Based on Genesis 17:15

Sarah shall be her name.

Many of you know that the congregation I served in upstate New York before I came to SPC includes a sizable population of immigrants from the West African nation of Togo.

The first challenge I encountered in this cross-cultural context of ministry came through the most basic of questions: *What is your name?*

For most of us here, that is a straightforward question. My name is *Gusti*. Your name is [*add your name here*].

For the Togolese, not so much. It turns out, almost everyone in Togo has at least two names, often three, and when they emigrate to the United States, sometimes even four.

The first name a Togolese child is given is based on the day of the week the child is born. Monday is *Kodzo*, for example, if you are a boy, and *Ajo* if you are a girl. Friday is *Kofi* if you are a boy and *Afi* if you are a girl.

There is a second family name that may also be ancestral. And then there is a third official name, usually in French, used for school and church and passports and the like.

For my congregation, once a Togolese family arrived in the United States, their official name would become a fourth Americanized version of the French name. *Gregoire* became Greg. *Georges* became George. For some reason I never did figure out *Henriette* stayed *Henriette*, but *Marie* [with a French accent] became Marie.

All of these new names became integral to the identity of the immigrant who is now putting down roots in a new land with a plan to perpetuate the family name for generations to come.

Many of our families have similar stories, if we look beneath the surface.

My family, for example, on my father's side, emigrated from Sweden through Ellis Island in the 1800s. For us, it was our last name that changed, rather than our first. *Johansson* became Newquist, meaning *new twig*, symbolizing a new start in a new land. Other families have similar stories of changing names or adjusting names in order to establish themselves as rooted and grounded in a whole new time and place.

From an anthropological perspective, this is what Abram and Sarai are doing in this 17th chapter of Genesis, albeit decades after they have left their former home. After far too many fits and starts, far too many misses and near-misses, far too many attempts to approximate what it is they really want, it is time to put down roots for the long haul and make this place their home.

A name change does that, for them and for everyone around them. A name change announces, *we have arrived!*

And the story unfolds. But it is still fraught. Because Abraham and Sarah are not the only ones called by God to make their home in the land of Canaan.

First, there are the people who already live there, including the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites. A biblical roll call of indigenous populations akin to the many tribal nations already living in this land when our ancestors arrived. Second, there are the people Abraham and Sarah force to emigrate with them, including Hagar the enslaved Egyptian woman and Ishmael, her son.

The biblical naming and claiming of Abraham and Sarah, at least in the way they perceive it and live it out, does nothing to bless those others who are also named and claimed by the God you and I call *GOOD.* In fact, the way Abraham and Sarah perceive and live out their naming and claiming does great harm to those others also named and claimed by God, with devastating consequences even to this day.

This, too, is the story of our ancestors throughout this nation and, as we are describing in our Adult Education History Project, the story of our ancestors here at SPC.

They, too, believed themselves to be called by God to a new land full of promise and plenty, named and claimed in a covenant of love that would bless their descendants for generations to come. They, too, perceived and lived out that naming and claiming in ways that did great harm to others of our ancestors who either already occupied this land or who were forced to emigrate against their will.

In this Season of Lent 2024, we who live out the consequences of the actions of our collective ancestors are now naming and claiming the historical harm perpetuated by some of those ancestors against others of those ancestors as a first step toward repairing that harm. In doing so, we are clinging, perhaps naively, to an even deeper promise that the land, at the end of the day, belongs to God and not to us and that our job is to share that land in such a way that all peoples - indigenous and immigrant alike - may be blessed in perpetuity. At least that is our fervent prayer.

One final note about naming and claiming I learned from my Togolese parishioners in New York. While it is, indeed, common, for most of them to have multiple names and to use their Americanized French name in public settings, there is one name the Togolese will never allow to be changed. To them, it is sacred to be born on Sunday, the Lord's Day, the Day of Resurrection, a mini-Easter each week. A child born on Sunday is named *Kossi* or *Akossiwa* and will use that name no matter where they go. These names are almost sacramental for the Togolese, like the communal experience of Baptism. The celebration of one *Sunday's Child* named and claimed by God, serves as a sign and a seal *for the entire community* that we are all named and claimed by God whatever our individual personal name might be.

At the end of the day, this is what our font of identity is all about. A reminder of the covenant God has made with all of creation and every person within it. We are, every one of us, claimed by the God who has named us all *Beloved*.