was looking for people who would see ‘the pattern he set for them – and seek to follow’. In today’s Gospel reading we find Peter, a disciple, a disciple who deeply loved and admired Jesus, being challenged with what it might mean to be more than an admirer. Jesus tells Peter and the other disciples who are there that his future is going to lead toward death. But Peter doesn’t want his beloved friend to leave – to die. Peter’s idea of what it means to be a Messiah is very different from what Jesus is telling him because the future that Jesus has claimed is not just a future of Jesus’ making. Jesus tells the disciples that those who seek to save their lives will lose them – but those who commit their lives to God’s future will save them. Henri Nouwen, in Bread for the Journey puts it this way:

“The great paradox of life is that those who lose their lives will gain them. This paradox becomes visible in very ordinary situations. If we cling to our friends, we may lose them, but if we are nonpossessive in our relationships, we will make many friends. If fame is what we seek and desire, it often vanishes as soon as we acquire it, but if we have no need to be known, we might be remembered long after our deaths. When we want to be in the center, we easily end up on the margins, but when we are free enough to be whatever we must be, we often find ourselves in the center. Giving our lives away for others is the greatest of all human acts. This will gain us our lives.”

The name change for Abraham and Sarah was an indication that God recognized in them the signs that they were seeking to follow in God’s ways. The disciples had to learn anew what it means to follow and not just admire Jesus.

We must take the best of what we know of our faith and live what we believe in our broken, scarred world – asking God to guide us into that future – for whatever the future may hold – let us cling to the promise that God will be in our future too.