

## “What Messiah Were You Expecting?”

Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler

Presbyterian Church in Leonia

February 25, 2024 Lent 2B

---

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

Mark 8:31-38

I want to begin by asking you a question: what is your name? Who chose it, and what does it mean? Maybe you will want to ask this of someone else over lunch before the Annual Meeting begins this afternoon.

A name is a powerful thing. In the bible: when a name gets assigned to someone, usually it holds significant meaning. When a name gets changed, pay special attention, because the new name holds spiritual transformation and covenantal promise.

When God made a covenant to Abram and Sarai, God gave them new names: Abram, which means “Father of Height” or “Exalted Father” in Hebrew, became Abraham, which means “Father of Many.” And Sarai, whose name shares the same roots as the name Israel, means “she strives” or “contentious” just as Israel means “struggles with God. Sarai became “Sarah” which means “princess”-- pointing to the promise that she will become the mother and ruler of nations. And indeed, in the covenant God makes with Abraham and Sarah promised that Sarah would bear a child, even in their old age.

Several people in the bible experience an important name change. Jacob becomes Israel; Jesus changes Simon’s name to Peter, which means Rock, and tells him “on this rock I will build my church.” Saul becomes Paul. Naomi, in the book of Ruth, who calls herself “Mara,” which means bitter, after her husband and sons have died.

Have you ever heard the term “dead name?” When someone’s gender reveals itself to be more expansive than what others assumed from their birth anatomy, that person may choose to take on a new name, a name that better represents how they see themselves and how they want the world to see them and the gender they are living into. When that happens, the name they were given at birth becomes a “dead name,” no longer meant to be used. In some states, kids like this have become politicized, and so you hear of things like school boards forbidding teachers from calling students by their chosen names, and instead calling them by their dead names. It would be one awful thing if this disrespected the student and their humanity. But even worse, it also models to the student’s peers the notion such kids are worthy of scorn and mistreatment. We saw this month the tragic death of an Oklahoma high school student, Nex Benedict, who

identified as non-binary, and had taken on a new name as they grew into their sense of self and tried to share that with the world. The light that shone in Nex exposed the hatred in others. Nex was repeatedly bullied, and in their last full day of life, was attacked in a bathroom by their peers; they died the next day.

But in the bible, there is a circle of honor and blessing upon those who take on a new name. Even when they are not respected in their own lifetime— like Paul, who spent a good part of his ministry persecuted and imprisoned—the bible makes sure their name is remembered, their life is honored, and their message gets told.

Jesus came with a whole bunch of names: Emmanuel, which means *God-with-Us*; the name Jesus itself comes from the Hebrew name, Yeshua, which means, “*God saves.*” In the verse preceding our gospel passage today, Peter boldly calls Jesus an important name: Messiah.

However, Peter seems confused about what that truly means. And while he tries to hu-mansplain to Jesus what a Messiah is, Jesus rebukes him and says, “Get behind me, Satan!”

Sometimes I wonder if Jesus would call me *Satan*, too.

I ask this question not because I harbor evil intentions for God or for the world. I do not.

I ask this question not because I am part of some secret Satanic ritual cult that the Presbytery somehow did not find out about when I got approved to serve as your Pastor. Let me be clear: I am in no way affiliated with Satan rituals.

I sincerely ask this question— would Jesus tell me, Leah Fowler, “Get behind me, Satan”? – because I can truly empathize with Peter. Peter, no longer known by his dead name, but his new name which means Rock, because Peter was the Rock upon which Jesus would build his church, felt like he needed to exert some leadership in the situation Jesus was presenting. You see, Jesus had just told Peter and the disciples that the Son of Man— Jesus himself— “must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.”

And Peter pulled Jesus aside and began to rebuke him. Honestly, I cannot blame Peter. Throughout my faith journey, I have questioned why it is that Jesus *had* to suffer, be crucified, and die. Does human salvation really require someone’s else’s death? Is God not powerful enough to save us without someone having to die for it? I won’t

speak for you, but personally, I don't want someone to have to die in order for me to live.

And so, if I had the chance to have Jesus right here, in the flesh, like Peter, I would want to pull Jesus aside and say, "What's going on here? I don't want you to die! Can't we think up another way?" And he might ever-so-gently push me back and say, "Get behind me, Satan!"

I suspect that, like Peter, I am not always good at understanding what Jesus was talking about. Like, Jesus is talking, but the people around him are already thinking about the ideas they have made up about him, or the ideas that others have made up about him. And so, we fail to truly hear what Jesus is really saying.

Here are a few ways I think we have misheard Jesus:

- 1) We think the name *Messiah* means military conqueror. There was the belief, among many of Jesus' same faith, that God would establish a new king from the line of David, who would be a military hero and would establish the security and kingdom of Israel, once and for all. You may think that this is the idea of the past. But it still exists today, in thinking such as the Christian nationalist idea that God chose America as a special nation, to rule above all other nations. Or the idea that the only way to establish peace in the middle east is through might, destroying lives and homes to secure land for *one* group. But the kind of kingship Jesus offers wears a different kind of crown. It lays bare the inadequacies of empire, and offers instead a beloved community, where *all* are treasured and have sacred worth and belonging.
- 2) We mishear Jesus when we believe that God requires violence for our redemption: only the price of someone else's blood can remove the stain of our sin. Theologians call this the substitutionary view of atonement. This view looks at God through the lens of the violence we know in this world. But God's ways aren't like that. God is not a masochist. God can create justice, without blood. The blood God does spill is the blood of new birth, not of sacrificial killing. What Jesus offers is a new way of living- not a recipe for our death. It is true that people following in the ways of Jesus have died, and will continue to do so, at the hands of those who are threatened by his bold message. But the holy purpose comes not in their suffering, but in the boldness with which they were willing to tell a sacred story— often, a story that lives long beyond them.
- 3) Another way we mishear Jesus is to think that we are called to endure suffering, in order to participate in Jesus' story. As a community that walks with survivors of domestic violence, I want to caution against such problematic thinking.

Women have been told for years to *endure* abuse from their partners– to take up their crosses as Jesus did. To deny their suffering bodies and spirits, because the reward they will receive in heaven is so much better. But if we truly listen to what Jesus has been telling us, we may notice that Jesus calls us to stand in solidarity with those who suffer; he calls us to alleviate suffering where possible, and to transform it into healing and liberation. And when we suffer– which we do; Christianity never promises that we won't– Jesus sees us, and loves us, and knows what we experience because he has felt it firsthand. We are not alone.

We may cling tightly to the idea of a Messiah, but let's make sure we are worshiping the Messiah God actually sent us, rather than any of these ideas that in the end cannot really save us.

Every Lent, the image of the cross casts shadows on our faith. There is no avoiding it, really. And so my questions must be revisited. Did Jesus have to die? I think he did. But maybe not for the reasons we have been led to believe. Jesus had to die, because he was the Son of Man– the Human One– as much as he was the Son of God. As humans all die, Jesus had to do that as well. He drew near to human suffering at its rawest, and probed its depths. We can know in our suffering, that we are never alone. But he took that universal human experience, and made it something else entirely– not an ending, but a birth to something more– an everlasting life with God. Jesus had to die because we let him die. Our human propensity towards violence led him to the cross. But Jesus overturned the power of violence and domination; his resurrection was an act of resistance to the powers that seek to diminish and destroy, and his story became so much more than theirs will ever be.

In this season of Lent, when Jesus asks us again to “take up your cross” and follow him, let's get behind Jesus. Not because we are Satan, but because Jesus is the only one who can lead us through these shadows, and into life.