

Renaming, You Belong

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Genesis 17: 1-7. 15-16

99 years old...that's old... that's 4 times my age... That's a loooooong time to be waiting for descendants...99 years old

Well, here we are, in the end of February, where the winter has felt as if it has been 99 years long... we are waiting, like Sarai and Abram, waiting...

Lent has started not too long ago, and if you are following the practice of giving something up or adding something on, the newness of this practice has probably worn off, and the end of the 40 days is still far off... waiting..

Now in this Lenten season, we have decided to have a focus of Christianity around the world. Last week we heard Ole talk about his time in Hungary with global missions. Today, I will share about my opportunity to spend a year in Swaziland in Southern Africa.

The story of Abram and Sarai we heard this morning, the story where they have been waiting for descendants for so long they are now 99 years old, and yet God comes to them. The story where God makes a promise to be their God, promises that they will have descendants, and God *renames* them; well this story reminds me of a story from Swaziland, where I *too* got renamed.

But first, we will start with the 99 years, as Abram and Sarai did, 99 years and they have been waiting. My year in Swaziland too, began with waiting. I watched all of the other young adults in my program go to their year of service in different countries, Rwanda, England, Mexico, Hungary, Argentina, and so on, but the group of 9 that was headed to Southern Africa? The group that I was apart of? We had to wait. Our visas were delayed, and we were stuck in Chicago, for three extra weeks.

Now three weeks may not sound like 99 years, but three weeks was long with no job, no school, no itinerary, and the excitement to go and move across the world....and then not. And then waiting. Day after day.

I imagine Abram and Sarai were excited when God said they would have ancestors that would number the stars...and then they were waiting. Year after year went by. They turned 99, was this going to happen God?

I also started asking the same question, Was this going to happen, God? Was I going to go overseas, or be stuck forever? But then, our visa's arrived! And we were on the plane and headed to South Africa! I about fell on my face, just like Abram did when God showed up, this was going to happen!

My group spent a few days in South Africa to get oriented, and then I was headed on a bus alone, crossing the border into Swaziland, into a country where I knew absolutely no one.

To be honest, I didn't even know where Swaziland was on the map until I was told I was going to be spending a year there.

When I arrived to Manzini, Swaziland, there was an older woman from the Lutheran church that picked me up, and took me to her house. Two boys came running up to take my suitcases inside. I thought to myself: I must be at my host families house. It wasn't quite clear on the way over. I tried to learn the women's name, but couldn't pronounce it right, Sphiweh Zwane, and we didn't get much farther in conversation after my attempts. When I got inside I met her husband, whose name was Simon Zwane. Simon. I could say that one. He had a huge welcoming smile, and we started visiting. I was brought tea and biscuits-- also known as cookies. And I remember Simon asking me how long I would be there. Hm...I responded, "well I will be in Swaziland until July (and it being September, that was 10 months away). I remember him looking surprised. Oh July! Wow, that is quite some time! And afterwards, him saying something to his wife in the native language of Siswati.

I did my best to hide MY surprised look. What?!? Did they not know I would be here for that long? Is this my host family after all? They don't even know the length of my stay! Maybe I am only here for a few days? Who will be my family?!? I have been waiting and waiting to come over here, (it felt like 99 years) and yet, who am I going to *be with*? Will I belong anywhere?

The next day, I go to meet my site supervisor who is one of the Lutheran pastors in town, and Sphiweh, my possible host mom, goes with me. We start visiting, and my site supervisor asks if I have a Swazi name yet. I respond "No, not yet" and Sphiweh says "hmmmm... how about Temangweni Zwane!" My site supervisor agrees, "Yes yes" I try to repeat my own name, "Temangeti?" The reply, "No no, Temangweni and Tema for short" Ahhh, Tema, I repeat with a smile. They both have huge smiles, and repeat my name with endearment, Tema.. I think to myself now, "I have a Swazi name! I *am* here to stay. And in the weeks following, I find out that Temangweni Zwane means "I belong to the Zwanes." I belong. Despite feeling like the outsider unsure if I had a host family, I was told that I belonged. The Zwanes took me in like their own daughter, and Simon and Sphiwe Zwane, became Babe Zwane (babe means father) and Make Zwane, (make means mother) I had a family.

I was renamed, just as Abram and Sarai were renamed and God told them that they belonged. God says, "I will be your God, and you will be my people" God made a covenant with Abraham and Sarah, so that their descendants will be many and will be blessed. They will be God's people, no longer alone, but belonging.

This renaming meant something, it brought purpose and newness in the midst of the 99 years. Abram became Abraham, which means, ancestor of a multitude, and Sarai became Sarah, which means mother of nations. And Anna became Temangweni, which meant that I belonged.

Not only were Abraham and Sarah renamed, God also is revealed with a new name. Instead of being referred to as "God," God says "I am God Almighty" also translated: "I am God of

Creation," This is the first time in the Bible that God is revealed as such: God of Creation. It is THIS God who made all of creation that is making a covenant with Abraham and Sarah.

And in Swaziland, Spiweh who named me, becomes Make Zwane, and Simon becomes Babe Zwane, mother and father. In our renaming, we show signs of our relationship to one another.

Relationship are built in our renaming, we are reminded that we are not alone, we have each other. I too was renamed, Temangweni, I belong. I was not alone.

In the Abraham and Sarah story, God is promising relationship, that the God of all of creation, will be *their God* and they will be God's people. God will *their God* and the God to their *descendants*. God will be our God, and we will be God's people, and nothing will take that relationship away.

In the midst of the 99 years, God promises to be our God, to remind us that we are not alone. God gives us hope, that at 99 years, we can bear fruit and multiply, or strangers can become our host family. And God gives us purpose, through renaming, to be a mother of nations, an ancestor of multitudes, or to belong, to build relationships across borders.

While in this long winter season, yet in the beginning stages of Lent, we may feel exhausted, discouraged, in the bleakness of a 99 year journey. Let us hold on to the promise, that we are not alone, God comes to us in relationship, God is our God, and we are God's people. Let us hold on to the hope that God brings life where life isn't expected to be possible, and God makes family out of strangers.

Renaming gives us purpose. Abraham and Sarah's new names meant something, that they would be ancestors of multitudes. It gave them a purpose. Also in the Bible, Jacob is renamed Israel, which means wrestling with God. Simon is renamed Peter, which means rock. Even Jesus was renamed, "You are my son, my beloved"

What is God renaming you? And how does that reframe your life? Maybe you are renamed as a healer, a prophet, a listener, a bridge builder, an advocate... It may seem daunting... especially in times when we feel as if we are in the 99th year stage. But God promises to be present with us, that God is our God, and we are God's people; that God calls us into relationship, that we belong and we will not be alone. We can always remember that in baptism, we are each renamed 'a beloved Child of God,' and nothing will take that name, or that relationship away. God renames us, claims us as God's children, and God gives us purpose in our lives.

What is God renaming you?