

A Name on the Way

A sermon on Genesis 12:1-4a; Psalm 121; & John 3:1-17 by Nathan Nettleton, 1 March 2026

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Message

A church discerns its new name while remembering that identity is not possession, but a journey of love shaped by God's call to be a blessing.

Sermon

If we were a church where the preachers pick their own Bible readings to suit the occasion, I might have chosen the exact ones that the lectionary set for us tonight. They were actually set in 1992! Sometimes it is quite startling how pre-set readings seem to speak directly to where we are in the moment.

In our first reading, we heard God calling Abram to set out on a journey into the great unknown, and promising to make his “name” great and that he would be a blessing to all the earth. And although we didn't hear anything but the start of his journey tonight, if we had read on for a few chapters, we would have discovered that as he journeys on with God, he is eventually given a “new name,” the name we now usually know him by, Abraham.

He sets out with the promise of a great name, and way down the road, he receives a brand new name.

And here *we* are. We haven't taken on a new name yet, but after a journey lasting more than 18 months, we now have one name that has risen to the top.

However, identifying our current preference from the names that have been considered is not quite the same as confirming that we now feel ready to close the search and embrace it. So that's our question this week. Are we ready to conclude the renaming process or do we think that there is more talking and listening that needs to be done? You'll receive your voting links later tonight.

That's one of the things about journeys, especially journeys done well; we can often only know the ultimate significance of any particular stage of the journey in hindsight. It's often not until it is growing smaller in the rear view mirror that we realise what that last stopover was truly all about. By then we are moving on into the next stage of our journey, but we can then see *how* we were changed by the previous stage.

The culture we have been growing into here seems to be equipping us with a willingness to journey well and avoid lazy short cuts. Steve Clarke, the expert consultant who spoke to us last week about where we are on this naming journey has told me that he has never seen any church or organisation that has the patience and integrity to do such a long carefully staged journey to ensure that everyone is heard and no one is left behind. I can already see his eyes rolling when I pluck up the courage to tell him that we've chosen to add yet one more stage this week!

But that's who we are seeking to be. We travel together mindfully. We listen carefully. Like Abram and Sarai, we move on when we are sure that we hear God calling. And we do that

together instead of lazily handing over responsibility to leaders and asking them to do it for us.

Whether it is next week, or still a few months off, before too long this renaming journey will be disappearing in the rear view mirror, and we'll be travelling on with a new name into the next stage of the journey God is calling us to. Where will we be heading? I've got no idea.

Abram and Sarai had no idea where they were heading. Even if God had told them more than just "Leave your country and go to the land I will show you," they had no GPS and no Google Earth to get any picture of what lay ahead. "The Spirit blows where it will," says Jesus, "and you don't know where it's going. So too with those who are born of the Spirit."

If you read this story again later, you'll notice that in this earliest account of their call and departure, the promise to Abram and Sarai is not so focussed on a particular geographic destination. God says "go to the land I will show you", but they're not even told whether it's a final destination or just a stopover where they'll get further directions. The promise is not a land transaction. The promise is that your name will be made great so that you will be blessing, and in you all the families of the earth will be blessed.

Christians, Jews and Muslims all look back to this story and see in it an image of the life of faith as we live it together now. Faith is something we are always travelling on in, not something that is expressed in securing and owning and occupying. God is always calling to us, and whenever God calls, we get up and go, and we do so together. Lent is often described as a journey — perhaps a journey within the journey — and that's why we hear this journey story in this season.

We don't know where the journey will take us, or what name we might be known by when we get to the next stopover, but we know whose call we are following, and we know who watches over us protectively and lovingly. The psalm we sang before, which we'll sing again in another version as our closing hymn, is paired with the story of Abram and Sarai's setting out precisely because it speaks of God's care for those who travel on.

"Lifting my eyes up to the hills,
where can I look for aid?
God is a protector by our side,
watching over us near and far,
now and always."

One of the beautiful things about this journey of faith is that there is always more to look forward to, always a new pathway opening up ahead of us, and always that same voice calling us forward and promising to watch over us on the way.

This current process of finding our new name has been a challenging stage of our journey together, and some of us will be only too happy to see it disappearing in the rear view mirror. But, of course, the reason it will be receding from view is not because this journey has planted us in some kind of promised land where we can just drop anchor and rest on our laurels as though finding a name was the ultimate goal of our journey. It will be disappearing behind us because we are moving on in response to the next call.

We will be carrying our new name, and learning to live into it more fully, but the name will no longer be preoccupying us. The next stage of the journey will be much more about something else, and we probably won't know what that something else is until this stage is complete, and we have caught our breath and paused long enough to hear God's next call emerging.

That comment from Steve Clarke that I joked about before is more important than it immediately seemed. Because when he spoke of our willingness to journey slowly and carefully, what he was contrasting us with was churches and organisations that might just conduct a brief opinion survey before the leadership stepped in and imposed a decision. Quick and clean, and not very consultative.

Now, in some churches, that is justified as being consistent with their belief that God speaks to us through anointed leaders. If a church wants to hear God's call, it listens to its anointed leaders.

