

I. Intro: *(a little imaginary scene)*

A. *(walking around wearing Neil name tag)* **Good morning, ladies & gentlemen & welcome to the National Christian Amnesiacs' Convention!**

I'm glad you all remembered to come ... Oh, you say you didn't remember? ... Well, I'm glad someone brought you

Greetings in the name of our God, who never forgets. Let me introduce myself. My name is ... My name is ... What IS my name? *(approach someone in audience)* Can you tell me?

Oh, I guess that's why I have this name tag on ... It says Neil ... that must be my name.

But, how do I know that's really my name? Here at the Convention, somebody told me that we had a Bible study to tell us who we are, & someone handed me some more name tags. *(pulls other tags out of pocket, and attaches them to chest, one by one)* So I guess this must be my name, right? *(say it aloud, such as "I'm _____")* Or maybe this one is? How do I know which is really my name? ...

B. Importance of names

1. To those of you who still remember who you are, I don't mean to make fun of people who truly have amnesia or even dementia ... That was just an illustration of how we take names for granted.
2. Names carry tremendous power in our lives
 - a) Yet, unless we have one of those rare names in English like Faith or Charity, many of us don't even know what our names mean, ...
 - b) So we go thru life responding by habit to a name spoken to us
3. Most of us keep our given names for our whole life
 - a) Aside from those in Catholic religious orders, or those who convert to another religion, getting renamed in a religious sense is not common in North America today.
 - b) But when you go outside of our European-centered traditions, name changes are not so uncommon

Some of you non-amnesiacs might remember the 1990 Kevin Costner movie, *Dances with*

Text: Mark 8:31-38; Gen.17: 1-7, 15-16

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Wolves, one of my favorite films of all times

In 1863, Lt. John Dunbar of the civil war Union Army has been assigned to a lonely outpost on the vast prairies of what we now call South Dakota. Out there by himself, he comes into friendly contact with some Indians from the nearby Lakota Sioux people. As the lieutenant is incorporated more and more into the Sioux tribe, they give him the name Dances with Wolves, after watching him try to tame a wild wolf

There is a crucial point in the development of the main character when Dunbar is captured by Army soldiers who consider him a traitor. After a Sioux war party has just rescued the lieutenant from his former comrades, he reflects on his name & his identity. He says ...

I'd never really known who John Dunbar was. Perhaps the name itself had no meaning. But as I heard my Sioux name being called over and over, I knew for the first time who I really was.

C. Let us imagine for a moment that experiences like that of John Dunbar were not so rare

1. What if we all expected that our given name would change at least once in our lifetimes?
2. And what if that change reflected not our personal identities, but rather was a reflection of our religion or of a group we belonged to?
3. Such is in fact the world of our Genesis story today
 - a) In Bible times, personal names really did mean something that people understood ... a person's name described something about God or something that was happening at the time
 - b) And it was not uncommon for biblical characters to be given a new name at some major turning point in their lives,
4. Brings us back to story of Abram & Sarai/ Abraham and Sarah

II. This is a story of transformation that is signaled by a name change, but perhaps there is more name-changing than you first realized, my friends

A. We have this man and woman (in their 90's) who believe that their future lies with a 13-year-old son Ishmael

1. Now, Ishmael was born to Abram thru his wife's Egyptian slave, a woman named Hagar
2. After 13 years living with one son, Abram suddenly finds God showing up to make a covenant, promising to make him the ancestor of a great multitude that will not come thru Ishmael
3. To mark this new time in a new covenant, God gives Abram a slightly different name, Abraham
4. Now, to those of us who don't expect to be changing OUR names, it's worth noting that a new relationship with God meant new names for Abram & Sarai

B. But did you realize that GOD also shows up with a different name in this passage?

1. It's not very obvious to us, but in v. 1 it's there in God's self-introduction to Abram ... In English we read "I am God Almighty"
2. "God Almighty" -- This is the most common translation of Hebrew *El Shaddai*. This is also the first time this name for the Israelite God appears in the Bible
3. As far as we know, *El Shaddai* is not a name that Abram or the biblical characters before him have known for their God

