



Sermon for the Second Sunday in Lent, Feb. 2021

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Coeur d'Alene The Rev. Dr. David Gortner

[Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16](#)

[Mark 8:31-38](#)

Welcome, friends. Peace be with you, at this end of February and this second Sunday of Lent.

Today's scriptures open for us the power of naming, speaking truth, and promising.

My name is David – David Timothy Gortner.

That was not my original chosen name. Before I was born, my parents and grandparents had thought together about a name for a boy, and had decided on Stephen Maurice. Maurice was the name of my father's father, a Lutheran pastor and gentle soul who had died a year before I was born.

But then, when I was born, as my mother held me, she said to herself and to my father, "That's no Stephen Maurice." And they thought together, and she named me David Timothy. One for the Old Testament, one for the New Testament.

David means "beloved."

Timothy means "honoring God" or "God honors."

Names are powerful. Names mark us.

Naming is an act of power, and act of creation. From the beginning, naming has been part of creating. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. In the beginning, God said, "Let there be light" – and God separated the light from the darkness, and called one Day and the other Night. God created humans in God's own image. And that first man, named Adam, which means ground or earth, is given some first work to do – to name all the animals. At the discovery of the woman by his side and from his side, names her Eve, which means living.

What do your own names mean? What do they signify?

What nicknames have you born and been given in your life? What names have you taken for yourself? Why? What did they mean – and what did they mean to you?

Names are part of our identity. They capture something for us. They are a base that holds us and anchors us – and also gives us a launching point from which to stretch and expand.

In today's scriptures, God is busy naming people. And these names have power.

Abram and Sarai had lived as nomads, wandering Arameans, for decades of their life, leaving the city they knew in order to follow a prompting by God. His name, meaning "exalted father," must have bit at him as he and Sarai had not been able to have children. Now, in his very old age, when he was ninety-nine, God appears to him, names himself (God Almighty), makes a covenant with him – a binding promise that has far-reaching implications and importance – and renames him Abraham, meaning "father of nations," promising that Abraham will become the ancestor of many nations and kings. Sarai (meaning "princess," feminine of "chieftan") is renamed Sarah (meaning the same, but having the hint of the word for god, so possibly "princess of God").

This renaming marks a pivot in their story. Things begin to unfold in different ways in the remainder of their life. It becomes serious for them, the shift from wanderers to future ancestors, forerunners. It remains unclear how it all will unfold. But the covenant has been made, and they have been renamed, and their identity and purpose changes. God has claimed and named them for what they will become. God is calling forth their fuller identity.

So, let's pivot to the Gospel of Mark for today. Jesus also does some naming today. It is not pleasant naming. He calls Peter Satan!

Jesus seems to have a penchant for naming and renaming Simon. First, Jesus renames Simon as Peter. Now, here, he names him as Satan. He returns to calling him Peter, but also calls him Simon. What are we to make of these many turns in naming? What is Jesus saying about Peter's identity and purpose?

Throughout this Lent, we find Jesus encountering, naming, and holding up a mirror to reality. Last week, we heard of Jesus being driven by the Spirit – just after his baptism and claiming by God – driven by the Spirit into the wilderness, there to face temptation by Satan, dwell with the wild beasts, and receive the care of angels. There, in the wilderness, Jesus faced all of reality of himself. Claimed and named by God as beloved Son, he feels the power of the Spirit driving him, experiences the alluring temptations of Satan to pull him toward self-serving ends, senses his kinship with all creatures even in their lowest nature, and knows the care of those showing their higher nature. Jesus returns from the wilderness knowing all of this reality in his own experience. Jesus has faced and recognized the truth.

And now, Jesus continues in his ministry to speak the truth. Unvarnished, direct, not smoothed over – spoken openly. Just, the truth. "The Son of Man 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” (Mark 8:31-32). This is just too much for Peter, who tries to hush Jesus and tone him down. In Mark, we don’t have Peter’s words. You can almost hear him say, though, “Enough of that, Jesus – one doesn’t say such things.” He might have tried to give Jesus some lessons on how to win friends and influence people, some script from the power of positive thinking. In another Gospel, Peter’s words are “God forbid!”

