**What’s In A Name**

**Message for Common Ground West**

**Sunday, October 22, 2017**

Have you ever really thought about the power of names? Recently I was sitting on the sidelines of my granddaughter’s soccer game which is a great place to hear names. Parents are calling to their children to encourage them. Sitting there I heard Iris, Atticus, Delano, and, of course, Hanley…that’s my granddaughter. I remarked to my son, Jesse, about the names that sounded a bit unusual to me. He said that new parents nowadays seem to be determined to give their children unique names that are either new inventions or old names from many years ago. Names like Ida and Rudy, which happen to be the names of my wife, Elizabeth’s, grandparents.

It might seem odd to talk about names as we’re in the midst of a series on evangelism, but stick with me a bit. My full name is Timothy James Kurth and that’s been my name since I was about four years old. You see, just before my fourth birthday my mother and father divorced and my mother quickly remarried. My birth name was Timothy Gerald Hanley because my mother was married to Thomas Gerald Hanley, though my father went by Gerald. Shortly after divorcing Gerald Hanley my mother married James Kurth and, viola, I became Timothy James Kurth and remain so to this day. At fifty-nine years old I’m pretty much settled with my name, though when Jim Kurth skipped town and divorced my mom when I was twenty years old and Gerald Hanley came back into my life for the first time in more than sixteen years, you can bet I had some name issues to work through. Not to mention a whole lot of baggage related to my family of origin. But today I like my name and I have a wife, two children, a daughter-in-law and two grandchildren who carry the name Kurth. Though, if you were paying attention, you know one of my grandchildren is named Hanley. My legal name is Timothy but I really prefer to be called Tim.

That’s enough about me. Right now I want you to stand up, find someone in the room you don’t know and introduce yourself. If you can honestly say you know everyone in the room then go introduce yourself to the person you know the least. Go! (allow about a minute for people to pair up)

Okay, now I’d like you and your new friend to meet two other people. Introduce your friend to the other pair and your friend will introduce you. (allow time for pairs to form groups of four)

Staying in your groups of four please grab chairs and sit in circles. You can spread out around the room if you need to. (allow time) For the next ten minutes or so each of you is going to do what I just did a couple of minutes ago. Share your full name, first middle and last, and any other names you’ve had (including maiden names or baptismal names for those raised Catholic, and any significant nicknames), the history behind your name, whether or not you like your name and what you preferred to be called. Start with the person whose birthday is closest to today and go around your circle clockwise.

(Allow ten minutes watching for when most everyone is finished)

Go ahead and rejoin your families and/or friends and turn the chairs roughly forward. Don’t worry about returning them to neat rows.

Thanks for being vulnerable and taking the time to share your name. This is one of the most revealing things you could do and for some it was emotionally challenging. Thank you for trusting this as a safe place to reveal yourself to new friends. Is there someone here who found this particularly difficult and, if so, would you be willing to tell us why it was?

Names are a big deal. There’s a vulnerability that comes with knowing someone’s name and someone knowing your name. If you want to see this in real life the next time you’re in a grocery store or anyplace where people wear nametags on their uniform, call them by name. You see most people who wear nametags forget they have them on. When you call someone by name you’ll see a momentary flash in their eyes as they wonder, “who is this person and how do they know me?”

God uses names and naming throughout the Biblical narrative. We could spend the better part of this week unpacking all the ways God uses names but since we don’t have that kind of time I’m going to highlight just a few. Let’s start with Abram, a man who lived with his wife Sarai in the land of Haran. God called Abram and Sarai to leave their homeland and go to a “land I will show you.” Not even a hint was given as to where that land was just get up and go and once you’re on the way I’ll give you further direction. Oh, and by the way, at some point I’ll change your name to Abraham and your wife’s name to Sarah because those names tell a story that needs telling. A story God needed to tell. This name change happened 24 years after God called Abram. Here’s when it happened for him at age 99 recorded in the book of Genesis chapter 17 at verse 5.