III. Why is a name change for God significant here? 2 reasons:

A. 1st, it shows us the nature of this God we have

1. When God appears to Abram here, the very 1st words out of God's mouth are to introduce himself in a new way
 - a) If I were in Abram's sandals at that moment, this is how it might have sounded to me, to have God show up with a new name ...
 - b) *Abram, I am the One you have known ...*

The Creator ... the One who made the rainbow covenant with Noah

The One who called you to leave your country and go to a new land that I would show you

You already know me ... yet I also have a different name, so you don't really know me ... not yet

2. Think about the fact that the Creator God who is giving out new

names ... this same God is also taking on a new name

3. Here is a dynamic God, a God who may surprise you

a) The appearance of *El Shaddai* tells us this is not some immutable stone-like deity ... this is a God with a flexible identity, God who appears differently to different people

b) Just when you think you have God figured out, this God shows up with a different name that throws you off ... *El Shaddai* is a case in point .. & that particular name leads to the 2nd reason that this name change matters

B. 2nd, If we go deeper behind the meanings of *El Shaddai*, it could give us a radically different view of this God

1. This Hebrew name *El Shaddai* is very unclear in its meaning, so in many ways all translations are merely educated guesses

2. Besides "God Almighty", here are a few other possibilities:

a) "God My Destroyer"

b) "God the Self-sufficient One" or perhaps

c) "God of the Mountain"

3. There's also one translation that doesn't show up in traditional commentaries, but which is most intriguing

a) Some scholars wonder if *Shaddai* comes from *shad* the Hebrew word for "breasts" or "bosom"

b) Now there's a whole new spin on *El Shaddai* ...

(1) what we may have here in Gen. 17 is Abram being introduced to the Breastfeeding God ...

(2) or, if you like, instead of "Almighty God" it's the "All-nurturing God"

c) Either way, it's feminine imagery for this covenant-making God

IV. So now let me reflect briefly again on why it matters that God's name changes at the same time that Abram & Sarai's names change

A. Let's recall what's happening when *El Shaddai* is being introduced to Abram:

1. God is setting up a covenant that will make Abram & Sarai fruitful with children of their own

2. It means there will be a long-lasting nurturing relationship between God & God's special people

Text: Mark 8:31-38; Gen.17: 1-7, 15-16

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- a) After all, in v. 7 of Gen. 17 we hear the promise, "I will be God to you & your offspring after you"
 - b) This is not some distant, aloof God who creates things, creates people & then stands back to watch them self-destruct
3. This is a God of unfolding relationships ... a God who feeds us, protects us, holds our hand, walks alongside us ... a God who rescues us from danger & disciplines us when we mess up
4. Sounds kind of like a mom, doesn't it?

B. So perhaps it's not so hard to see that the God who sets up an eternal covenant relationship in Gen. 17 is *El Shaddai*, the All-nurturing God, (or as some commentators have written, "the nursing God")?

- 1. In fact, I think it's a fitting name for such a covenanting God
 - a) Now I wouldn't stake my life on this linguistic interpretation being the only correct one
 - b) But I think it's just as plausible as the traditional "God Almighty", which conjures up images of a muscular male warrior of a God
 - c) But why is **this name** for God so difficult to translate & understand?
- 2. Could it even be that this name *El Shaddai* in our Bibles was deliberately left hard to decisively translate?
 - a) Could it be because our God cannot be pinned down to only 1 name and only 1 image?
 - b) In case you're wondering by the way, that is why you don't hear me repeatedly using the title "Father God" in my prayers

V. Let me close by bringing it back to name changes for us

A. You & I may not get literal name changes, like Abraham & Sarah did

- 1. But *El Shaddai* still wants to be your God in a covenant of love, just as with Abraham & Sarah
- 2. When life is hard & we sometimes feel beaten up, we may quietly, inwardly take on very negative names for ourselves, based on our self-perception and the way people have treated us ...
 - a) If some of you amnesiacs were completely honest with yourself you'd be wearing nametags that say,

