

“A Holy, Human Exchange”  
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Presbyterian Church in Leonia

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Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16  
Mark 9:2-9

Today's scripture lessons tell us lots about the interactions between the human, and the holy. In Genesis, we hear this conversation from God, who is holy, to Abram, who is quite human. God gives Abram a new name, Abraham, and promises that he will be the ancestor of nations, that kings will come from him, and that God will hold an everlasting covenant with Abraham. And for Sarai, Abraham's wife, God promised a new name too: Sarah. She too would be blessed, and bear a son, and nations would spring forth from her, even kings. A change of name, a change of life.

“I told Jesus it would be alright, if he changed my name.” You can hear the raw lament in Nina Simone's voice in her recording of this old black spiritual. Though the song doesn't spell it out for the listener, you can feel the sense of loss of what might have belonged to the singer, and the aching longing for a new life to come, something she cannot yet see.

When God gives Sarah and Abraham their new names, they also gain a new sense of belonging. Though they received their first names, Abram and Sarai, from their families, most likely, their new names came directly from God-- setting their identity on divine things, and not just human things. This paves the way for how Jesus would come into the world. Though the scriptures trace his lineage to Jesse, father of King David, that lineage comes through Joseph-- whereas Matthew and Luke would have us believe that Mary was his only biological, human parent. Here, we have a mixing of human things, and divine things, so to speak.

Peter, in our Gospel reading today, gets chastised by Jesus, for rebuking Jesus after Jesus predicted his suffering, his rejection, his execution, and his resurrection. When Peter insists on a different narrative, Jesus tells him, “Get away from me, Satan, for you are setting your mind not on divine things, but on human things.”

*But what exactly is a human thing, and what is a divine thing?* I'm not so certain that the two have to be mutually exclusive. After all, our scriptures tell us that God made humankind in God's own image, male and female God created them. So, there is something of God reflected in humankind. Likewise, in Jesus God chose to live in human flesh. So, there is something human of God. If we truly allow Jesus to be our Rabbi, our Teacher, Jesus can show us how to bring the two together.

But not for poor Peter. He has a hard time thinking beyond the limits of human understanding. To him, suffering must be avoided. Power and recognition must be maintained. Death is an ending. Peter always wants to be Jesus' loyal defender, his right-hand man, the first to step out

to join him walking on the water. Peter, like Abraham and Sarah, had also been gifted with a new name. In Matthew's gospel Jesus tells his disciple, Simon, "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church!" English translation misses the clever wordplay here in both the Aramaic and Greek forms, in which the name Peter, or Cephas in Aramaic, means "rock."

I guess the thing about rocks is they don't move easily on their own, not without outside shifts. And so Peter's rock-solid stubbornness prevented him from seeing the truth Jesus was trying to name. I think we all, at times, can be a little like Peter.

We are in the midst of some undeniable shifts right now, and I am not sure what they will mean for us, and where that covenant relationship between the human and the holy might emerge.

In the past week, I read one newspaper article that featured Mount Sinai epidemiologist Shanna Swan, who has documented plummeting sperm counts over the last 40 years and general fertility decline due to environmental chemicals and lifestyle choices; she predicts that by the year 2045, humans will become an endangered species. Perhaps that's good news for climate change, but if you are still hoping for children or grandchildren, it could be a heartbreaking reality. We all might want to stop eating and drinking out of plastics, and certainly don't microwave food in them; leaching chemicals from plastics was noted as a primary culprit in this decline in fertility.

Another thing I read last week is that 1 in 6 Generation Z adults-- that is, young adults between the ages of 18-23-- identify as LGBTQ. It's not clear whether people's physiology and psychology is drastically shifting to become more queer, or if the lifting of societal shame around sexuality and gender identity has allowed people to be freer to express how they really feel.

Now, the Torah had a keen interest in keeping a narrow window of sexuality and relationship that was most likely to lead to the birth of Hebrew babies, lots of them, to fulfil that covenant God made with Abraham and Sarah, and also to help strengthen Hebrew presence and identity in the midst of many competing tribes, cultures, and beliefs in the same land.

But let's not lose sight of the fact that Jesus our Teacher tries to show Peter that life means more than self-preservation. "Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life, for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world, and to forfeit their life?"

Our anthem today, which you will hear so beautifully played by Renée Guerrero Harris and Mineko Yajima, is the Theme from Schindler's List, scored by John Williams. As I remember the stories for which this tune was written, it also hits me that last week marked 500,000 deaths from COVID-19 this year. I know that is not the same thing as death from human evil like the Holocaust, but they are losses nonetheless and deserve Mineko's loving and aching lament.

I remember the movie *Schindler's List* came out when I was a high school senior, and the JCC in my neighborhood paid for my whole senior class to see it in the theater. The movie tells of

Oskar Schindler, a German, Christian-born man who traded intelligence secrets for Nazi Germany, joined the Nazi party, and as an industrialist was always looking to trade favors to advance his wealth, no matter how terrible the people were who gave him favors and made him rich... *until* one day, when he had a spiritual awakening upon seeing the massacre of Polish Jews at the Kraków-Płaszów Concentration Camp. Schindler began asking that Jews be sent to work in the industrial enamel and ammunition factory *he* owned. On the surface, these requests seemed to the Nazis to be fitting with Schindler's business wheelings and dealings; of course this man they knew as an opportunist wanted the cheap labor of Jews. But Schindler was in fact intentionally saving lives with each Jew he managed to hire for his factory at Brunnlitz. Not only that, but he also falsified the records of his factory's ammunition production, to sabotage the military strategy of the Nazi army. It turns out he lost his great wealth, because he would spend it on cash and liquor bribes of Nazi officials so they would not pay close attention to what he was doing. He put his own life at great risk. But he saved 1,200 Jewish lives, and to this day Jews consider him a *mensch*-- a person of high integrity and honor.

"I told Jesus it would be alright, and the world would hate me, that I would go hungry, if he changed my name." Nina Simone knew there was a cost to getting a new name. But the cost of living in the old was even worse.

I suspect that each time the holy chooses to have an exchange with the human, we are invited and called towards change. We are called to lose our lives, to gain them. We are called to take up our cross and see what happens next. What is human, becomes more holy. And what is holy, becomes more human. Abraham and Sarah went from human ancestry, to a holy ancestry. Jesus went from being at one with God, to being at one with humans, with you, with me... especially in the moment of his death on the cross. In this exchange, we come to know God and find out what life *really* means.