***5****No longer shall your name be called Abram,[*[*b*](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis+17&version=ESV#fen-ESV-403b)*] but your name shall be Abraham,[*[*c*](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis+17&version=ESV#fen-ESV-403c)*] for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations.****6****I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you.****7****And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.*

And here’s where God changed Sarai’s name in Genesis 17 at verse 15:

***15****And God said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah[*[*d*](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis+17&version=ESV#fen-ESV-413d)*] shall be her name.****16****I will bless her, and moreover, I will give[*[*e*](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis+17&version=ESV#fen-ESV-414e)*] you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall become nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.”*

Now there are some names with a big story to tell…a God story to tell. Imagine an old friend of Abram meeting Abraham. Hey, buddy, what’s with the name change? Well, let me tell you!

Here’s another interesting name story with a twist. God calls Moses through the unique medium of a bush that is on fire but is not consumed. He calls Moses by name and tells him that he has been chosen to be the one through whom God will announce the deliverance of his people from Egypt. And Moses isn’t interested. Not only is he not interested but he actively argues with God trying hard to convince him he’s made a huge mistake. Here’s the story from the book of Exodus chapter 3:

 *Now Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian, and he led his flock to the west side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God.****2****And the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush. He looked, and behold, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed.****3****And Moses said, “I will turn aside to see this great sight, why the bush is not burned.”****4****When the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, “Moses, Moses!” And he said, “Here I am.”****5****Then he said, “Do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.”****6****And he said, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.*

***7****Then the Lord said, “I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings,****8****and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites.****9****And now, behold, the cry of the people of Israel has come to me, and I have also seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them.****10****Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt.”****11****But Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?”****12****He said, “But I will be with you, and this shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain.”*

***13****Then Moses said to God, “If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?”****14****God said to Moses, “I am who I am.”[*[*a*](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Exodus+3&version=ESV#fen-ESV-1594a)*] And he said, “Say this to the people of Israel: ‘I am has sent me to you.’”*

There’s much more to the story and Moses continues to argue with God but for today I want to point out something most people don’t realize about this exchange. Moses really, really doesn’t want to do what God is calling him to do. You see he was a wanted man in Egypt for having killed an Egyptian guard. Further, he didn’t see himself as leader material. But once it began to dawn on him that God was not going to take ‘no’ for an answer, Moses tried to gain some control of the situation. It goes right by us in our culture but in ancient times it was believed that if you knew someone’s name you had some power or at least parity in the relationship. In a clever attempt to gain some power in a situation obviously out of his control Moses asks God for his name. I say clever because he asks, “So…if the people say who sent me what name should I give them?” God is not so easily tricked. Though we have come to use I Am as a name for God it isn’t that at all. When God tells Moses I Am that I Am so tell the people I Am has sent me what he’s saying is, my name is none of your business and you have no say in this calling I am giving you. I Am God and I Am out of your control.

Okay, one more naming story and we’ll move to wrap this up. This is another great one. It’s the story of Gideon, one of the great Judges of Israel in the time before the kings. His story is recounted in the book of Judges chapter 6:

***11****Now the angel of the Lord came and sat under the terebinth at Ophrah, which belonged to Joash the Abiezrite, while his son Gideon was beating out wheat in the winepress to hide it from the Midianites.****12****And the angel of the Lord appeared to him and said to him, “The Lord is with you, O mighty man of valor.”****13****And Gideon said to him, “Please, my lord, if the Lord is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all his wonderful deeds that our fathers recounted to us, saying, ‘Did not the Lord bring us up from Egypt?’ But now the Lord has forsaken us and given us into the hand of Midian.”****14****And the Lord[*[*a*](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Judges+6&version=ESV#fen-ESV-6669a)*]turned to him and said, “Go in this might of yours and save Israel from the hand of Midian; do not I send you?”****15****And he said to him, “Please, Lord, how can I save Israel? Behold, my clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father's house.”*