Hi, my name is "loser" or "anti-social" or

They call me “Shallow”

b) If this is you, I’m challenging you this morning that God has more positive, life-giving names in mind for you ... a little later this morning you’ll get a chance to receive one

B. Now, with all this talk of exciting new life-giving names, it might sound more like this is Easter than the season of Lent

- 1. This is still the season when we especially look at the God who was revealed to us in Jesus Christ, the Suffering One
- 2. Jesus had a very challenging message for those willing to covenant with him, as you heard in the reading from Mark 8
- 3. At the same time that we like Abraham & Sarah gratefully accept new names from God that will boost our spirits, making a covenant with Jesus can also change our names in sobering ways:
 - a) Those who belong to Christ are also called to take on names that may not be so easy to wear
 - b) Imagine yourself in a big meeting or convention where your name tag



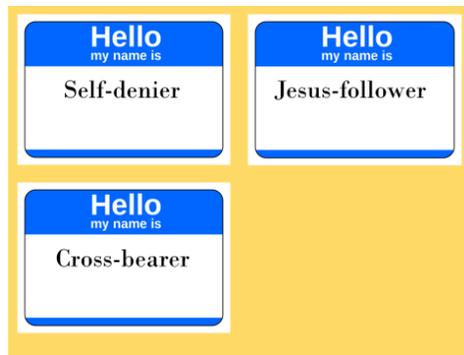
looks like this so you introduce yourself with “My name is self-denier” ... or



“Hi, my name is Jesus-follower” or

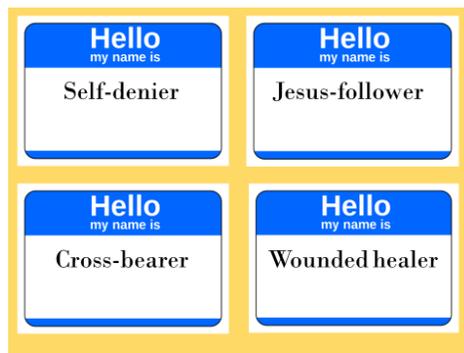
Text: Mark 8:31-38; Gen.17: 1-7, 15-16

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"Just call me Cross-bearer"

... or perhaps



"Wounded healer is what I

go by"

4. If you can't imagine a literal name tag like these ones, then just think back 11 days to our Ash Wednesday service

- a) About 60 or so people left here with a temporary name tag on their foreheads or hands
- b) The name tags had no words, but all the same, they said something like "I am made of dust" or "I'm a cross-bearer"

VI. Conclusion

A. This morning you have an opportunity to receive from God an encouraging new name

1. In these 2 baskets up front and one in the back are pieces of paper with many different name phrases drawn from Scripture
2. The names are written from God to you

B. Our simple song of response is "Between me and you", which we've already sung once today

1. But before we sing that, Ruthie is going to lead us in a reflective time singing the song "El Shaddai"
2. As she sings I invite anyone who wants to receive a new name from God this morning ... anyone (children, youth, adults) come take a paper from a basket & return to your seat

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3. For the rest of this coming week, I encourage you to dwell with that name, & let yourself hear God speaking that name to you
4. When everyone has gotten their new name, and the song is finished, I will have a prayer.

C. Now, if you also are feeling that Gospel call to take up your cross and follow Jesus, one way to do that is to copy down one of the names up here on the screen onto the back of your paper

1. Then every day this week look at both sides of that paper
2. Let it remind you of this great paradox of Lent:
 - a) On the one hand, thru Jesus God gives you an exciting new name
 - b) And on the other hand, by following that Jesus, there are also some costs & limits that come with it

3. It's thru claiming both of these names that we come to know who we really are

(Turn baskets around to show "My name is ..." placards. Ruthie plays "El Shaddai" as people come forward)

Prayer: *(stand back up)*

O Great I AM ... Lord God ... El Shaddai ...

Guide us to accept the new names you have for us ...

And comfort us with the assurance that when we say "yes"

to your action in our lives,
we will have all we'll ever need.

Amen.

As Bob comes forward to lead our response song, please show your new name to someone nearby you & introduce yourself, saying "My name is ..."

(Response song: "Between me and you")