

## CHANGE MY NAME

John 1:29-42

*A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward, on January 19, 2020, the Second Sunday in Ordinary Time, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.*

---

*The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.' I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel." And John testified, "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God." The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!"*

*The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, "What are you looking for?" They said to him, "Rabbi" (which translated means Teacher), "where are you staying?" He said to them, "Come and see." They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon. One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. He first found his brother Simon and said to him, "We have found the Messiah" (which is translated Anointed). He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, "You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas" (which is translated Peter).*

### I.

I don't know when I first heard it, but it was written by Roberta Flack and recorded on her album *First Take* in 1969.<sup>1</sup> She sings it with a meditative, almost plaintive mood; as I read her words aloud, I cannot help but bring a harder edge.

I told Jesus be alright if you change my name  
I told Jesus be alright if you changed, changed my name  
I told Jesus be alright be alright be alright  
I told Jesus be alright if you change my name  
If you change my name

Then he told me, he said the world will turn away from you child  
if I change your name  
Yes he told me, said the world will turn away from you child,  
if I change your name  
I told Jesus be alright be alright be alright  
I told Jesus be alright if you change my name

Then he told me, he said your father won't know you child,  
if I change your name  
Yes he told me, said your mother won't know you child, child  
if I change your name  
But I told Jesus, I said it would be alright, be alright, be alright

---

<sup>1</sup> Roberta Flack, "I Told Jesus," Atlantic Records 1969. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C39ItA1nvUc>

If my father turns away now, and my mother turn away now  
Yes my brother, my baby sister, turn away, turn away  
I told Jesus be alright, if you change my name, change my name,  
change my name  
If he change ..... my ..... name.

## II.

It is not just the New Testament in which Biblical characters undergo a change of name symbolic of the change of heart or mind, direction or call.

- At age seventy-five and sixty-five respectively,<sup>2</sup> Abram and Sarai are called by God to receive the blessing of land, descendants, and nationhood, to become the people who would bear the name of God and through whom all the peoples of the earth would be blessed. Thereafter, Abram and Sarai came to be called Abraham and Sarah,<sup>3</sup> the names by which we remember and revere them.
- After wrestling with an angel into the wee hours of the morning, emerging both blessed and limping, their grandson is given a new name, from Jacob, which means “the supplanter,” to Israel, which means “the one who strives with God.”
- Less known to us – but no less important – is the mother-in-law in the Book of Ruth, Naomi, who, after losing her Moabite husband and Moabite sons in the land of Moab to which she has migrated from Israel returns home to Bethlehem with a message of defeat and dissent: “Call me no longer Naomi” [which means Pleasant], but call me Mara [which means Bitter]...for the Lord has dealt bitterly with me.”<sup>4</sup>

Changes of name do not cease with the opening of the New Testament. The two figures who lead Christianity from being a small sect within Judaism to a religion that will help define the world even to our day also receive a change of name at the hands of naming God.

- Seeing “a light from heaven flash around him and hearing a voice, a precocious young man within Judaism experiences the risen Christ, and a few chapters later, his name is changed from Saul to Paul as he is commissioned to spread the good news of the resurrection throughout the Greco-Roman world.”<sup>5</sup>
- Earlier, in our passage today, when Simon is brought to Jesus by his brother Andrew, Jesus looks at Simon and says, “You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas (which is translated Peter)<sup>6</sup>,” and which means Rock. Jesus will later say to Peter: “...on this rock I will build my church...”<sup>7</sup>

“I told Jesus be all right if he change my name.”

---

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 12:4 reports Abram is seventy-five when God calls him; Genesis 17:8 reports Abram to be one hundred when Isaac is born; Sarah ninety.

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 17:5 and 17:15.

<sup>4</sup> Ruth 1:20-21.

<sup>5</sup> Acts 9:1-9 and 13:9.

<sup>6</sup> John 1:42.

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 16:13-20.

\*\*

In some ways I'm not the right one to talk much about a change of name, for I was born into this faith and it has remained with me "Rock-like" for as long as I can remember. I haven't wrestled directly with an angel, nor heard the voice of God directly call my name. Yet I have seen people changed in ways beautiful and powerful that I cannot help but attribute to God.

- I have seen people like Naomi move from blessedness to bitterness and from bitterness to blessedness.
- I have seen people like Abraham and Sarah set out on a "God-driven" journey of whose endpoint or destination they had no idea at the time of their departure.
- I have at times wrestled indirectly with God and – like Jacob – emerged blessed and limping, limping and blessed.
- And I have seen even seen "decently and in order" Presbyterians be moved by the Spirit of God – sometimes in quiet ways, sometimes with great drama – that even if they keep their name they emerge radically different and deeper people.