You see the Midianites were literally plaguing Israel. God had allowed the Midianites to overwhelm Israel as a discipline for their disobedience. Every time Israel’s crops came in the Midianites would destroy them utterly. The Israelites had taken to hiding in caves and trying to protect their harvested food as best they could. When we find Gideon he is threshing wheat down in a wine press. This is challenging because when threshing wheat you should do it out in the open where the wind can blow off the chaff and the wheat grains can be easily separated. But to hide from the Midianites Gideon is down inside a winepress trying to thresh wheat. The Angel of the Lord appears to him and calls him a “Mighty Man of Valor”! This title is dripping with irony as Gideon points out. “I’m the weakest man of the weakest clan hiding in a wine press! Who in the world are you talking to with this mighty man of valor stuff?” But God persists because Gideon is not a Mighty Man of Valor because of who he is. He’s a Mighty Man of Valor because of who God is and because of what God is calling him to do. The angel is announcing God’s intention for Gideon *not* Gideon’s current reality.

Let’s look at these words from Isaiah spoken to the people of Israel and echoing down through the ages to you and to me. From Isaiah chapter 43:

*But now thus says the Lord,*

*he who created you, O Jacob,*

 *he who formed you, O Israel:*

*“Fear not, for I have redeemed you;*

 *I have called you by name, you are mine.*

*2 When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;*

 *and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;*

*when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,*

 *and the flame shall not consume you.*

*3 For I am the Lord your God,*

 *the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.*

We are named by God. He is our God and we are the people of his pasture and the sheep of his hand. Here’s the thing about being people of God. He has an intention for us. He has an intention for you. For Abram his intention was that he leave his home and travel to a foreign land to be named later. For Moses his intention was that he be a deliverer of the people of Israel from the land of Egypt. For Gideon it was that he would rise up out of that winepress and valiantly lead his people to throw off the oppression of the Midianites. These are all great stories but they have one thing in common. None of these people wanted to do what God called them to do. None of them sought out God and said, Lord I want to do something dangerous and uncomfortable that might threaten my very existence on this earth. No, God called them to accomplish his purpose, filled with his power, in response to his calling.

In every case where God calls people one of three things happen: 1) They refuse to go like Jonah did. 2) They argue with God trying to convince him that he’s made a horrible mistake like Moses and Gideon did. Or 3) They go but along the way they keep trying to make God’s calling fit their agenda like Abram and Sarai did (there’s not time to unpack that but go read their story). Even the disciples who were each called individually by Jesus and some of them even renamed (Simon became Peter, Saul became Paul) didn’t really, fully understand what was going on and often tried to convince Jesus his plan was a little crazy.

Let’s land this. You have a name and you have a story associated with that name. Somewhere along the way your name and your story intersect with God. For some of you that first intersection might go back to birth. For some that first intersection might be happening right now. When God intersects with your story he calls you by name and he has an intention for you. He might call you to go when you’d rather stay. He might call you to speak truth to power in order to set people free. He might call you strong when you feel you’re at the weakest point in your life. It doesn’t matter because when God calls it’s never about us. It’s about him and his plan for all of humanity. Nick is right when he says evangelism is scary because, at its core, evangelism is about going where God sends you and doing what God calls you to do. Since Pentecost God doesn’t show up in burning bushes or announcing angels standing over your wine press. His Holy Spirit has been poured out. And for all of us who have received Jesus we have that same Holy Spirit dwelling *inside of us*. It is God’s Holy Spirit that moves us, challenges us, speaks to us in those quiet moments, inspires us to reach out a hand when we’d rather turn and walk away.

Evangelism is not about knowing the Bible frontwards and backwards. It’s not about convincing people to follow Jesus. It is not about converting the masses and saving them from Hell. Evangelism is about tuning in to the voice of God’s Spirit, listening closely, and doing what you’re told. Evangelism is as easy and as hard as sharing your name, telling your story, and telling where God’s story intersects your story wherever God puts you.