But this *is* a temptation. And it comes from someone close to Jesus – from his own inner circle. The temptation is to withdraw from speaking the truth about what is and what will unfold.

So, here, in his travels with his disciples, Jesus encounters the wilderness again. Jesus responds by speaking a hard truth to Peter. He names what Peter is being, in this moment. Peter is being the opposer, the accuser in the older Hebrew notion of *satan*, the underminer, the tempter or deceiver. Jesus speaks this truth directly to Peter, as a wake-up call. “Here is what you are being, right now.”

This is a hard thing to do, to speak truth so directly. And the truth Jesus was saying about himself and the path ahead for him was not pretty – it was gruesome, frightening, tragic. It is no wonder that Peter wanted him to tone it down or change the subject.

This happened to Martin Luther King, Jr., when he was in jail in Birmingham. Eight moderate white pastors, priests, and rabbis in Birmingham wrote and published a letter, trying to get African-Americans to stop protesting. “We strongly urge our own Negro community to withdraw support from these demonstrations.” Martin responded in his own Letter from a Birmingham Jail, “I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro’s great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen’s Council or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to ‘order’ than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice... who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a ‘more convenient season.’” Martin names what they are doing. Martin then goes on to outline why directness and peaceful protest is essential when injustice is so embedded in the way things are.

This naming of people is powerful. It holds up the mirror. It helps people see who they are being now, who they have been. It also calls them to something more than they have been so far.

This kind of naming, that calls us to ourselves, to see ourselves honestly – or, as with Abraham and Sarah, calls us to our greater potential and purpose – is unsettling and jarring. But it is not the same experience as name-calling. Name-calling is simply for the purpose of cutting someone down, chipping away at their self-esteem, undermining their identity and purpose, twisting who they are. Name-callers have no long-term care for the people they label. We have plenty of that in our current political life. Cheap shots that create cheap thrills for the cheap-minded, at the cost of integrity and the loss of respect for anyone but oneself. There is no

concern by name-callers for any covenant, promise, truth, or long-term relationship with others.

This is an important distinction. Speaking the truth in love, even when spoken boldly and directly, seeks to help and mend and correct and restore and empower. If you hear name-calling, as we do so often now in our political arena, don't let it hook you into some twisted satisfaction or woundedness. If it does not seek to sustain, strengthen, or deepen relationship, if it does not seek truth, it is worthless.

So, what's important to recognize is that Jesus stays in relationship with Peter. He doesn't simply withdraw and abandon Peter. He doesn't shun him. He doesn't call him "Satan" and then leave it at that. Jesus speaks a harsh wake-up word of reality to Peter in the context of a relationship that is continuing and that will not end.

Who has done this for you? It may not have always been pleasant. It is often surprising. But in the end, we are often grateful for honest and true naming.

For whom have you done this? It is a bold thing, to name and to speak reality and truth. It is a daring thing, to name in the hope of promise of what someone might become. Naming is a declaration.

When have we retreated from naming and speaking truth directly? When have we maybe coaxed others to "tone it down"? When have we, ourselves been urged to not speak so directly? What has been the cost of those tempting choices and nudges, in ourselves and others around us?

Jesus returns to what he had been saying, and uses the reality of what he was going to face, to issue an invitation. "If any of you would be my disciple, well, take up your cross and follow me." The cross of Jesus takes us into other wildernesses where we face the reality of ourselves and the world around us – in the temple, in the garden, in the public square, in the place called The Skull outside the city where we banish and sacrifice others. Jesus, God incarnate, the Human One, continues the journey, speaking and revealing the truth as he goes. The cross of Jesus is a cross of naming, and speaking, and seeing reality – the world as it is. No matter what the cost.

I pray that each of us open ourselves to God's direct truth about ourselves and the world around us, and to God's call to us to become more fully what God invites us to be. I pray that each of us hear God's naming us, even if at times it comes as a correction. I pray that we find courage to speak truth where it must be spoken, to name what has yet to be named. And I pray that we have the grace to speak the truth in love, even when directly and clearly, staying in relationship with those to whom we must speak.