But one of the things that makes us Baptist is a conviction that God's call and leading are most reliably discerned by a prayerfully gathered community, listening not only to its leaders and to its loudest voices, but to the whole congregation, the scriptures, the prophetic dissenters, the children, the thoughtfully quiet, and the timid and unassertive.

The reason this process has been drawn out over many steps and stages is not so much because we haven't found the decision easy — although that was a factor too — but because faced with a challenging decision, we were taking care to ensure that all the voices were being heard and that there was plenty of space into which the voice of God could speak and be heard.

Even now, there are those who are not convinced that we've listened enough, and that's the point of the next vote. We are not just looking for a majority opinion on whether we've done all we can do or should take more time, we are seeking the collective wisdom of our congregation on what God would have us do at this point — explore this ground a little more fully, or watch it disappear in the rear view mirror as we move on to the next journey.

Whether we stay on the current journey a bit longer, or venture off in new directions now, we are not travelling simply for the fun of it. Like Abram and Sarai, we set out when we hear God calling us, and we travel in the direction that God points us. The wind of the Spirit blows where it will, and we can't tell where it is going, but we can follow its trail. And we can do that secure in the knowledge that God is watching over us in love and care.

This willingness and commitment to setting out on whatever journey God calls us to is actually the fundamental basis of our identity as a church congregation. Who we are, or at least who we are on the way to becoming, is determined by God who is constantly beckoning us on towards our destiny, towards the fullness of our identity. Our identity is not first and foremost something we choose or design, and it is certainly not something that is created from nothing by the choice of a name.

A name can be important, and a well chosen one can serve as a kind of signpost that reminds us who we are called to be and points us further forward on the road. But even the most perfect of names can never entirely define us or say everything there is to say about our identity.

Our identity is formed and shaped by our relationship with God as we follow Jesus wherever he leads us. And an identity grounded in relationship is never fixed and static. It is constantly evolving, and if the name works well, it will evolve with us and deepen in meaning as our journey fills it with stories.

If we ever lose sight of that and begin to think of our name and our identity as some kind of solid fixed destination, as some kind of land we have conquered and can now just occupy and protect, then we would be deluding ourselves, and probably betraying our calling to keep travelling on in the company of Jesus and one another.

It doesn't take much imagination to see how easily these ancient stories can be misused if we forget what they are really about. If we start to think of identity as something like a piece of land with fixed borders — something to claim, occupy, and defend — then we are already in dangerous territory.

We see this whenever biblical promises are invoked as though they were timeless land deeds rather than part of a larger call to trust and to bless. When identity becomes something we secure and protect instead of something we receive and live into, it can harden into something brittle and aggressive.

In the past 24 hours, many around the world have woken up to the news of a major escalation in armed conflict involving major powers in the Middle East. When ancient texts are used to justify claims of domination or possession — whether land or power — they can be twisted away from their deeper call to blessing and love. Scripture's wisdom is not a checklist for imposing our will, but an invitation to follow God's way of life and peace.

If we forget that, we risk turning identity into an idol. And once identity becomes an idol, it no longer points us forward on the road with God; it tempts us to dig in and defend what we think we already possess.

Many faithful Jews and Christians have been reminding us that the earliest telling of the call to Abraham and Sarah is not centred on territorial control, but on vocation — on being blessed in order to be a blessing to all the families of the earth.

God's promise and call to us are the same. It is this call to be a blessing to all that establishes our fundamental identity. Whatever we name ourselves, that is still our call, our purpose, our identity. The name has to serve that call, not the other way around.

The Apostle Paul reminds us of something similar in the words we sang as our first hymn (1 Corinthians 13). What difference does it make if we speak like angels? What difference does it make if our faith moves mountains? What difference does it make if we've got a shiny brand new name that's the envy of churches everywhere? We've got nothing if we don't have love.

If we don't love and bless the world, we've got nothing. If we don't love and bless the world, no shiny new name is ever going to rescue our squandered identity. Names will come and go, but love never ends.

What did we hear Jesus say to Nicodemus tonight? “God so *loved* the world that he gave his only Son.” It is God’s love for the world that is the driving impetus of Jesus’s life and mission, the reason he was sent into the world: to be a blessing to all. Whether we take our inspiration from Abraham or from Jesus or from both, we ultimately hear the same call to go where we are sent and be a blessing of love for all.

So here we are, a people called to journey together as we follow the mysterious Spirit of Jesus who blows where he knows where. Here we are, emerging from a challenging stage of the journey that has placed a brand new name in our hands, and we’re about to decide whether we are ready and willing to put it on. And here we are, knowing that even if we decide to put it on, it will be worth nothing if we don’t have love and we are not becoming a blessing to the world.

But here we are too, living in a world where conflict, fear, and suffering are real and immediate. Yet the same call we hear in Abram’s journey and in Jesus’ mission – to be a blessing of love – is the light we carry into that world. Whatever decisions we make here this week about a name or about what comes next, we are sent into a world God loves – a world that still needs compassion, courage, and peace.

New name or no new name, our identity is in God’s call to travel forth in love and be a blessing to all. If we can do that together, our new name will quickly fill with beautiful stories and truly be an icon of God’s overflowing love, an open window through which the world can glimpse heaven and through which God’s love and blessing can pour out into the world.