\*\*

I have also been privileged to see people change their hearts and minds: their view of the world, their view of themselves and their place in it, their view of faith, their view of our country, their view of scripture from which we in the church consider all our changes.

- I have seen people no longer view scripture as a book dominated by judgement and severity and instead come to see the book as being as open to people where they are as its pages are open on a coffee table or library stand.
- I have seen people change their views of who experiences human love in ways that are genuine, beautiful, blessed, and legal.
- I have seen people change their views to accept that war is sometimes a necessary response to human destructiveness, and to come to see that it should nearly always be the last response after all other attempts have turned up empty.
- I have seen people change their views on what it means – what it *truly* means – that "all men are created equal,"<sup>8</sup> that "in Christ there is no longer Jew or Greek...slave or free...male and female, for all...are one in Christ Jesus"<sup>9</sup> and that people "will come from east and east, north and south, and sit at table in the kingdom."<sup>10</sup>

\*\*

The man whose birth our nation commemorates this weekend – Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. – received a name at birth that stayed with him thirty-nine years but led so many others to change their names. He had the most remarkable ability of anyone since Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass to speak the language of the

---

<sup>8</sup> *The Declaration of Independence*, 1776.

<sup>9</sup> Galatians 3:28.

<sup>10</sup> Luke 13:29.

Bible and the language of the Declaration of Independence as if they were his native tongue and as if they could become ours.

At various times in my life, I have had on my wall in a small, black frame, a black-and-white photo of the iconic posters held high in my home town "I Am A Man." Dr. King went a long way to leading all of us to be able to say: "I Am A Man. I Am A Woman." And then perhaps even more importantly to follow with: "So Are You." While the road ahead on which he placed our feet is still strewn with fallen trees and seemingly immovable boulders ahead of us, we've come a long way in accepting many changes that are worthy of a change of name.

"I told Jesus, be all right if he change my name."

### III.

But Roberta Flack knew well what Abraham and Sarah and Naomi and Peter and Paul came to experience adorned with their new names: that change doesn't come easy; that it rarely involves a unanimous vote on the part of the community of which we are part or the family in which we have been reared; and that during the decades and even centuries it unfolds, it leaves behind many who suffer for the time the struggle takes.

- Abraham and Sarah journeyed across nearly 700 miles of desert and 25 additional years of life before their only son Isaac was born to them and then quickly saw the family become deeply estranged from one another over God's inscrutable command that Abraham sacrifice Isaac and Abraham's willingness to obey,<sup>11</sup> until God intervened with a different set of orders at the last minute.
- Likewise, Isaac's son Jacob emerged blessed from his wrestling match with an angel, but he also emerged with a lifelong limp.<sup>12</sup>
- And as a hymn from my youth reminds us: "Peter, who hauled the teaming sail, Head down was crucified."<sup>13</sup>

As Roberta Flack sings:

*...he said the world will turn away from you child  
if I change your name  
...the world will turn away from you child,  
if I change your name*

*...your father won't know you child...  
....your mother won't know you child...  
...my brother, my baby sister, turn away, turn away*

*[Yet] I told Jesus be alright...  
If he change ..... my ..... name.*

---

<sup>11</sup> Abraham's command to sacrifice Isaac occurs in Genesis 22, and after Abraham passes the test, God withdraws the command. Yet God never again speaks to Abraham; Abraham and Sarah never again speak to one another; Abraham and Sarah live apart (Genesis 22:10 says Abraham lived at Beersheba and 23:1 says Sarah lived in Hebron); it is God, not Abraham, who blesses Isaac (Genesis 25:1), and Isaac is not present when Abraham buries Sarah (Genesis 23:1-20).

<sup>12</sup> Genesis 32:22-2.

<sup>13</sup> William Alexander Percy, "They Cast Their Nets in Galilee," written in 1924.

\*\*

Three trees on Calvary.

The balcony of the Lorraine Motel.

The many places that Christians  
– known and unknown –  
*Lose* their lives or *give* their lives  
Because of what they believe,  
What they stand for,  
What they fight for,  
What they seek to change in the world around them  
That it might come a little closer  
To what they believe is  
The will and way of God.

They remind us  
That the change of name we experience  
At the hands of Jesus Christ  
Runs much deeper for our lives and our world  
Than mere nomenclature.

“They told Jesus be all right if he change their name.”

Amen.